



Who is at the center of our language teaching?

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Abstract

The terminology of student- and teacher-centeredness is familiar to most language teachers as a metric of effective teaching. In this report, I explore the challenge of applying such limiting terminology to language classrooms and detail additional questions that instructors should ask. First, Kumaravadivelu's three categories of language teaching methods—language-centered, learner-centered, and learning-centered—are directly relevant to the principles and practices of language teaching. However, recent critical and intercultural approaches to language instruction highlight the intentional decentering of the classroom in order to better engage in effective communication and relationship building with members of local and global language communities. In this report, I propose expanding our understanding of who or what is at the center of our language teaching to include not just the people and ideas in the classroom itself, but to embrace an outward orientation that centers language communities.

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Introduction

Language instructors bring to their classrooms a set of organizing principles, strategies, and activities that make up their teaching approach and repertoire. Even when other factors like materials, technology, and training are similar, the ways teachers determine the goals of their instruction and then chart a path to reach those goals can vary. Furthermore, even when goals and strategies are aligned, two instructors may have idiosyncratic qualities that result in different student experiences. One way that language educators and researchers can engage in productive discussions about what happens in classrooms is by isolating key features of instruction for analysis rather than looking at the entire complexity of the classroom. For example, consider the use of the dichotomy of teacher-centered and student-centered instruction as a way to describe who is doing the talking and making the decisions in a classroom setting.

Educational trends have shifted between teacher-centered and student-centered models of instruction for at least the past 100 years, not just in language classrooms, but in all educational contexts (O'Neill & McMahon, n.d.). Currently, the particular terminology of student- and teacher-centeredness seems to be ubiquitous, appearing as a metric by which teachers are evaluated by supervisors, as a standard applied by professional organizations in widely used rubrics of teacher-effectiveness, and as a self-assessment paradigm. In this report, I will explore the challenge of applying such limiting terminology to language classrooms and explore additional options for isolating key elements of the classroom in terms of (a) methodological coherence and (b) relevance to recent critical and intercultural approaches to language instruction.

The Problem of Terminology

Shared terminology about teaching practices such as *student-centered* and *teacher-centered* allows teachers and researchers to communicate efficiently about how we do things and why. Even when terminology is reductive, and perhaps especially when it is so, the ability to break down the complexity of teaching into some discrete components allows us to make apples-to-apples comparisons across classrooms, teachers, and students. However, it is precisely because our shared terminology is useful in drawing broad comparisons that it is fundamentally unable to capture complex phenomena that are influenced by numerous variables. This is the same dilemma often described in the divide between quantitative and qualitative research methods. Where quantitative research allows us to draw comparisons across wide populations with the intention of extracting generalizable knowledge, qualitative research is more concerned with digging deeply into a smaller population in order to draw in rich detail the nuances of specific experiences. Both quantitative and qualitative research have made important contributions to our profession's understanding of second language research and practice, but my own experience as a qualitative researcher undoubtedly informs my approach to terms like student-centered and teacher-centered. I see these sorts of dichotomous descriptors as the equivalent of the old jokes that start with the line "There are two kinds of people in the world..." Of course, there are more than two kinds of people in the world. Every person is unique, a universe unto themselves. Yet, in order to arrive at any useful data about people, categories help. To paraphrase the mathematician George Box (1976) as my mathematician colleague Derek Bruff often does: All models are wrong, but some are useful. In other words, broad categories never capture the whole truth, but they do capture *something*, and often that something is worth examining.

For many of us, the concept of teacher-centered and student-centered classrooms is no longer just a useful shorthand for capturing something about classrooms but has become a widely understood judgment. If I declare that a class is teacher-centered, my listeners do not hear a value-free observation of who is talking in that class. Teacher-centered connotes that the teacher has decided what students will study and how; all eyes are on the teacher during class as the teacher-leader stands at the front of the room doing most of the talking. When I apply that label to a specific classroom, it is understood to be a negative evaluation, likely implying that the teacher talked too much, and the students did not talk enough. The term has a negative connotation that, no doubt due to its codification in measures of teacher effectiveness, nearly all of us understand.

