

Student Centred Learning: Are our students and lecturers ready to embrace this approach?

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Abstract: Student Centred Learning, a prominent term in educational arena in Europe and the West is gaining popularity in Asia including Sri Lanka, especially in the higher education sector. Even though a lot of discussions, workshops and training programmes are conducted through several projects on this concept, there is no evidence for it being adopted by higher education sector in Sri Lanka. Nor are there any evaluations of the outcomes of the approach, where the Student Centred Learning is practised at a smaller scale. This paper arises at the backdrop of such a scenario to identify if Student Centred Learning is practised in a Sri Lankan University called South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, and its perceived benefits and constraints at the university.

Key words: Student Centred Learning, Interaction, Confucian Heritage Culture, Didactic- Teaching, Reticence

Introduction

What is student centred learning?

Student centred learning is a long standing concept not only in higher education but also among primary and secondary level (Lea et al., 2003) educators. Hence, defining student centred learning has been a problem of all concerned (ibid).

In this paper, I have attempted to give a few definitions for Student-Centred Learning (SCL). SCL is a broad teaching approach that encompasses replacing lectures with active learning, integrating self-paced learning programmes and/or cooperative group situations, ultimately holding the student responsible for his [or her] own advances in education (Nanney, 2004). SCL is a teaching approach that replaces the traditional didactic lecture method to an approach that keeps the students in the centre of the learning process and gives autonomy to them. In the SCL approach students are responsible for their learning and the teachers become facilitators playing a little role.

Froyd and Nancy (2010) have listed an array of terms coined to indicate SCL, of them some prominent terms are Active Learning, Collaborative Learning, Inquiry-based Learning, Cooperative Learning, Problem-based Learning, and Project-based Learning. In addition, O'Neill and McMahon (2005) list some other terms such as experiential learning and self-directed learning. Nevertheless, of all the terms used SCL has been an overused term (ibid). Adding to this list are Case-based learning, Goal-based scenarios, and Learning by design by Pederson and Liu (2003).

Despite varying methods and approaches encompassing the SCL the basis of the approach is that SCL gives autonomy to learners with varying flexible strategies to learn. In Sri Lanka too the term Student Centred Learning is gaining popularity especially among the higher education sector. The staff development programmes organised by universities to train the newly recruited staff focuses on the 'Mantra' SCL but to what extent an understanding of the concept is conveyed is another question to be investigated.

Student centred learning requires students to set their own goals for learning, and determine resources and activities that will help them meet those goals. Because students pursue their own goals, all of their activities are meaningful to them (Pedersen and Liu, 2003). A principle commonly agreed upon SCL is student autonomy in contrast to teacher dependence. This also implies that interdependence between the teacher and learner is also an attribute to SCL.

In Sri Lanka, recently, SCL has become a prominent concept with the onset of idea of converting Sri Lanka into a knowledge hub in Asia. In addition, the higher education ministry introduced a benchmarking for future graduates, known as, K-SAM. That is Knowledge, Skills, Attitude and (proper) Mindset are the key parameters a graduate should possess at the end of his or her education. The ministry is geared to achieve this end through the various grants provided to universities, financed by the World Bank. Billions of rupees is being spent on refurbishing lecture halls, acquiring new equipment, targeting to bring about a change in the lecturing approach to student centred learning. Hence, it is good to investigate in detail if the students and lecturers in Sri Lankan universities have understood the concept of SCL, and are willing to accommodate SCL. In this study I tried to look into these aspects, albeit at a small scale.

Literature Review

Biggs and Tang (2007) argue that the university sector in most western and some eastern countries continue to change the teaching/ learning approach at an increasingly higher rate because they claim that teaching and learning have been neglected in favour of learner. They argue learners should be prioritized in learning process. In other words, they stress for student centred learning.

