

**OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENT LEARNER-CENTERED
APPROACH IN GENERAL SECONDARY SCHOOLS OF AWI ZONE IN AMHARA REGIONAL
STATE, ETHIOPIA.**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the existing opportunities and challenges that enable or hinder the realization of learner-centered approach in general secondary schools of Awi Zone, Amhara Regional State. Descriptive survey design was employed using the instruments of open and closed-ended type questionnaire, focused group discussion, observation and semi-structured interview. Teachers, students and school principals were made to participate in the study. All participants of the study were taken from five randomly selected general secondary schools. The data gathered through closed-ended questionnaire was analyzed using percentage, and the data obtained through open-ended questionnaire, focused group discussion, observation and interview were discussed in the form of narration. The findings revealed that the existing opportunities identified by respondents were availability of text books, library access, cooperative learning and exposure to continuous professional development including short term trainings and experience sharing. On the other hand, lack of awareness, past learning experience of teachers and students, lack of interest to teach and learn, low internet access, lack of meaningful supervision and follow up system were found to be the major obstacles to implement learner-centered approach. Therefore, accessing alternative capacity building mechanisms for teachers and students, recurrent follow up and support, considering the use of existing potentials to implement learner-centered approach are the possible solutions that should be taken into account to improve the implementation of learner-centered approach.

Key words: Challenges, Learner-centered, Opportunities, General secondary school

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

There are two commonly known instructional approaches: The teacher-centered and learner-centered approaches (Arends, 1991). The former approach tightly controls the students' activities and class room interaction (Aggarwal, 2008). Because of dissatisfaction with the teacher-centered, the learner- centered approach was developed during the latter part of the nineteenth century (Tylor and Mackenney, 2008). The term learner-centered is used interchangeably with active learning that focuses on the needs and interests of the learner (Derebsa Dufera, 2004; Eggen, 1988). Thus, nowadays the education system is changed from memorization type of learning into participatory type (Kumpulainen and Wray, 2002).

It is through the active engagement of students that behavioral change would take place. This concept is derived from two basic assumptions: learning by nature is an active endeavor and people learn in different ways at various situations (Brown, 1989). Learner-centered approach is allowing students' opportunity to think.

The key concept in learner-centered is that knowledge cannot be transferred but created (Wittrock, 1986). This requires the detail understanding, when learners process information, think about it, question it, use it and connect it to their existing knowledge and personal experience (Moore, 1992). Therefore, learner- centered instruction provides the experience for learners to develop the independent learning and critical thinking skills necessary for problem-solving.

The application of learner-centered came from the theory of constructivism that students are actively constructing knowledge through the active engagement process rather than merely copying knowledge (Moore, 1992). Learner-centered approach gives freedom to the student under the creative and sympathetic direction of the teacher (Marshall, 1990; Saylor et al., 1981).

It is a way through which teachers improve their teaching, create two way communications between the teacher and the students as well as develop confidence. Therefore, the finding of the research is expected to be significant for teachers, school principals and educational experts to recognize and use the existing

potential to implement learner-centered approach. In addition, the students can develop positive attitude towards learner-centered approach that improves their learning. Decision makers can benefit from the result of the study to formulate suitable strategy to initiate teachers and students to apply learner-centered in the instructional process. Universities which are responsible to train teachers would take the findings as potential inputs to revise their training system. Finally, it is also hoped that the study would serve as valuable source of information for other researchers.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The current literature takes into consideration about the existing practice and challenges of learner-centered implementation (Taylor and Mackenney, 2008). In order to promote the implementation of learner –centered approach the Ethiopian government has made the necessary efforts in terms of providing teachers with in-service trainings and improving the supply of instructional materials. In spite of the efforts, teachers and students do not seem to have gone through any fundamental changes in their utilization of learner-centered approach

(Ambissa, 2009). Some empirical studies also proved that teachers still depend on traditional approach that is teacher-centered approach (Amare et al. 2006; MOE, 2008). Hindering factors and recommendations identified by the previous studies mainly focused on teachers' background, commitment as well as resources without much consideration the student related issues.