On the other hand, if I observe a language class and report that it was student-centered, that also attaches a clear value to the observation. I am not just saying that the students had a say in what they learned and how, or that the students did the majority of the talking and the teacher took on the role of facilitator, although that is the agreed-upon definition of a student-centered classroom. I am implying that this class was well done precisely because it centered student voices, preferences, and decisions.

Reducing the complexities of classroom practices to categories is useful, but when those generalizations become attached to values of good and bad teaching and when the categorical options are so limited, we are left with a dualistic way of thinking about complex issues (Chávez et al., 2003) that has the potential to lead to false solutions and overly simplistic interpretations of what happens in classrooms (Mascolo, 2009; Schuh, 2004). Terminology so weighed down with connotations might well represent an ideology in and of itself that must be critically examined. Teaching principles grow out of the teacher's ideologies about language (Lippi-Green, 1997), but also out of ideologies about students, classrooms, and our beliefs about the world. This is just how our brains organize knowledge, and whether we realize it or not, our ideologies affect every aspect of our practice. So, in order to fully explore our own practices as teachers and researchers, let's explore who is at the center of our language teaching.

Who is at the Center

Unfortunately, some of the assertions implied by the value-laden teacher- and student-centered dichotomy may not align with what we know about language teaching through educational and second language

acquisition (SLA) research. In a hypothetical example, a practitioner might interpret research to mean that students learn language when they interact meaningfully with input (as described in Ellis, 2005, for example), that teachers do not always provide significant language input during instruction (as in Kim & Elder, 2005, for example) and that the teacher is often the best source of that input in instructed SLA (as in Ellis & Shintani, 2014). So, for the teacher who has come to believe that student-centered instruction is superior, the conundrum arises: How can the teacher provide that input if they are doing little of the talking? It seems that, given a particular set of circumstances, it could even be possible to receive glowing reviews of teacher effectiveness according to a scale of teacher- versus student-centeredness without actually providing students with enough input to acquire language, despite the fact that acquiring the language is a primary goal of the language classroom no matter who is at its center.

In another example, language teachers might select materials with a focus on student interest in accordance with the principles of student-centered classroom and scholarship urging compelling input (as in Krashen & Bland, 2014, for example). Unfortunately, if we design instruction exclusively around student interests, which are limited by students' own experiences and prior mental models, our courses are unlikely to center people, places, and ideas that have not traditionally been part of the language curriculum or of which our students have no previous knowledge (Randolph, 2021). In contrast, Anya and Randolph (2019) describe the language classroom as a place where the instructor carefully curates resources in order to maximize student interactions with diverse communities:

A diverse and meaningfully representative curriculum does not happen naturally. We must be intentional about finding and incorporating authentic resources that represent non-dominant target language and learner communities and cultural narratives (e.g., non-white, non-heterosexual, non-cisgender, non-male, non-middle/upper class, non-Eurocentric, non-English) so that these voices may be amplified in our courses and, more importantly, so that our world and social realities can be more accurately and more completely represented (p. 26).

Despite categories of teacher- and student-centeredness finding their way into teaching discourse, classroom observation protocols, and other measures of effectiveness, the reality of classrooms muddies the distinctions between these two categories. In observing the classrooms of many teachers over the years and reflecting on my own practice, I have encountered some teachers who fit the *sage on the stage*, teacher-centered model who led their enthusiastic students through stories, challenges, lectures, and other teacher-talk activities that were beneficial for language acquisition and also encouraged a wonderful atmosphere of community and learning in class. Some classrooms I have observed were classically student-centered but seemed to require students to stumble through group activities that were too challenging for them to do in the L2 or perhaps the student-centered activities required students to reveal too much of themselves to a group they did not know well or trust yet. Other classrooms I have observed seemed to line up well with the expectations of the teacher- and student-centered models. Furthermore, the majority of the teachers I have observed, including myself in my own classroom, are not just teacher- or student-centered in the way we organize our classes. We tend to do a bit of both, centering teacher or student voices, preferences, and decisions when it suits the goals of our teaching. The categories of teacher-centered and student-centered make for a useful shorthand to describe who is doing the talking, but it does not tell us much about the quality of instruction or the learning. That is a much more complex set of questions.