SCL has been in practice and is subject to research for a long time in many parts of the world. To cite a few - The University of Glasgow (2004, cited in O'Neill and McMahon, 2005) identified four main strategies in a study that focused on student-centred learning practices in their University. They are (i) make the student more active in acquiring knowledge and skills. This includes exercises in class, fieldwork, use of CAL (Computer Assisted Learning) packages, etc., (ii) make the student more aware of what they are doing and why they are doing it, (iii) a focus on interaction. i.e. tutorials and discussions and (iv) the focus on transferable skills. Further, O'Neill and McMahon (2005) list several attributes of SCL that could be practised in SCL, both outside the lecture format and within the lecture. The first ones are Independent projects, Group discussion, Peer mentoring of other students, Debates, Field trips, Practicals, Writing journals, etc. The latter group consists of Buzz groups (short discussion in twos), Pyramids/snowballing (Buzz groups continuing the discussion into larger groups), Cross-overs (mixing students into groups by letter/number allocations), Rounds (giving turns to individual students to talk), Quizes, Presentations, Role play, etc.

Lea et al. (2003) in their study at a UK university tried to identify students' perceptions on SCL. The studies revealed that students had a positive view of SCL. However, the students expressed their unfamiliarity with the concept and were skeptical if the approach was politically motivated.

Hasan and Ageely (2010) from a Saudi Arabian university used secondary sources to investigate the influence of SCL in medical education and found that SCL is widely used in medical education. Further, Asoodeh et al. (2012) in a study in Iran tried to correlate SCL with academic achievements and found that when the students were exposed to SCL approach their achievements were higher. However, their study was conducted among secondary school children. Lont (1999) in a study among Finance students in a New Zealand university exemplified how finance lectures could be delivered in SCL approach using intranet.

In another study, in Belgium, Baeten et al. (2013) attempted to link deep and surface approaches to learning with learning strategies and conclude that a deep approach is associated with an intention to understand and an intrinsic interest in the content to be learned, while a surface approach is adopted for an extrinsic motivation and fear of failure. That is, it can be presumed that when students are exposed

to SCL they undertake a deep approach to learning. This study exemplifies the potential benefits of SCL and the possible learning outcomes students could develop as a result of SCL. These two deep and surfaces approaches can be linked to teaching and learning paradigms too. Also, a shift in the approach to teaching has been marked as a shift from Instruction Paradigm to Learning Paradigm (Barr and Tagg, 1995). The SCL is connected to the latter. These brief reviews indicate that SCL has been in practice in many parts of the world.

SCL approaches have been implemented in this region too. For example, in Malaysia, Student Centred Learning (SCL) approach is currently encouraged in the Malaysian Higher Education classrooms for teaching and learning with a view to producing individuals with creative thinking (Yusoff et al., 2003). Hence, it provides students with learning opportunities that promote namely creative and critical thinking, active student engagement, value judgement, and transferable skills (ibid). According to Yusoff et al., SCL can be traced back to as long as to 1956. In their study in a Malaysian university they investigated to what extent lecturers practise SCL. They used a framework for the SCL which comprises of seven components: Learners' Empowerment, Learners' Engagement, Collaboration, Teacher's Role, Higher Order Thinking Skills, Assessments, and Approaches/ Methodology/ Strategy. The results of the study reveal that lecturers practise different forms of SCL varying from collaborative/cooperative learning, problem based learning, to debate and action research, in a decreasing frequency. In addition, SCL can be an alternative approach when universities face limited staff resources (Janor et al., 2013).

Since the Sri Lankan government has introduced a qualification benchmarking called KSAM. The SCL can be the means of achieving this KSAM. This is similar to the Malaysian MQF (Malaysian Qualifications Framework) which includes eight attributes, according to a recent study by Janor et al. (2013). Those attributes include: (i)knowledge; (ii)practical skills; (iii)social skills and responsibilities; (iv)values, attitudes and professionalism; (v)communication, leadership and team skills; (vi)problem solving and scientific skills; (vii)information management and lifelong learning skills; and (viii)managerial and entrepreneurial skills. Hence, Janor et al. believe that SCL can lead to achieve the MQF.

