The essential feature of a learner-centred approach to language teaching is that it caters for active participation by learners in the development of their study programme. In this way, a learner-centred approach draws on a more complete knowledge base than traditional approaches to curriculum development, which tend to be largely specialist-driven. Learner involvement in programme development can serve to enhance the relevance of learning content and also gear the format and orientation of learning activities more closely to learners’ preferences and developmental needs. At the same time, both the degree and the nature of the contribution learners can make to the development of their study programme depend on a variety of human and pragmatic variables. Thus, what may be an optimal mix of specialist- and learner-direction in one learning context may differ considerably from what would be feasible in another. This article will focus principally on a discussion of a number of these conditioning factors. It will be suggested that, for the full potential of a learner-centred approach to be realised, it needs to be implemented with care and sensitivity, and in full awareness of the complexities of the target learning situation, in both human and pragmatic terms.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years considerable effort has been invested in an attempt to re-evaluate the nature and modalities of learner involvement in the language teaching–learning continuum. This has been inspired by the desire to create language teaching frameworks capable of accommodating and responding meaningfully to learner needs in terms of both the content and the form of learning. Stimulus to reflection in this area has derived in part from humanistic approaches such as Community Language Learning (Curran, 1972; Stevick, 1973) and Suggestopedia (Lozanov, 1978; Scovel, 1979), which emphasise “whole person” learning and view language learning as an aspect of personal growth and development. However, while such approaches have provided a valuable impetus to reflection, they tend to be based on philosophical or psychological premisses which are less than universally accepted (Atkinson, 1989; Brumfit, 1982), and have thus remained relatively marginal. Parallel to this movement, but more firmly within the mainstream of language teaching, has been the development of interest in a variety of means of catering for an active and participatory role for learners within the teaching–learning continuum. This may be seen in research into personal learning strategy usage (Wenden and Rubin, 1987), and into modes of study and learning such as individualisation or self-direction, and the concept of learner
autonomy (Altman and James, 1980; Brookes and Grundy, 1988; Dickinson, 1987; Holec, 1979; Huttenen, 1986). The most thoroughgoing attempt to date, however, to create a framework capable of systematically accommodating learner involvement in programme development may be found in the concept of the learner-centred curriculum (Brindley, 1984; Nunan, 1988). Nunan (1989, p. 19) describes the specificity of the learner-centred curriculum in the following terms:

While the learner-centred curriculum will contain similar elements and processes to traditional curricula, a key difference will be that information by and from learners will be built into every phase of the curriculum process. Curriculum development becomes a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, since learners will be involved in decisions on content selection, methodology and evaluation (emphasis added).

This perspective on curriculum design clearly casts a new light on the role of language learners within the wider teaching-learning process, learners being seen as able to assume an active and participatory role in areas of programme development normally viewed as the reserve of language professionals such as needs analysts, course designers or materials writers. Johnson (1989) contrasts two extremes in curriculum development. One is the “specialist” approach, where decisions relating to a range of factors from goal-setting to classroom practice are made by specialists in the relevant fields without consultation with the target learners—what could be seen as a top-down approach to curriculum development. At the other extreme is a fully learner-centred approach, where the same range of decisions is made via a process of consultation and negotiation between learners and teachers—a more bottom-up approach to curriculum development. Between these two extremes lie a range of options which combine different degrees and different modalities of specialist- and learner-direction—what Johnson (1989) calls an “integrated” approach to curriculum development. Such an approach seeks to unite the respective advantages of both specialist and learner input in the light of the human and pragmatic constraints operant in the target learning situation. In this perspective, curriculum development emerges as an endeavour to make use of the full range of skills and knowledge potentially available in a given learning situation as the basis for the design and implementation of a language learning programme.