Another confounding factor is the research demonstrating that some students prefer a teacher-centered approach with an instructor who is an organized, trustworthy source of knowledge and clearly in control of the classroom (Ross-Gordon, 1991; Shuh, 2004). Common complaints from students when they are transitioning to a student-centered approach are that they experience insecurity, uncertainty, frustration, fear, reduced learning efficiency, and confusion (Alessio, 2004). In small doses these negative feelings can be overcome. However, in a language classroom where the entire course is being conducted in a new language, it is easy to see how these feelings can be compounded with comprehension issues and lead to disengagement and instability (Foster, 1997). Naturally, language students might exhibit a preference for a classroom leader who reduces confusion and frustration. Mascolo (2009) argued that the entire dichotomy

of teacher- and student-centeredness is built on a false premise of knowledge transmission versus constructivist philosophy, and that the real work of the teacher is to guide students in the socio-cultural activities that constitute active participation in the learning process:

The idea that students must actively construct their skills and understandings *for themselves* is not the same as suggesting that children must actively construct their skills and understandings *by themselves*. Conceptions of teachers as mere facilitators or coaches whose function is to support a student's active attempts to discover and reconstruct knowledge through their own actions relinquishes the central role of teachers in the pedagogical process... for the vast majority of students of all ages, the goal of promoting active engagement cannot occur in the absence of authoritative teachers who play a central role in organizing the structure, content and direction of a student's learning (p. 8).

In the end, the teacher/student-centered dichotomy does serve a purpose in helping the profession accurately describe and categorize certain kinds of classroom practices. On an individual basis, the categories can also help teachers reflect on their own practices in order to better align instruction with goals and objectives. However, most classrooms do not neatly fit into either category, and the attached value judgments with each term may conflict at times with the kinds of classroom practices that tend to be most meaningful in the context of language instruction. Rather than abandoning this dichotomy of teacher- and student-centeredness just because it does not answer all of the important questions we might ask, scholars have developed additional categories and ways of understanding to accurately capture language teaching practices as we will see in the next section.

Classroom Principles and Practices at the Center

The reality of language classrooms, as Mascolo (2009) and Anya and Randolph (2019) described, is that teachers play a central role in determining the content and methodological approach and students must actively engage in the learning process. In language teaching methodology, the more salient question tends to be not who is at the center, but rather what principles about language and learning are at the center of our teaching. From that perspective, Kumaravadivelu's (2006b) categories of language-, learner-, and learning-centered classrooms present a useful set of descriptions of language teaching practices and methodological preferences. According to this model, teachers and classrooms can be considered (a) language-centered, (b) learner-centered, or (c) learning-centered.

The *language-centered* approaches are the ones that focus on the language itself as a complex abstract system that can be systematically understood and analyzed. Students in this setting intentionally learn language and acquire meta-linguistic knowledge about the language. Traditionally, language programs have relied on textbooks to cover the entire grammar of a language during the first two years of instruction, representing a language-centered approach. If the syllabus indicates that this week students will be learning all the irregular present tense verbs and indirect object pronouns, that would be an indicator of a language-centered approach. In this kind of classroom, one of the primary roles of the teacher is to give clear explanations of grammar and ensure student understanding of grammatical concepts.