In a study in Vietnam, Thanh-Pham (2010) identified several practical difficulties in implementing SCL in Vietnamese education sector. He quotes:

Vietnamese educators are dedicated to importing various Western teaching and learning approaches, especially a student-centred approach and see these approaches as 'standards' for local education reforms. This happened because they believe that a student-centred learning approach promises to provide local students with new skills required by the labour market like independence, creativeness, activeness and cooperativeness. In many ways, such advanced approaches can be considered a fashion. (Thanh-Pham, 2010: 22)

Even though Thanh-Pham accepts the idea of SCL, he warns that other local constraints also should be taken into consideration when implementing such huge educational change.

In a Sri Lankan study for a Master's thesis, Dahanayake (n.d.) investigated the secondary level classes for practicing SCL. His findings reveal that even though teachers and students have a positive attitude towards SCL, the approach is yet to be practised at a greater scale. Hence, studies on tertiary sector are yet to appear in Sri Lanka.

Theoretical underpinning

The epistemological background of SCL is connected to sociocultural approach to learning, originated from the work of Vygotsky. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of development treats that learning and development happen in social interaction. Sociocultural theory argues that the role of language and interaction between the teacher and the learners is important for the L1 as well as L2 learners (Mercer, 2001). The importance of dialogic interaction in learning has been emphasised in sociocultural perspectives on learning in both L1 and L2 contexts (Navaz, 2012). Hence, Li (2012) explains that Vygotsky's sociocultural theory stipulates that formal and conceptual knowledge emerges from a repertoire of daily experience and interaction with adults and peers. Li further explains that constructivism as a learning theory makes learning meaningful. The core constructivist perspectives are as follows: (a) learning is a self-directed process - knowledge is constructed rather than directly received; (b) instructor as facilitator; (c) learning as a sociocultural process. These are the basis on which SCL is built.

Biggs and Tang (2007) echo the same view that constructivism can take several forms such as social and cognitive. The latter was the result of Piaget who considered learning is a mental process, whereas Vygotsky considered it a social process. Nevertheless, Biggs and Tang emphasise that the learners construct knowledge with their own activities, building on what they already know. Teaching is not a matter of transmitting but of engaging students in active learning, building their knowledge in terms of what they already understand. Biggs and Tang believe that:

We prefer constructivism as our framework for thinking about teaching because it emphasizes what students have to do to construct knowledge, which in turn suggests the sort of learning activities that teachers need to address in order to lead students to achieve the desired outcomes. In conceptualizing outcomes-based teaching and learning, constructivism works for us. (Biggs and Tang, 2007: 21)

Similarly, Duffy and Cunningham (1996) explain that constructivism has come to serve an umbrella term for SCL approaches and hence the key concerns of the constructivism are (i) learning is an active process of constructing rather than acquiring knowledge and (ii) instruction supports construction of knowledge but not communication of knowledge.

The foregoing brief review indicates that constructivism could be a suitable theory to explain the underlying theory for SCL. Hence, interaction is a key parameter in implementation of SCL. Moreover, The underlying principle of SCL is being engaging students in learning-teaching process and also it can be described as 'inside out' to an 'outside in' approach (Lea et al., 2003). In the former, students make the decision of what is required of them, while the latter stipulates that outside authorities make decisions for the students. Hence, students are more attracted to inside-out approach which meets their learning needs and SCL provides a platform for this learning.

Methodology

This study attempted to investigate the aspects of SCL in a quantitative manner at SEUSL; the practice of SCL, the perceived benefits and constraints. For this purpose, a questionnaire has been designed for students to investigate their perceptions of SCL. In addition, views of the lecturers also were accommodated, albeit at a small scale to triangulate the students' views.

Students from three faculties were randomly selected as convenient samples. Second and third year students were selected from Faculty 1 and 2. The names of the faculties were not revealed due to ethical considerations. In Faculty 3, first year students were selected. In Faculties 1 and 2, L1 is used for instruction, whereas in Faculty 3 English is used as a medium of instruction. The number of students who participated in this survey are given in table 1 below.