The potential advantages of learner involvement in programme development may be seen in terms of both the product and the process of learning (Brindley, 1989). Under the first heading, while a classic needs analysis approach [cf. Munby (1978)] to the specification of learning content can serve a valuable indicative function, it has limitations. Beyond a relatively basic level of language use, most interactive situations will involve a degree of personal psychosocial investment by the language user. Thus, even in globally rule-bound situations, the language user will generally function as an individual, with the unpredictability and specificness of communicative intent which this entails. Learner involvement in goal-setting can serve to narrow the gap between the relatively general learning orientations derivable from an initial needs analysis and the more specific communicative needs of individual learners. On the process side of learning, learner involvement can influence decisions relating to factors such as pace of learning, or the format and orientation of learning activities. It also implies a willingness to accommodate learners’ developmental needs, i.e. needs arising out of the process of learning itself, and which may vary considerably even among learners with similar long-term communicative
goals. Given these considerations, it would seem reasonable to assume that a learning programme with sufficient flexibility to respond to differences in learning style or developmental need would be more likely to be effective than one which seeks to force all learners into the same learning mould.

The practical implementation of a learner-centred approach will inevitably raise a variety of questions, from the preparation of learners for an active role in programme development (Dickinson, 1988; Holec, 1987; Wenden, 1986a), through the modalities of learner participation in the selection of learning mode and methodology (Clarke, 1989; Littlejohn, 1985), to the learner’s role in evaluation (Blue, 1988; Le Blanc and Painchaud, 1985; Lynch, 1988). Perhaps the most crucial question to be addressed, however, once the basic decision has been made to adopt a learner-centred approach, relates to the degree of learner-direction to be aimed at. As Johnson (1989) clearly points out, learner-centredness does not necessarily imply full-scale learner-direction, but rather a sensitive dosing of both learner and specialist input. The present article relates to this aspect of learner-centredness and will provide a discussion of a number of variables likely to influence the degree and nature of learner involvement in programme development.

CONDITIONING FACTORS

The nature and extent of the contribution which language learners can make to the various decision-making processes involved in the development of a learning programme depend on two main sets of factors. The first relates to the learners’ readiness, on a number of personal, psychological and experiential counts, to assume a reasoned and responsible role in shaping their learning programme. The second set of factors relates to the attitudinal and material constraints operant in the target learning environment. On each of the factors discussed below, learners or the learning environment may receive a high or low rating—a high rating indicating greater scope for learner involvement. Figure 1 provides a summary of the various factors discussed, with a three-point evaluation scale. This is intended to assist readers interested in implementing a learner-centred approach to evaluate their teaching–learning situation in terms of the potential it offers, in both human and pragmatic terms, for learner involvement in programme development, and also to identify those areas in which difficulties are likely to arise.

Naturally, even if a given learning situation produces high ratings, indicating good scope for learner involvement, it would be unrealistic to think of giving learners wide-ranging control over their learning programme from the outset. Thus, a graded lead-in period will be called for in virtually any teaching context. This would probably include an explicit learner training component [cf. AMEP (1989) and Ellis and Sinclair (1989) as examples of learner training materials], but will crucially be geared round a gradual transfer of decision-making from course developers or teachers to learners as the latter grow into their self-directive role. Low ratings on the various conditioning factors will thus have two main implications. The first is that the target level of learner involvement will be reduced, and perhaps limited to certain subdomains of the language teaching–learning process. The second is that the lead-in period will need to be longer and more supportive. A learner-centred approach needs to be learner-sensitive in a number of respects, and perhaps the most
important of these involves gearing the demands made of learners to their ability to assume these demands comfortably—both on an individual level and in the light of the constraints imposed by the wider learning environment.