Kumaravadivelu (2006b) described *learner-centered* approaches as focused on communication, specifically on what we might describe in classrooms as language performance (ACTFL, 2012a) or output. In contrast with language-centered approaches, learner-centered classrooms treat language as discourse and as communicative acts, not merely as an abstract system. In order to meet communicative goals, learners engage in communicative tasks that result in both knowledge about concrete uses of language and also the ability to use the language that has been taught in order to achieve communication. Such communication is designed around language functions, the systematic expanding of vocabulary, as well as sociocultural and pragmatic considerations of language use. Students have opportunities to practice communication in increasingly complex ways. Many teaching strategies that fall under the big umbrella of communicative approaches would be classified as learner-centered approaches in this model. Through deliberate practice

and a mix of explicit and implicit strategies, the goal is for learners to express themselves by accurately and appropriately using the language learned in class.

The third and final of category of Kumaravadivelu's (2006a) language teaching practices is *learning-centered*. Classroom practices that fall into this category "engage the learner mainly in the negotiation, interpretation, and expression of meaning, without any explicit focus on form" (p. 65). This sort of classroom might focus on authentic communicative experiences, giving students opportunities to acquire this new language much like they acquired their first language: through meaning-making, social interactions, and with little to no emphasis on formal aspects of language. Also, like first language acquisition, these classrooms do not value student effort or intention but rather they value the subconscious, incidental language learning that happens when students are focused on meaning. The teacher's role is not to grade student performance or to sequence activities to facilitate learning or to explain the grammar but instead to provide students with an optimal linguistic environment (Ortega, 2008) and keep their focus on communication for its own sake.

Kumaravadivelu's three categories are helpful for making sense of language teaching methods, and similar divisions have also been identified by other authors. For example, instead of language-centered, one might see those practices described as focused on "achievement" (Bong, n.d., para. 1; CARLA, n.d.) or explicit instruction (COERLL, n.d.) or in more casual contexts, one might just describe these practices as grammar-focused. Many practitioners use the terminology of performance (ACTFL, 2012a; Bong, n.d.) and proficiency (ACTFL, 2012b; Bong, n.d.) to differentiate between the two categories Kumaravadivelu calls learner- and learning-centered, respectively.

Of course, just as with teacher- and student-centeredness, teachers borrow from all three of these categories according to the goals of their classroom, their own and their students' preferences, the demands of their programs and supervisors, among many other considerations. Kumaravadivelu's (2006b) three categories are more methodologically coherent for language teachers than the student/teacher-centered dichotomy from the previous section. However, while these labels may help categorize practices to make sense of methodology at a bird's eye view, actual classroom-based research and actual teaching takes place in much less structured environments. As Kumaravadivelu pointed out, teachers who are trained in and even those who swear by particular methods do not always conform to the theoretical principles and classroom procedures of that method. A group of teachers who all claim to follow the same method will frequently use different classroom procedures. Classrooms are pragmatic spaces.

Additionally, the effectiveness of student-, teacher-, language-, learner-, and learning-centered approaches is tied to the objectives the instructor hopes to achieve. In a first-year language class with departmental expectations for students to perform on a fixed series of tasks, a teacher might use learner-centered practices because they are focused on equipping students with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed on specific communicative tasks. The same class might also be described as teacher-centered because the teacher is carefully sequencing the activities and doing the majority of the talking with novice students who cannot yet sustain conversations in the target language. In this case concretely, neither of those terms would be incorrect or in conflict, nor would they need to be negative evaluations of the teacher's performance. This combination of a learner-centered and teacher-centered approach would be most likely to lead that particular group of students to the established goals. In other contexts, such as an advanced grammar course for upper-level students, a more language-centered approach would be more appropriate. In another instance, with students expanding into the advanced levels of proficiency, moving towards a more student-centered approach would allow them to flex their communication skills more.

Language is complex. Classrooms are complex. Teachers and students are complex. One or two ways of thinking about classroom challenges is not a sophisticated enough tool kit to describe what we do. In fact, a narrow focus on teachers, students, learning, and language, while all important questions, may not provide us with the tools to appropriately describe other essential aspects of language learning.