Table 1: Number of students who participated in the survey

Faculty	Year of study	Student Numbers
1	2	11
	3	23
2	2	13
	3	14
3	1	52
Total		113

A questionnaire survey was administered. The questions were read by an administrator and the meanings were explained. Students were given freedom to answer the questionnaire which was in English in any language of their choice. Lecturers were contacted face to face or via telephone. The following research questions were formulated:

1. What do the students understand by the term Student Centred Learning? Is SCL practised in their respective faculties?
2. What are the perceived benefits of SCL and constraints in practicing SCL in the university?
3. What do the students perceive of classroom interaction?
 - 3.1 Do the students ask questions?
 - 3.2 Do the students answer questions?
 - 3.3 What factors do influence classroom interaction?

10 lecturers from those three faculties were consulted/interviewed to get their views on SCL.

Findings

I. What is Student Centred Learning?

Surveyed students reported what SCL means as given below:

From Faculty 1 and 2:

*Students are responsible for their own learning with little help from the lecturers/teachers.
In SCL students are given focus. In SCL students carryout all learning activities themselves.
A learning activity to gain additional knowledge and enthusiasm.
An activity to acquire additional knowledge and skills, while motivating them to learn with eagerness.*

Faculty 3:

*With little guidance from lecturers student find the information using library and internet.
students talk 75% in the lecture.
Students are given chance [to] tell something about [the] subject.*

II. What is students' perception of practicing SCL in their faculties?

In Faculties 1 and 2, 90% of the students mentioned that SCL is practised in their faculties. In contrast, in Faculty 3, 58% mentioned that SCL is not practised. Of the surveyed students 5% reported that they don't know if SCL is practised or not.

III. What are the activities connected to SCL in their respective faculties?

Of those students who marked SCL is practised in their faculties detailed in what ways SCL is practised. I give them below for Faculties 1 and 2, followed by 3.

1. Reference Work – Students are given keynotes only and asked to refer books and find detailed notes. Sometime lecturers provided only the areas of study and asked students to do reference work.
2. Use labs – Here students refer to their work at the IT lab for the IT subject. They sometime prepare projects and programmes for this subject.

3. Presentations – Many students mentioned that they are asked to do presentations in their classes. This includes individual and group presentations.
4. Research project – Students are asked to do small scale project studies and submit reports but this does not cover the final year dissertation.
5. Group work - This covers assignments and presentations too.
6. Debates – Students are asked to make debates on selected topics dividing them into groups.
7. Teaching practise (Faculty 2) – For certain subjects students are asked to conduct micro teaching practices.

In Faculty 3:

In this faculty many students mentioned about the presentations and quiz tests. These are conducted as part of their Continuous Assessments (CAs). In addition, some others mentioned that group activity as examples for SCL. Even though in this faculty nearly half of the study time is spent on practicals none of the students mentioned it as an activity for SCL.

IV. What are the advantages of SCL?

As advantages of SCL students listed the following. Nevertheless, these advantages should be treated as potential advantages because students who had stated that SCL is not practised in their faculty listed this advantages too.

Students get to know new things and also at the same time develop skills to search and find new things. They also consider that it enhances their understanding of concepts. SCL is assumed to be enhancing knowledge and skills of students. For example, they mentioned they produce CDs and write computer programs for the IT subject.

The students perceive that they develop abilities to work independently. This includes their leadership skills and personality development too. Some students feel that their stage fear is eliminated through presentations and also their shyness to talk is reduced.

In addition, some other reasons mentioned by the students were that through SCL higher relationship between lecturers and students could be maintained. Another advantage, as reported by the students, is assessing students could be easy.