**Motivation**

—perception of need

clarity of learning goals

Most teachers would agree that good motivation is a prerequisite for success in language learning. With highly motivated learners, even if other factors are less than ideal, something meaningful can always be achieved. If motivational levels are low, however, teaching will be an uphill struggle and levels of attainment are likely to be disappointing. While this applies in any language teaching situation, it is of particular relevance in terms of the implementation of a learner-centred approach, one based on the active involvement of learners in the development of their learning programme. Without at least a reasonable level of motivation it would be unwise to count on the willing and active commitment to the learning process which is essential to the success of a learner-centred approach. Motivation can, of course, derive from a variety of sources: the target language (TL) may be needed for more or less specific transactional purposes, it may be an enabling factor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONDITIONING FACTORS</th>
<th>PREPAREDNESS RATING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MOTIVATION</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- perception of need</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- clarity of learning goals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EXPERIENTIAL TRAITS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- maturity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- level of education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- prior language learning experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAITS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- aptitude</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- intelligence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- self-reliance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LINGUISTIC READINESS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- entry level of competence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- linguistic and cultural proximity of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the TL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- roles of teachers and learners</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- views of language learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MATERIAL CONSTRAINTS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- access to the TL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- class size</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- need for comparability of results</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- scope for teacher development and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1. Preparedness profile for a learner-centred approach.
for academic or professional advancement, or it may be related to purely personal interests of the individual learner. The key factor, however, would seem to be a personal perception of need for the TL, and a consequent willingness to make a sustained investment in the learning process. The greater this perception of need among learners, other factors being equal, the more scope there should be for active learner involvement in programme development. Conversely, of course, the less directly learners perceive a need for the TL, the more teacher-directed a programme would probably have to be.

While perception of need would seem to be the key motivational variable with respect to the implementation of a learner-centred approach, the nature of the contribution learners can make to the development of their learning programme depends quite significantly on a number of factors, one of which is the clarity of learning goals of the target learners. Holec’s (1980, p. 32) comment that

... it seems unlikely, to say the least, that needs analysis can be successfully carried out by anyone other than the learner himself ...

certainly contains a valuable insight, though it is evident that, with respect to long-term learning goals at least, certain learners can make a much more targeted contribution to needs analysis and goal-setting than others. This is clearly the case with learners who have had direct experience of their target communicative situations in the TL, and who have thus had the opportunity to assess both their communicative requirements and their relative ability to fulfil these requirements. It also applies, though to a somewhat lesser degree, with learners whose target communicative needs mirror those with which they are already familiar in their first language (L1). There is less scope for learner input in long-term goal-setting in the case of learners who have little or no experience of the situations in which they might require the TL—as when the language is studied as part of a pre-experience school or university curriculum, for instance. Perception of need, and hence motivation, may well be high, but the nature of the contribution such learners can make to programme development will differ in a number of respects from that of learners with direct experience of the situations in which they will require the language.

**Experiential traits**

—maturity
—level of education
—prior language learning experience

The manner in which these variables may influence learners’ ability to assume an active role in the development of their learning programme is not difficult to see. Maturity serves as a general enabling factor which is likely to facilitate negotiation of learning goals and study formats both between learners and teachers and among learners themselves. More mature learners will also tend to have a wider experiential base from which to develop more varied modes of participation in programme development. Level of education can influence the implementation of a learner-centred approach in that learners with wider experience of the process of study and of different teaching–learning methods are likely to be more flexible as learners and thus better able to make reasoned and independent decisions regarding the development of their learning programme.
**Prior language learning experience**, which is clearly a specific instance of general educational experience, has relevance within a learner-centred approach in two main ways. Firstly, learners who have already studied a second language (L2) will probably have developed a set of personal learning strategies which, whether they be optimal or not, can at least provide a starting point for discussion of attitudes and approaches to language learning [cf. AMEP (1989, pp. 5–26) and Wenden (1986a, b)]. Secondly, experience of different methodologies or activity types can help learners to make reasoned choices with respect to learning format on the basis of observed preference.