Decentering Classrooms

The previously discussed categories focus on classroom practices by answering questions about who is talking or what is the organizing principle of instruction. However, many important questions remain: What is the content of our courses? Whose language is represented? Which cultures are we including? Are dominant narratives being reinforced or are we looking at the real diversity of the people who use this language? Or are we talking about people at all? Sometimes language is presented as a sort of static object, separate from communities, families, and the social groups to whom the language belongs. Other times language is treated as a code that exists only for the benefit of students, divorced from any cultural context, artistic traditions, social movements, or power relationships that exist in that language outside of the classroom. Our existing heuristics are good for answering some questions about classrooms, but other questions may require new terminology and ways of knowing.

In his book *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*, Byram (1997) pointed out that communication is not possible without considering how our words will be received by the interlocutor. “Even the exchange of information is dependent upon understanding how what one says or writes will be perceived and interpreted in another cultural context; it depends on the ability to de-center and take up the perspective of the listener or reader” (p. 3). So, in our classrooms, who are the listeners/readers whose perspectives our students must center in their communication? There are various possible answers to that question, and each teacher’s answer will inform their teaching choices in significant ways.

If we propose that the classroom is the focus of the curriculum and students are primarily engaging with their immediate environment, then students are learning about themselves and each other, communicating with each other, and centering classroom experiences and classroom interlocutors. In order to communicate effectively in this setting, students will need to decenter their own perspectives and take up the perspectives of their classroom peers. The immediate environment is key. Teachers who lean toward this category see the classroom as the primary space of engagement and may express that the classroom is the real world, rather than just a “rehearsal” (Savignon, 1997, P. 195) for some future engagement with language users outside of the classroom. Taylor (1994; and more recently Henshaw, 2022) argued that “...what goes on in a classroom is very real. This is a real use of language and we must not forget that classroom language is very real to the learner” (Taylor, 1994, p. 5).

In contrast to a classroom orientation, communities-centered approaches would seek to decenter the classroom and instead focus student attention on the communities in which the language is used. The focus here is on learning about people who use this language as part of a shared community, developing the language and intercultural skills needed to effectively interact with those communities, and decentering students’ own perspectives in order to take up the perspectives of those communities.

At a presentation I gave on this topic in October 2021 (Johnson), Kate Paesani commented that classroom-centered instruction focuses inward, and communities-centered instruction focuses outward. Indeed, that distinction succinctly represents these categories. Classroom-centered approaches primarily focus inward by teaching students to understand their classmates, express themselves in ways comprehensible to other language learners, meet their own needs, and talk about themselves with others. In contrast, communities-centered approaches primarily focus outward on how students learn to understand members of target language communities, express themselves in ways comprehensible to members of those communities, listen deeply to others’ perspectives, and make new connections within those communities using the community language.

To be clear, decentering the classroom and taking up the perspectives of people in local and global language communities does not mean devaluing the students or teachers in the room. It does, however, clarify that when we come together in the classroom space to learn language, we are learning a language that belongs to communities. As such, the impetus is on us to engage with a world already in progress and a language already in use. Communities-centered teaching does not displace the need to work in culturally relevant or culturally sustaining ways (Paris & Alim, 2017) that honor the full humanity of our students. Instead, it

focuses the content of our courses on others, rather than positioning students as both subject and object of their own work. In fact, when teachers focus on communities and encourage students to do the same, students' own communities and community language practices can be highlighted. In such a classroom focused on the lived experiences of real people, students will often find their own identities and experiences reflected meaningfully in the stories they read and hear.

Connections to Standards and Practices

Languages exist as social practices in communities where they enable communication, transmit culture, and provide shared identity for community members. According to the *World-readiness standards for learning languages* (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015), within the Communities goal area, "Learners use the language both within and beyond the classroom to interact and collaborate in their community and the globalized world" (Summary p. 1). In her analysis of the five goal areas in the standards—Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities—Conlon (2020, 2021) has asserted that Communities should be the profession's central organizing principle because the other four goal areas, especially communication, are natural and necessary parts of engaging with multilingual communities. Communities-centered instruction gives our communication purpose while centering people and their experiences.