In addition, the researcher heard supervisors' and school principals' frequent complaints and dissatisfaction during various university school workshops and meetings about the implementation of learner-centered approach. They indicated that there is a gap between what has to be done and what is actually going on. Thus, it seems a sound justification to explore the opportunities and challenges to implement learner-centered of teaching and learning.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study was to assess the existing opportunities and challenges to implement learner-centered approach. Specifically, the study tried to;

- Explore to what extent the learner-centered is implemented in general secondary schools.

- Identify factors that would affect the implementation of learner-centered approach.
- Show possible solutions to minimize the challenges of learner-centered approach

2. Methodology

The design of this study was descriptive survey that followed both quantitative and qualitative research paradigms. The reason was that it is preferable to collect the data from a relatively large sample size and to explore the current practice of learner-centered approach in general secondary schools (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2008).

2.1. Sample size and sampling techniques

The subjects of the study were teachers, students and school principals of general secondary schools in Awi Zone. Five general secondary schools were selected randomly out of thirteen general secondary schools. The sample schools consisted of a total of 386 teachers and 8147 students. The number of students was determined by multi-stage cluster sampling technique. First, students were clustered by grade level and then by their sections. The sample schools had 163 sections. From each section, two students were selected using simple random sampling. Therefore, a total 325 students were taken as sample respondents.

From the total population of 386 teachers, only 97 teacher respondents (25%) were selected as a sample by random sampling technique with the assumption that similar experiences are found and respondents have equal chance of being selected. Five school principals were also included as the subject of the study. They were selected using purposive sampling technique because they have special responsibility and experiences to facilitate and follow up the practice of learner-centered approach.

2.2. Data gathering tools and procedures

The data was collected through questionnaire and focused group discussion from teachers and students. Individual interview was conducted with school principals. Observation was also carried out to check the presence of school facilities. Before the actual administration of the questionnaire, pilot study was carried out. On the basis of comments and suggestions important improvements were made.

Data collection tools were developed in such a way that they would maximize the possibility of generating answers to the basic research questions. Then, the data obtained through different instruments were triangulated. Applying triangulation is fundamental in verifying the convergence and divergence of views and interpretations regarding the issue

under study, and would help the researcher to secure a detail understanding of it.

2.3. Data analysis

The statistical data obtained from questionnaire was analyzed using frequency and percentage because they are easier to interpret and useful to compare the responses on each item. Whereas, data collected through focused group discussion, interview and observation were discussed in the form of narration. Finally, the overall course of the study was summarized with findings, conclusions and some possible solutions.

3. Result and Discussion

The data collected from teachers, students and school principals were analyzed and interpreted as follows.

3.1. Teachers' and Students' understanding of learner-centered approach

It is a prerequisite and very essential issue to consider the conception gap of teachers and students. Creating awareness is a fertile ground which is assumed to be conducted before the effective implementation of learner-centered approach.

Teachers and students have to understand the objective, importance, methods, principles and other related concepts about learner- centered approach they were asked through questionnaire about their understanding of the approach. Nearly half of teacher respondents (49.5%) replied that the level of awareness of teachers on learner-centered was average. This idea was also supported by 51.7 percent of students. In the focus group discussion, almost all teachers agreed that teachers' understanding of learner-centered approach was at the medium level. On this issue, one of the teacher discussants explained as:

I think teachers including myself have no significant problems about the conception of learner-centered. Even teachers can easily understand through reading and experience sharing without having the training opportunities. But the problem is to realize in the class room.

In the above response, it is indicated that teachers could increase the capacity on learner-centered approach through readings and experience sharing although the training opportunities were not arranged. On the other hand, since teachers were not using learner-centered approach properly,

students believed that teachers lack awareness on it.