**Psychological traits**
- aptitude
- intelligence
- self-reliance

All else being equal, learners with a high language learning **aptitude** are more likely to achieve success than learners with a lower aptitude—and this whatever approach is adopted [cf. Skehan (1989, pp. 25–48)]. However, by virtue of having certain traits which predispose them to inducing a system from input data [cf. Spolsky (1989, pp. 104–108)] and working out effective learning strategies, they seem particularly suited to deriving benefit from an approach which caters for learner choice and flexibility of learning mode. The role of **intelligence** is not dissimilar to that of aptitude, but operates on a more general level. Intelligence is a complex of cognitive traits which enables individuals to make sense of and respond creatively to the demands of their environment. In this way, higher levels of intelligence provide a headstart in most learning situations, including language learning (in a formal learning context at least). It is thus likely that more intelligent learners will be able to avail themselves more fully of the opportunities for personal decision-making and self-direction offered by a learner-centred approach than learners whose powers of analysis and interpretation are less developed.

The **self-reliance** variable has obvious relevance with respect to a learning approach which rests on active learner participation in planning and decision-making. Learners with a dependent attitude are likely to feel less at ease in assuming an active and contributory role in planning their own learning. They are thus likely to need a more staged and supportive lead-in than more self-reliant learners, who can more comfortably assume a self-directive role. Above and beyond its occurrence as a psychological trait capable of influencing the interaction of individual learners with a certain learning mode, the self-reliance variable may also be seen as a culturally conditioned trait. Learner groups from a culture open to individual initiative and self-direction are thus more likely to respond positively to a learner-centred approach than learners from an authority-oriented culture or one which places a high value on social solidarity and cohesion [cf. Riley (1988)].

In addition to the three factors mentioned above, there is evidently a wide range of other psychological traits which will influence language learning preferences. These include factors such as anxiety, risk-taking, field (in)dependence, and introversion–extraversion. Such factors will exercise a significant influence on learners' needs and preferences, and will thus need to be taken into account by teachers within a learner-centred approach. For the
moment, however, it is unclear whether these factors interact in any systematic manner with learners’ basic ability to fit into a learner-centred approach.

**Linguistic readiness**

- entry level of competence
- linguistic and cultural proximity of the TL

Learner involvement in programme development depends to a large extent upon a growth in learners' awareness—awareness of their communicative needs and intentions, of the learning options available, and also of the structure of the TL itself. Learners whose entry level of competence is low and for whom the TL is a more or less undistinguishable blur, cannot realistically be expected to participate extensively in the planning of their learning programme. Exceptions do occur, particularly in the case of learners with high ratings on factors such as motivation, aptitude or prior language learning experience. For example, a group of researchers requiring Russian to gain access to specialised materials, and who have already learned to do this in another language, could make a significant contribution to the development of their learning programme even with a very limited competence in Russian. Such cases are relatively rare, however, and it is reasonable to assume that the early stages of learning a language will be more heavily teacher-directed. Learners can gradually assume a more active role as their ability to negotiate a path through the TL, gain access to TL data and realistically evaluate their current skills against their target competence increases.

Very similar considerations apply with respect to the linguistic and cultural proximity of the TL. The greater the distance on either count between the TL and learners' L1, the longer it will take learners to feel at home in and find their way around the linguistic and expressive system of the TL. As a consequence, it will take learners longer to be in a position to assume a self-directive role in the management of their own learning. Thus, the greater the distance between the L1 and the TL, the more teacher-driven a learning programme will need to be, in the early stages of learning at least.

**Cultural expectations**

- roles of teachers and learners
- views of language learning

A learner-centred approach, involving the active participation of learners in the development of their study programme, can succeed only on the basis of a willing acceptance by learners of both the goals and the methodology of such an approach. Culturally determined attitudes either to learning or, in particular, to language learning can play an evident role in this respect (Riley, 1988). Preconceptions with regard to the roles of teachers and learners are one case in point. In certain contexts, the teacher is viewed primarily as a “knower”, a figure of authority whose task it is to impart knowledge and direct learning. From this perspective a collaborative approach to the development of learning goals and methodology could easily be perceived as an abdication of responsibility on the teacher’s behalf. Such a perception, however unjustified, can lead to confusion and a loss of commitment among learners. Similarly, in contexts where prevailing views of language learning equate the process with explicit grammar study, the rote learning of rules or vocabulary lists and, in short,
with "hard work", a non-directive approach open to learner-direction runs the risk of being perceived as vague or ineffective. This, in turn, can cause a loss of social prestige for the approach in question and, thereby, weaken the chances of gaining learner commitment.