The terminology of classroom-centered versus communities-centered instruction may help identify and develop useful connections among many current approaches and practices in wide use in language education. For example, classrooms that emphasize intercultural communicative competence tend toward an outward orientation by positioning cultures other than the students' own as the content of language study so that students can systematically learn the knowledge, skills, and mindsets that allow them to engage effectively across difference. Social pedagogies as explored in Dubreil and Thorne's (2017) volume require students to engage with multiple perspectives and connect their learning in the classroom to the world and to authentic audiences outside of the classroom. Critical and justice-oriented language pedagogies (Enns-Kannan, 2019; Glynn et al., 2018; Osborn, 2006; Randolph & Johnson, 2017) can also be said to be outward facing in order to engage questions of power and justice in current events and in the lived experiences of people in the communities where the language is spoken. The differences in communication or culture that students encounter when they interact with new communities, according to theories of transformative language learning (Johnson, 2015; Leaver et al., 2021), are the catalyst for perspective transformation and deep learning when teamed with critical reflection, shared experiences, and individual action. An outward, communities-centeredness is the common thread in many important shifts in language education in recent years.

The Possibilities of Communities-Centered Instruction

For language teachers who want to foster a more communities-oriented classroom, what would that look like in terms of practices? What happens in the classroom when we decenter the classroom itself? The primary question teachers and students seek to answer in a communities-centered classroom might be "How can we use this language to get to know people and communities better?" Lessons and units might be organized around real people as individuals and as members of communities, centering their experiences, language, and identities. In the following sections, I discuss key questions and practices in a communities-centered approach to language teaching including issues of expertise, the role of the teacher and students, language varieties, materials, and student language production.

Expertise

The source of knowledge—who gets to be the expert—is one feature that distinguishes instructional approaches. For example, in a teacher-centered classroom, the teacher is the source of knowledge whereas in a student-centered approach, student expertise is more highly valued. In contrast, communities-centeredness elevates the expertise of people who use the language as part of a community. In order to

benefit from this community expertise, students should encounter first-person accounts of lived experiences and diverse representatives from communities that use the target language. Communities are experts in their own linguistic and cultural practices, and we learn from them.

The Role of the Teacher and Students

In communities-centered language instruction, the teacher's primary role is to connect students with communities of language speakers by equipping students with the language proficiency as well as the intercultural competence they need for engagement. This community engagement might fall into two distinct categories, pulling communities into the classroom and pushing students out into communities. In order to pull communities in, the teacher will need to stay up to date on what is happening in a variety of communities where the language is spoken and bring in learning materials such as authentic texts (Long, 2020) and community language resources (Menacker, 2001) that reflect reality in all of its complexity rather than oversimplifying or reinforcing dominant narratives. In order to push students out into communities, teachers will need to scaffold and facilitate opportunities for students to decenter their own perspectives at developmentally appropriate moments perhaps through study abroad, community-engagement, service learning, virtual exchange, ethnographic projects, or other experiential pedagogies. Teachers both help students access and understand how communities use the target language and help them to interact effectively and respectfully with language communities.

A communities-centered classroom can help students understand that true communication requires intentionally and deeply listening and understanding people in their own language. When students come in contact with perspectives that are new or in opposition to their own, they are encouraged to listen and read to understand rather than to defend their own perspectives. Students in communities-centered classrooms should understand that building relationships is the goal of language and, as such, will seek out opportunities to learn from diverse interlocutors.

Materials, Language Varieties, and Oversimplification

Traditionally, hallmarks of many commercially available textbooks include stereotypical cultural representations (Drewelow, 2013) and a lack of diversity (Fabbian et al., 2019), including a lack of linguistic diversity (Griffin, 2019; Mason & Nicely, 1995) despite evidence that exposure to variation is feasible and beneficial for students even at the lower levels (Schoonmaker-Gates, 2017). Often, such textbooks and other pre-packaged materials assume that students should learn a standardized variety, or a variety that has traditionally been labeled as prestige or academic in nature. These standardized varieties are not reflective of the creative, dynamic ways people use language in social groups and are simplified for classroom comprehensibility. In a classroom-centered approach, it might seem more logical to stick to one widely-taught, standardized variety that students will be able to use consistently with each other and will be likely to encounter in other classrooms. In a communities-centered classroom, where the emphasis is on language as a community practice, students will need to have access to the language varieties spoken in the communities they are learning about. Each community member we encounter will teach us the variety of their home, and students will learn to navigate and celebrate these differences.