More than half of teacher respondents (60.9%) and student respondents (54%) replied that students' awareness about learner-centered approach was low. The above evidence was also supported by many of the student focused group discussants. One of the student discussants shared her experience to the group in the following way:

We heard about learner-centered approach and our teachers have told us that students have the right to ask and give answers because we are following learner-centered. But no one has explained about the advantages and disadvantages of learner-centered. We don't have any idea which instructional methods are classified as learner-centered and which one as teacher-centered.

As compared to the awareness level of teacher, students' awareness about learner-centered approach was less. Regarding teachers' and students' awareness, school principals were also interviewed. Almost all of the school principals replied that the teachers' awareness was average and their awareness was developed through the experience sharing and occasional short

term trainings. In this issue, one of the interviewee said:

In relative terms, I feel that the awareness of teachers seem to be fallen at an average level, but not enough. The conception of students on learner-centered is assumed to be low. This is because we are focusing on the capacity building of teachers but we are not thinking about the students' awareness. It is a critical problem that every educational stakeholder has to be given emphasis to facilitate the environment to create awareness to both teachers and students. Other problems such as, problems related to content coverage, interest and commitment will be solved when the awareness of teachers and students is increased.

The above data indicated that different problems related to learner-centered approach could be easily solved when the understanding level of teachers and students is improved.

3.2 Interest of Teachers and Students to implement learner-centered approach

There are many factors that affect teachers as well as students' interest to implement learner-centered. Increasing their interest towards learner-centered approach is not a one side activity, rather it requires a collaborative effort expected from each educational

stakeholder at each level (Kumpulainen and Wray, 2002).

Data was gathered from teachers and students through questionnaire about their interest in employing learner-centered approach. First, both respondents were asked to reply on teachers' interest. A significant number (48.6%) of teacher respondents leveled their interest of student-centered approach at the position of average. However, 43% of the students considered teachers' interest lower.

In addition to the questionnaire, in the focus group discussions, both teachers and students forwarded almost similar idea. Most of them believed that teachers' interest was low. For example, one of the students in the focus group discussion argued as:

I am not saying all teachers have no interest. Though the reason is not clear for me, some of the teachers seem to lack interest not only exercising learner-centered approach but also the teaching profession. They are complaining now and then as they are teaching because they have no other alternatives. They have less interest to support and advise us. In fact, few teachers tried to encourage students to read additional materials from library, have good relationship with students and even discussed with students out of the classroom.

One of the teacher focused group discussants briefly reported as the following:

I myself have less interest to employ learner-centered approach. This is because it is difficult to cover the course contents within the planned schedule. In addition, some teachers who applied learner-centered were not motivated and we are pulled to the traditional approach (teacher-centered). Even students have no interest to be treated in the learner-centered approach because they don't like to exert more effort and prefer the short path which is memorizing what the teacher is giving in a form of notes. Teachers who attempted to apply learner-centered were not accepted by their students. Therefore, teachers prefer to use teacher-centered.

Teachers and students were also requested to write their assumptions why teachers lacked interest in learner-centered approach. The reasons forwarded by both of the respondents were; teachers' previous learning and teaching experience, fear of not finishing the contents within the given time frame and students lack of interest to be engaged in learner-centered approach.

Regarding students' interest, most of the students (65.8%) and more than average number

of teachers (56.2%) answered that students' interest in learner-centered approach was low.

The researcher invited the student focused group discussants to say something about the students' interest in learner-centered. The discussants shared the response given by teachers. For instance, one of the students reported as follows:

I observed that most of the students including myself have no interest to learn independently without the teacher. In fact, there are books and other reading materials in the library, but we don't want to refer and get additional knowledge. You could find very few students who read other than their notes. The rest (almost all) students are reading their notes which were given by their teachers. In addition, students have no culture to share their knowledge in the class room or out of the class room. Thus, students are more comfortable with teacher dominant type of approach.

In general, the major reasons that inhibit the students not to have an interest on learner-centered approach were students' past experience of teacher-centered approach, considered the teacher as the only source of knowledge, prefer to use the simplest or easiest way, lack of awareness about learner-centered, focused on promoting from one class level of education to the other.