V. What constraints and practical problems do students and lecturers face in practicing SCL?

1. Lack of resources – students reported that there are not adequate resources like multimedia projectors, computers and internet facilities.
2. Fear of approaching lecturers – Students stated that they fear to approach lecturers or even they think that a confrontation may arise if students take the lead role that is stipulated by SCL approach. This comes from the value that lecturers should not be challenged in the classroom. A few students also mentioned that when questions are asked the lecturers respond to them harshly so that they do not dare to ask questions again. However, this claim should be verified in future studies. As a whole, students feel that there is lack of understanding between lecturers and students so that practising SCL may be impossible.
3. Some students also feel that when the responsibility of learning falls heavily on the shoulders of students their stress will increase and also it may lead to dropouts and absenteeism.

Asking Questions

Eighty percent of the surveyed students reported that they do not ask questions in the classroom. As a reason some of the students mentioned that they understand all the concepts that are taught in the classroom, but this claim needs further clarifications.

As some other reasons for not asking question students mentioned the fear and shyness to ask questions. As mentioned earlier, students fear to ask questions because they assumed that it could be treated as challenging the authority of the students. In addition, due to language problems also students from Faculty 3 avoided asking questions. Time constraint is another factor that hampered asking or answering questions in lectures. Students reported that time is not allocated for asking or answering questions in lectures.

Answering Questions

In contrast to asking questions, 70% of the students mentioned that they answered questions in lectures.

Suggestion to improve interaction:

Students suggested that increasing the relationship between lecturers and students is a good measure to increase interaction. When the lectures behave friendly with students, students will tend to talk more in the classroom. In addition, students should be trained and guided to talk in the classroom. Giving opportunities to ask questions and make presentations, group activities are also important. They also suggested that giving prior knowledge of the subject will encourage students to interact in the classroom.

In Faculty 3, students suggested that lecturers should focus on all the students equally and give opportunities to all students. They alleged that lecturers' attention fall on the talkative students. Also they requested that lecturers should not reply in a harsh tone. However, these allegations are limited to one or two lecturers and verification was not possible as students did not reveal the names of these lecturers . Further, they stressed the necessity to establish a friendly atmosphere in the classroom. Students wanted to get more group activities too. They also mentioned that exam oriented teaching should be avoided in lectures.

VI. What are lecturers' view on SCL?

A few lecturers consulted accepted that presently their faculties do not practise SCL but at the same time agreed that SCL is an important concept for the development of students. Time constraint and the necessity to complete the syllabi within the time frame are the hindering factors if someone wants to practise interactive or collaborative teaching. They stressed that lecturers need proper training before implementing SCL.

They also blamed that students are not cooperative for collaborative learning and stated that students do not answer questions even though they ask questions. A few of the lecturers are also aware of the friendly atmosphere and mentioned that students try to maintain a distance from them that they rarely approach lecturers to clarify any subject related problems. The interviewed lecturers did not accept that they answer the questions in a harsh manner.

Discussion

The findings reveal that students in Faculty 1 and 2 assume that SCL is practised in their faculties, while the majority from Faculty 3 denies its occurrence. However, these acceptance and denial cannot be taken as a good indication of SCL because so far there is no clear understanding of what SCL is among the students and lecturers. SCL can be practiced through different forms such as Active Learning, Collaborative Learning, Cooperative Learning, Problem-based Learning, etc. But, at this university, students and a few interviewed lecturers think that the way lectures are conducted as SCL, considering classroom discussions, leaving out the fact that it is a holistic approach that encompasses many different approaches as listed above.

At SEUSL, even though lecturers and students think that asking and answering question is SCL in reality it may be a single component of SCL. I compare both approaches side by side as discussed by Pedersen and Liu (2003) in table 2. The key differences between the two approaches include goals, roles, assessments, and student interactions.

From this comparison we can easily identify that at SEUSL most characteristics favour traditional teacher centred approaches. Nevertheless, one cannot argue that SCL is not practised at SEUSL at all. Students' revelations show us that there are different practices leading to SCL along the line but they need to be streamlined.