Such considerations clearly do not imply that no attempt be made to apply the principles of learner-centredness in contexts with more traditional views of language learning, nor does it imply that learner-centredness can be reduced to simply giving learners what they expect. They do, however, reinforce the point that careful consideration be given to the cultural preparedness of the target learner population for the approach it is hoped to implement. This has two main sets of implications. Firstly, it may be necessary to maintain a more or less substantial block of traditional (and traditionally structured) learning activities if these respond to strongly felt cultural expectations regarding the nature of language learning, and can thereby help to maintain learner commitment. For instance, learner-directed activities might be limited to one timetable slot or to a specific subpart of a learning programme, the remainder retaining its traditional and familiar structure. Secondly, it may be wise to scale down even long-term goals regarding levels of learner involvement or, at very least, to cater for a longer lead-in period in which teacher-learner roles correspond more closely to learners' expectations.

Learner-centredness cannot be imposed on learners, nor can it be achieved by riding roughshod over the deeply ingrained attitudes of the target learner population. There is thus no irony in suggesting that, with learners from a culture with a traditional, teacher-driven view of language learning, the application of a learner-centred approach will, initially at least, need to cater for a stronger element of teacher-direction than would be the case with learners from a culture more accustomed to personal choice and individual decision-making.

Material constraints

— access to the TL
— class size

One distinguishing feature of a learner-centred methodology is that it will be discovery-based. Much of the information learners can contribute to the development of their learning programme will emerge from a process of exploration and discovery—both of their communicative and developmental needs and of the learning options available to them. In this perspective, learners' ability to chart a path through the linguistic and expressive system of the TL and to set relevant learning goals is dependent, in part at least, on the opportunities they have to explore and experiment with the language. Furthermore, the ability of teachers and learners to plan a learning programme which responds to learners' needs and preferences is clearly linked to the availability of suitable learning materials. In both these respects then, access to the TL, whether this be in terms of interactive contacts with native speakers or in terms of availability of authentic or language teaching materials, can have a substantial influence on the implementation of a learner-centred approach. While limited access to the TL does not rule out the adoption of a learner-centred approach, it does have implications for the way in which such an approach can be implemented, particularly with respect to the degree of individual exploration and study planning which
LEARNER-CENTREDNESS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

will be feasible. In an input-poor environment learners will thus tend to be more dependent on the teacher, both as a source of input and as a guide in goal-setting.

If other factors are favourable, there is no reason in principle why a learner-centred approach should be less feasible with class groups of, say, 50, than with groups of 10. In practical terms, however, class size is likely to influence both the form and the level of learner-direction which may be catered for. Firstly, negotiation of programme content and methodology will almost inevitably be more complex with larger numbers of learners per class. Secondly, the larger the class group, the greater the range of needs and preferences which are likely to emerge and which will have to be accommodated in one form or another. Naturally, neither of these problems is insurmountable. However, implementing a learner-centred approach with larger class groups will call for greater creativity and flexibility, and will differ in a number of respects from what is feasible with smaller and more easily manageable groups of learners. This is all the more the case if large class size is combined with other factors such as limited study and reference facilities or, from the teacher’s standpoint, heavy teaching loads.

Institutional constraints
- need for comparability of results
- scope for teacher development and support

The rationale underlying a learner-centred approach is that such an approach can allow learners to personalise their study programme and thus enhance both the relevance of the learning content and the likely uptake potential of learning activities. It follows from this that the learning programmes of different subgroups of a wider learner population may well, over time, come to differ more or less substantially from one another. In a context where the outcome of learning is monitored functionally, in terms of learners’ ability to operate in their target situations of use, this is unlikely to cause any difficulty. The situation is somewhat different, however, if at either national or institutional level there is a need for comparability of results, which is frequently met by means of performance on a proficiency-based examination. If such an examination is sufficiently broadly based it should not place significant constraints on the choice of methodology. If, on the other hand, the examination has a more specific orientation with regard either to language content or to elicitation procedure, it would be irresponsible for curriculum designers not to ensure that at least a reasonable part of the learners’ study programme is geared to the demands of this examination. This is particularly the case if success in the examination has an influence on learners’ subsequent professional or academic careers.