3.3 Instructional Methods

The teaching methods teachers commonly used in the classroom were based on the experiences they found when they are teaching. It is also from their training and existing current situations (Aggarwal, 2008). As indicated from the data, 86.7% of teachers and 70.3% of students replied that the traditional chalk and talk (lecture) method was dominantly applied. Although teachers and students' response varies, the remaining methods that were employed in the teaching and learning process were group discussion, question and answer, individual work in a form of home works.

According to the student and teacher focused group discussants, lecture method took the leading role and others like question and answer; group work and presentation were the commonly used instructional methods. Concerning this point, one of the student focused group discussants expressed as:

The common instructional methods that most of the teachers employed starts from reminding the main points of the previous lesson and followed by introducing the day's lesson. After this, lecturing takes most of the class time.

Finally, the teacher gives chance to the classroom students to ask questions which are not clear for us and give feedback. Sometimes assignments are given in groups and presented by the group leader or any other volunteer of the group.

Similar question was also asked to teacher discussants and one of them said:

I am in doubt that teachers used different instructional methods which focus on the students' interest and effort. As far as I know instructional methods like lecture, question and answer, group discussion and individual homework were the most prevalent methods of instruction. During the classroom teaching, much of the time is spent by the teachers' talk.

From the above discussions, it is possible to conclude that teachers are using very few instructional methods and even these methods are not free from teacher dominated approach.

3.4 Opportunities to Implement

Learner-Centered Approach

Knowledge can be constructed mainly through the maximum effort of learners (Moore, 1992). Teachers' and students' readiness and motivation are the necessary pre-requisite opportunities for them to implement learner-centered approach. Active learning strategies also serve as useful educational

environments. As complementary responsibility, teachers and the school administrators need to monitor and support the system consistently. Adequate and up to date facilities have to be available to create healthy teaching situation.

A questionnaire was administered to teachers so as to identify the availability of different opportunities for the successful implementation of learner-centered approach. Very large number of respondents (80%) rated the availability of text books as high. Library service and cooperative learning was placed at an average level with the percentage of 61.9 and 52.4 respectively. The remaining opportunities such as internet access and the presence of motivational environment were almost none as reflected by 82.9 and 65.7 percent of teacher and student respondents respectively. The student respondents also shared the view of most of the teacher respondents.

The researcher was also observing the necessary facilities which would strengthen the learner-centered approach. It was found that there were shortages of adequate rooms and chairs to get library service. In addition, the reference materials in each department were not available as required. Very few numbers of computers were available (averagely 18 computers in each school) and even these were not accessible for students as an instructional resource.

In addition, school principals were asked through interview about the opportunities. They pointed out that in-service training opportunity for teachers on active learning and other pedagogical matters; the presence of classroom collegial observation (clinical supervision), the presence of fair number of students in each class (not more than 50) and exposure of teachers to continuous professional development were potential opportunities for teachers to implement learner-centered approach.

Thus, from the above response, one could infer that the exiting potentials to implement learner-centered approach was relatively encouraging and requires a common understanding to use them in school context.

3.5 Challenges to Implement Learner-Centered Approach

According to the respondents, challenges were related with students, teachers, school environment, course contents and administrative issues.

Challenges Related to Students

With regarded to students related challenges, majority of teacher respondents (87.6%) replied that unwillingness to learn through learner-centered took the leading rank. However, 77.6% of the student respondents considered lack of students' conception about learner-centered as the first challenge.

Both respondents (teachers and students) were asked to mention other challenges through open-ended question and they mentioned some challenges. These challenges include students' low value to their learning, high interest in the traditional lecture method, students' low self-reliance, lack of experience, problem of self-centered and less interest to learn from others.

Challenges Related to Teachers

Teacher respondents claimed that their past experience of teacher-centered approach (76.2%) and lack of interest to their profession (58.2%) were found to be major challenges. On the other hand, student respondents (81.4%) answered that the major challenge in relation to teachers was lack of interest to their teaching profession

Besides, in the open-ended items of the questionnaire, few students reported that absence of teachers' willingness to learn

from their colleagues, lack of preparation to use learner-centered approach, lack of encouragement for teachers who use learner-centered, and the teachers' high concern to cover course contents were additional challenges related to teachers.