Table 2 – Differences between the approaches

Characteristics	Student Centred Approaches	Traditional Teacher Centred Approaches
Goal of student activity	students work to provide a response to a central question. Have students' ownership over their process	students work to meet the objectives set by the teacher
Role of the teacher	the teacher presents the central question (issue, case, problem), and then works as a facilitator as students determine the nature of the response they will develop, and then formulate and carry out a process to develop that response.	In teacher-directed instruction, the teacher sets learning objectives, and then plans a set of activities designed to help learners meet those objectives.
Assessment	Open ended assessment techniques that are designed to involve students in examining their own learning, focusing their attention on their learning needs and changing understanding rather than on a grade.	teachers use assessments to determine grades, which in turn are used to motivate students.
Interaction	Collaborative learning emphasizes students' self-governance of their interactions, allowing them to make decisions about with whom they work, and how.	Teacher directed

Adopted from: Pedersen and Liu (2003)

Another issue aligned with practicing SCL is the forms of evaluation conducted at SEUSL. At this university end semester written examinations are still popular. For these examinations, students tend to memorize the lecture notes and reproduce at the examinations. Present allocation of marks for continuous assessments⁹ (CAs) is not sufficient, though the new proposals warrant a higher proportion of CAs. It is believed that when assessments are targeted on high level knowledge students tend to work more – to engage in active learning practices. In contrast, if the assessments focus on lower level knowledge students are believed to adopt a surface learning approach (Thanh-Pham, 2011). For example, if the teachers administer MCQ type tests in classes students tend to work alone and try to find the answer as soon as possible. This is true for their end semester assessments and their study

⁹ Forms of evaluations (e.g. assignments, presentations, reports, etc.) that exclude end-semester written examinations,

approaches too. That is, if assessments are focused on testing the memory of the students, they would not spend time on group or collaborative learning. As far as this university is concerned serious note should be taken to revise the assessments and evaluation in order to facilitate the practice of SCL. On the other hand, increasing the continuous assessment marks to higher level may not be possible either because of the students' passive attitude and interdependence.

The findings further reveal that the shortage of resources may hamper the implementation of SCL. Students reported that equipment like multimedia projectors, computer and internet facilities are inadequate. Moreover, lecture hall seating arrangements are also structured for lecture mode but not for group activities. Nevertheless, with the pouring funds into this university and to Sri Lankan universities in general via various projects infrastructural facilities and equipment can be acquired in near future.

Another major concern expressed by the surveyed students was that of related to culture of students and lecturers. For SCL there should be higher level of classroom interaction between lecturers and students and among the students. Students in this study reported that they feared to ask questions or answer questions in the classroom. They also feared that there could be a possible confrontation with lecturers if the students take the lead role. In addition, They claimed that there is no cordial relationship between lecturers and students. A previous study by the researcher (Navaz, 2012, 2013) indicated that students in Sri Lankan universities are passive and reluctant to participate in classroom discussions. That is, if SCL to be introduced students' passive behaviour should be changed. In a previous study by the researcher, two major reasons were indicated for students' passive behaviour. They are the influence of the school environment and the cultural influence. These two parameters are more important as they deal with students' attitude and therefore I discuss them below.

Influence of the school environment

In the absence of any studies at tertiary level with regard to students' classroom participation, I refer to study at school level. This study reports that the reasons for the passive behaviour of students are the teacher dominance and teacher centred classrooms in schools throughout their entire school life (Premawardhena, n.d.). Based on this it can be argued that the students who did not have much chance to interact in the classroom and are 'trained' to be passive may continue in their reticence at university too.

Therefore, one reason that explains the university students' reluctance to interact may be the long term passive learning they have been used to in the schools and when they enter university the twelve years of persistent behaviour may not change easily. Flowerdew et al. (2000) also explain that 'students have passive learning styles inherited from the secondary school system' (p. 125) and I take up their point below for further discussion.