In a classroom-centered environment, students might read about characters invented as a vehicle for providing comprehensible input, or activities might be designed to keep the focus on students in the room describing themselves, both of which can be beneficial for language acquisition and are widely employed in classrooms. However, in communities-centered instruction, teachers select and highlight texts, both authentic and those created for learners, that reflect community stories, values, and language practices. In particular, when texts are created especially for language learners by teachers who are not members of a community where that language is used, in order to maintain a communities-centered approach, the authors of such texts should avoid linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992). The Language Learner Literature Advisory Board (LLLAB, n.d.) warns that linguistic imperialism, "...may intentionally or unintentionally create a version of the target language that doesn't resemble the geolects used in target cultures." For teachers who write materials for their students, the LLLAB describes the impact of oversimplifying

language for the sake of comprehensibility as a process of “cultural erasure by replacing native-language thought patterns and phrasing with those of a language associated with imperial domination.” Long (2020) argued from an SLA perspective that language learning is also hindered with oversimplified texts of this type, “Comprehensibility has been improved, no doubt, but of a text that has been bled of semantic detail and realistic models of target language use” (p. 172).

The inclusion of authentic texts, meaning texts that are created by members of target language communities for authentic communicative purposes, might represent an outward focus on community language use in contrast with textbooks and leveled readers designed with an inward focus on learner needs. However, even authentic texts can originate outside of the communities they describe and/or reproduce harmful narratives and stereotypes (Conlon et al., 2019). All materials used in teaching, whether authentic or not, must be re-evaluated in light of whether they center the language varieties, perspectives, and voices of individuals in target language communities.

Through this lens, teachers might decide not to spend valuable class time with students on fictional or stereotypical textbook materials when there are so many people in the real world about whom we could be learning. With a focus on instructional texts that center community members, current events, artists, and even ordinary people posting on social media, students come into contact with real people, often telling their own stories in their own words.

Interpersonal and Presentational Communication

In addition to the interpretive communication as described in the previous section, interpersonal and presentational communication are transformed under a communities-centered approach. For example, in a first-semester course, students typically learn simple language to describe their everyday experiences, feelings, and the world around them. Many textbooks focus all of the activities and assessments on students describing themselves and others in the room. However, when we intentionally shift the focus to language communities outside of the classroom, students are able to use the same language to talk about the people, places, and events we have encountered through reading and listening activities, i.e., interpretive communication. Suddenly, in-class conversations and presentational activities are not just about the students in the room, our schedules, our preferences, and our activities. We can talk about what is happening in local and global language communities. Students can give short presentations on community heroes, historical figures, artists, and other public figures using the language they know. Students can also report on their own experiences with community engagement as well as bring their personal community connections into the classroom to share.

Conclusion

At any level of instruction and in any kind of language classroom, teachers can ask themselves if their practices keep the focus on the people in the classroom, or if the focus is on learning to interact with existing communities of language users in local and global language contexts. While previous terminology around student- and teacher-centeredness as well as language-, learner-, and learning-centeredness has provided useful insights into teaching practices, I propose that expanding our understanding of who or what is at the center of our language teaching will generate useful connections across recent critical and intercultural approaches to language education and encourage our profession to continue evolving to be more outward-facing and more communities-centered. Since a communities-centered orientation can co-exist with other organizational and methodological approaches such as student-centeredness or learning-centeredness, this terminology would improve our collective ability to communicate effectively about what does and should happen in language classrooms without disrupting effective practices already in place.

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