Challenges Related to School Environment

Conducive physical environment demand good and up to date facilities. Teachers and students were requested to reflect on challenges related to the existing environment of the schools. The challenges had different ranks as responded by both respondents. Irrespective of their frequencies, except student text books, others like inadequate reference materials, teacher work load/ shortage of time, low internet access were critical challenges which need attention by all educational stakeholders.

Challenges Related to Course Contents and Administrative Issue

Regarding the administrative related factors, less attention was given to academic matters and it had become the biggest problem as responded by 81.9% of teachers and 65.4% of students. Next to this, unmanageable course contents took the second rank as 77.1 percent of teachers and 53.9 percent of students ranked it.

Limited supervision and lack of awareness on the side of school principals took the third rank with considerable number of respondents. Teachers were asked to say additional points through open-ended questions. Absence of motivation, focus on routine and occasional matters, absence of teachers' academic freedom, less opportunities for discussion, and limited monitoring and supporting system were pointed out as challenges.

School principals were also requested to reflect the challenges that would hinder the implementation of learner-centered. All of the interviewees externalized that most of the challenges were related to teachers. One of the school principals, for example, explained in the following way:

Although there are problems related to administration at school, woreda, Zonal and regional level, the lion share of challenges on learner-centered would be on the shoulder of teachers. If teachers are committed, they can update themselves through reading and experience sharing about the implementation of learner-centered.

Therefore, the challenges were not from the specific area rather interrelated to each department and each educational stakeholder including the existing locality of the school.

The very important point to be emphasized is to identify the root cause of each problem and to solve it accordingly.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

The analysis of the data revealed that teachers as well as students need continuous access to be aware of the objectives and the implementation techniques of learner-centered approach. Very small number of teachers attempted to carry out learner-centered based on their background knowledge of their pre-service training on learner-centered approach and experience sharing in their respective school. Students' conception about learner-centered approach was very low. It is also evident that students depend on the teacher, and the teacher determines the kind of students' involvement. This would create a negative impact on the interest of students and teachers to implement learner-centered effectively. Teachers were not far apart from implementing the traditional model of teaching (lecture method) which is guided by the principle of teacher-centered. However, there were some opportunities to implement learner-centered approach. These include availability of sufficient text books, library access, reference materials and cooperative learning.

Teachers have also more exposure to continuous professional development (CPD) and experience sharing among staff members.

Lack of understanding, interest and instructional resource limitations were the most common challenges that lead teachers to use teacher-centered approach. Lack of continuous support and monitoring was also discussed as a critical problem to apply learner-centered approach. The overall reflections indicate that the teaching and learning practice in the General secondary schools of Awi Zone did not encourage learner-centered approach where students could construct their own meaning.

4.2. Recommendations

In line with the result of the study and conclusions drawn, the following recommendations were forwarded to mitigate the problem of learner-centered approach.

- To improve the quality of education in every general secondary school, teachers need to be equipped with pedagogical skill through consistently accessing alternative capacity building strategies.
- Teachers need to make themselves familiar with the existing dynamic changes for updating the self and their profession (teaching) through readings and experience sharing.

This environment should be extended to the students as well. Teachers and students who are direct actors in the instructional process need to have clear understanding about learner-centered.

- School principals and department heads are also responsible to make recurrent follow up and supervision as well as reinforcement for the realization of learner-centered.
- The use of existing potential and supplying the necessary facilities have to be considered to implement learner-centered approach.
- Policy makers and implementers at each level have to give priority to bring teachers' and students' interest for teaching and learning more than accessing instructional resources. This could be taken place through continuous open discussion with teachers and students.
- Identifying and motivating teachers who are implementing learner-centered approach needs to be emphasized. Continuous support and follow-up is also another basic strategy to develop the concept of belongingness.

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