Naturally, evaluation is an integral part of curriculum development, and there should thus, ideally, be a close link between methodology and evaluation procedures. In practice, however, possibly for reasons of tradition or administrative convenience, there may be greater flexibility with regard to innovation in methodology than in evaluation. If this is the case, then the relevant constraints clearly need to be accommodated within the target curriculum. Within a learner-centred perspective this may mean that a basic framework of shared goals and margins of tolerance for variation may need to be set from the outset. In other words, the scope for learner-direction would be limited to accommodate the constraints derived from the exit examination. Failure to allow for constraints of this nature
can undermine motivation and have a very negative effect on the success of what might otherwise be a promising initiative.

The concept of learner-centredness, not surprisingly, tends to focus attention primarily on the changes which such an approach implies for the role of the learner in the teaching–learning process. It is thus easy to lose sight of the implications which a learner-centred approach has for the role and responsibilities of teachers (Tudor, 1990). While the rationale underlying learner-centredness posits that learners can and should be encouraged to assume a participatory role in programme development, it is the class teacher who is the manager of this participation. Thus, if a learner-centred approach offers learners the possibility of making decisions on aspects of their learning programme normally decided upon by specialists, then it also implies the same for teachers.

The knowledge and skills which a learner-centred approach demands of teachers, above and beyond the personal and pedagogical skills required in any teaching situation, fall into three main categories:

**Specialist skills:** familiarity with the procedures of needs analysis to guide learners' awareness of their learning needs; course planning skills to channel and maintain coherence in learners' negotiative development of their study programme; familiarity with a variety of methods, techniques and materials to be able to react flexibly to learners' needs and preferences.

**Educational skills:** knowledge of key cultural, psychological and cognitive variables in order to adapt activity types to learner characteristics, and to gear the level of learner-direction to learners' ability to assume this role; human and interpersonal skills to act as a learning counsellor.

**Personal qualities:** resilience to cope with the lack of clarity in developmental course structure which goes with learner-direction; openness to a shift in role relationships, both horizontally (vis-à-vis learners) and vertically (within the educational hierarchy).

The more thoroughgoing the attempt to implement a learner-centred approach, the more marked the requirements in these areas will be. It is thus essential, in considering the implementation of a learner-centred approach, to make a careful evaluation both of current levels of teacher preparedness (in terms of factors such as level of training, professional motivation and self-esteem, and openness to innovation) and, crucially, of the scope for teacher development and support. The lower the ratings on either count, though particularly the latter, the more prudence needs to be exercised regarding both the degree and the pace of application of a learner-centred approach.

**OVERVIEW**

One question which inevitably arises from the foregoing discussion regards the relative importance of the various conditioning factors: would low ratings on one or another factor weigh heavier than similar ratings on others? This question is clearly complex, and can be fully answered only in the light of the mix of factors present in a specific learning situation. Nonetheless, two conditioning factors, motivation and cultural expectations,
would seem to have a more basic, enabling role. If motivational levels are low, even if other factors are favourable, the chances of success of a learner-centred approach are slim. The situation with respect to cultural expectations, though perhaps less marked, is not dissimilar. If the basic principles of learner-centredness run counter to deeply-ingrained preconceptions either of the learners or of the teaching body concerned, it is unlikely that any even reasonably thoroughgoing attempt to implement a learner-centred approach will be feasible. These two factors, both of which relate more to the human and attitudinal aspects of the situation, would thus seem to be crucial. Other conditioning factors can, certainly, exert a significant influence on both the degree and the nature of learners' involvement, but none is likely to have so determining a role as the motivational and attitudinal preparedness of the target population—both learners and teachers.