Students in this study also reported that they feel shy to talk in the classroom. Though no Sri Lankan studies have reported on students' shyness, in Malaysian ESL school classrooms, Harun (2009) reports that students were shy to answer because they feared that other students would laugh at them. Harun's finding was similar to the findings of this study.

Cultural influence

In addition to this passive behaviour inherited from school learning, there is another belief among students that lecturers should not be challenged. In a previous study (Navaz, 2012) the researcher found that students considered that asking questions while the lecture was going on as inappropriate behaviour and they also thought this could even be an insult to the lecturer.

With regard to the claim I have made above that Asian students are passive in the classroom, Flowerdew and Miller (1995) claimed that the reluctant attitude of Asian students in participating in classroom discussions is believed to be culturally linked to Confucianism. These claims were made

based on a study conducted among Cantonese-speaking Chinese tertiary level students taught by NS lecturers. Flowerdew and Miller note that the values of Confucianism emphasise that lecturers' authority should be respected; lecturers should not be questioned, etc. In addition, they claim that Chinese students adopt a receptive role in class and look to the teacher to provide the information needed to successfully pass the course. Further, they consider, it is because of the Confucian values the students are rooted in, that they do not want to expose themselves in a weak position. That is, if they answer questions, they may face the risk of giving a wrong answer, they may worry that their English is wrong, or they do not want to be considered by others as showing off.

With regard to Confucian culture, Biggs (1996) describes Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC). The countries, or the educational systems, in East and Southeast Asia are considered to be influenced by CHC (e.g. China, Taiwan, Singapore, Japan, etc.). These CHC classes are assumed to be authoritarian; students are accustomed to rote learning. However, Biggs, based on several other studies, argues that CHC students are not rote learners. He calls this consideration of rote learners a 'western misperception arising from a mistaken interpretation of a repetitive effort' (p. 63). That is, repetitive learning has been misunderstood as rote learning, according to Biggs. Biggs also considers that CHC learners are able to perform at high cognitive levels in academic tasks and are deep learners, if deep learning is defined as handling the task meaningfully.

Moreover, some researchers have challenged the view of Asian students as reticent, for example by Flowerdew and Miller, as an overgeneralisation (e.g. Cheng, 2000). Cheng argues that the reticence of Asian students is not cultural, reluctance or passivity but that it is situation specific. He states that the reticence arises mainly due to methodological differences in the classroom as well as the language proficiency of students in ESL classes. Cheng explains that those Asian students studied in teacher controlled classrooms where students were trained to be passive and, as a result, they may not ask questions of the teachers. In addition, when these students learn in a foreign environment, which is different from the Asian environment, these students may not ask questions because of their limited language skills.

Similar to this argument, Littlewood (2000) states that students from Asian countries would like to learn through active participation and there is little difference in the attitude to learning between Asian students and European students, even though there are differences at individual student level. Littlewood (2000), similar to Cheng, argues that students in Asian countries do not see the teacher as an authority figure who should not be questioned.

Based on the foregoing discussion we can assume that there is reticence among the Asian students but it does not need to be permanent. These Asian students when study in foreign universities along with the western students they perform better than the western students. As a result of the Vietnamese study also a similar view was expressed. The researcher quotes:

[...] it is easy to understand why Vietnamese students are very familiar with accepting knowledge transmitted from the teacher and feel reluctant to express their own ideas in discussions. To change the traditional worldview, there need to be new thoughts about the role of the teacher in transforming knowledge. (Thanh-Pham, 2010: 31)

In addition to the issue of passive behaviour, students mentioned some other problems too connected to practising SCL. Students in this study feared that leaving the burden of teaching and learning on the shoulders of students may increase their stress level. There is high probability that students will resist to this approach when implemented. Lea et al. (2003) expressed a similar view as a result of their study among a higher educational institute in UK. In their study students feared 'about an approach that lacked structure, guidance and support in the name of being student-centred' (p. 12).