It will not have escaped readers' attention that the conditions outlined in this article as favourable to a learner-centred approach correspond closely to those favourable to any language teaching-learning undertaking, whatever the approach adopted. This should not be taken to mean that learner-centredness is the reserve of relatively privileged learning situations. It does, however, indicate that realism is called for in planning the adoption of a learner-centred approach. Learner-centredness in language teaching offers a number of advantages. These can, however, easily be forfeited by an overenthusiastic attempt to implement learner-centredness with insufficient consideration of the human and pragmatic constraints operating in the target learning situation. It would be a rather sad irony to attempt to impose learner-centredness on unwilling and uncomprehending learners, on a teaching body whose training and experience had led them to expect very different types of teacher-learner roles, or to set goals which exceed what can realistically be achieved in the target learning environment. Learner-centredness is not a "method", nor can it be reduced to a given set of techniques or activity types. Rather, it represents, in the first instance, an awareness of learner variability and of the contribution which learners can potentially make to the development of their learning programme, and then an openness to accommodate learner input as far as the human and pragmatic constraints of the target learning environment can comfortably allow.

Opting for a learner-centred approach does not, therefore, involve an either/or decision. It is much more a question of degree of blending specialist and learner input to arrive at a balanced utilisation of available resources. While decisions in this respect need to be made at the level of programme development as a whole, they are also required in subareas of the teaching-learning process. Indeed, it is at this level that decisions will have to be made once a serious attempt to implement a learner-centred approach has begun. The learning environment profile derived from Fig. 1 can serve a projective function in this respect and point to areas in which there is greater or lesser scope for learner input and direction. High ratings on level of education and prior language learning experience, for instance, would indicate a good potential for learner participation in choice of methodology and activity selection; learners familiar with their target situations of use could, potentially, contribute significantly in terms of goal-setting, activity selection, and, possibly, the sourcing of materials. If, however, there seems to be limited scope overall for a learner-centred approach, it could be decided to limit learner-direction to topic selection or to independent study (e.g. by means of a free reading component [cf. Hafiz and Tudor (1990)]. Figure 2 provides a framework for assessing the relative weighting of specialist- and learner-
Fig. 2. Dominant input sources in programme development.

direction in different aspects of programme development. In each area of programme development the approximate weighting of specialist and of learner input may be plotted on the scale from full specialist- to full learner-direction. In this way, the profile provided by Fig. 2 may be seen as both deriving from and complementing that yielded by Fig. 1.

CONCLUSIONS

The tone of this article so far might well be seen as a “Yes, but . . .” with respect to learner-centredness. This does not derive from reservations regarding the value of a learner-centred approach, but is simply because such an approach can never be less complex than are the human and pragmatic constraints operating in a given learning environment. Learner-centredness should, as Nunan (1989, p. 19) suggests, be viewed as a logical development of communicative language teaching. However, by explicitly incorporating learner participation it offers the possibility of considerably enriching the knowledge base upon which programme development decisions are made. At the same time, this adds to the complexity of these decision-making procedures.

In approaches to language teaching geared in the first instance round the language code (e.g. audiolingualism or the functional–notional approach), the key considerations relate to the coherence of the linguistic analysis applied and to presenting and generating practice in the TL forms. In a communicative approach, in addition to such concerns, there is a need to incorporate insights into the structure of communicative interaction in the learners’ target situations of use and into the linguistic skills required in these situations. A learner-centred approach has to work with all these concerns, but also needs to cater for a wide
LEARNER-CENTREDNESS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Range of considerations relating, on the one hand, to the specifically individual aspect of both language use and language learning and, on the other hand, to the cultural, attitudinal and pragmatic factors which exert an influence on learners' ability to assume a participatory role in developing their study programme. The reference framework which underlies a learner-centred approach is thus fuller and richer, but also more complex—corresponding more closely to the complexity of the factors influencing both language use and language learning.

REFERENCES