Another issue is, in the absence of proper guidance and guidelines, lecturers may find difficulties to manage the lessons and deliver SCL successfully. In this study, students in Faculty 3 complained that lecturers should focus on all students equally rather than paying attention to only talkative students. Lea et al. also pointed out that ‘a failure to focus upon what the student does may potentially lead to a division within the class, between those who are able to rise to the challenge of a more student-centred approach and those who are not’ (p. 12-13). That is, any new model that deviates from the traditional didactic teaching approach may be looked upon suspiciously and even loses support from both students and lecturers. Nevertheless, proper training, planning and guidance may lead to success.

In this study it was revealed that students perceive different concepts with SCL. Sometimes students expressed their fear that students may not attend lectures. This fear arises from their understanding of the concept of SCL in which they assumed that students do not need to come to lecture, instead they have to find their own notes in the library or internet. Similarly a few lecturers also expressed that SCL always involves group discussions. In reality we have seen that SCL is an approach that encompasses different student centred learner activities without limiting to a single method.

As Napoli (2004) claims student-centred learning is not simply about classroom interaction. He argues that it has implications for curriculum and syllabus design, and assessment and requires a whole change of culture within an institution including syllabus and curricula. If it is the lecturer who should decide his or her mode of delivery of lectures according to SCL, will he or she be in a position to do this? It will be a crucial decision to make what individual activities or methods to use in a lecture that is to be delivered as SCL. We cannot have ‘one size fit for all’ approach. Then the vital question comes ‘who designs this?’ Mckenna (2013) also warns that when designing SCL approaches pedagogic elements should be taken into consideration. He argues that there is little consideration of how the disciplinary knowledge is constructed and what norms and values underpin such constructions.

It is unfortunate that those who dictate from higher position forget to tell the constraints and practical difficulties connected to SCL. Higher authorities do not treat students as a vital entity that they should accept this. They think that lecturers have to adopt this new approach getting rid of their old traditional lecture method. Lecturers should also be convinced this new approach is really beneficial for all.

Any change in the educational activities should be implemented through a collaborative effort between those who propose change and those who implement it (Macnab, 2003). Teachers may adopt change under the right conditions such as an innovation which is practical, has support from the top and other teachers, and is backed up by sufficient resources (Fullan, 2001). Therefore, when implementing SCL one needs to consider the issues discussed above.

Limitations of the study and future considerations

This study focussed on the perception of the students and limited discussions with them. In addition, only a few lecturers’ views were accommodated that a very detailed picture of the situation was not obtained. A wider generalisation of findings is not possible either. Nevertheless, in the absence of any studies (published) at tertiary level, I consider this study as a precursor to a more in-depth study in the process of investigating SCL in Sri Lankan universities.

With the limitations of the study in mind, I would like to reiterate the following challenges the educational administrators and higher authorities who are keen on establishing SCL in Sri Lankan universities should take into consideration.

1. Our students have been trained to be passive in classrooms. Making them to be part of educational discussion will be a huge task for the lecturers and also for students themselves. This transformation may take a longer time than we assume. Therefore, a gradual stage by stage or subject-wise introduction of the SCL would be an alternative to consider.

2. Limited resources and larger class sizes in Sri Lankan situation indicate that we cannot adopt any western model to our situation abruptly. Western-developed practices are often supported by structural conditions and cultural values that are not always found in Asia (Thanh Pham, 2011). As mentioned earlier our lecture halls are structured to conduct the lectures in a traditional way and restructuring them and providing necessary equipment are mandatory pre-requisites for SCL. Moreover, unlike western classes, in Sri Lanka, we have more than 200 students for some lectures. In these situations implementing learning strategies to suit SCL warrants careful attention. Hence, a modification of SCL to meet the local needs may be necessary.
3. As SCL is a new and alien concept careful designing in a holistic manner is necessary. The SCL should encompass curricula, materials, methods and evaluation too. Rather a focus on lecture delivery only for SCL may not be a success, even may lead to failures in the approach. The lecturers need guidance and training and careful monitoring of implementation is also necessary.

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