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Title of manuscript

From learner-centred to learning-centred: Becoming a ‘hybrid’ practitioner

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# From learner-centred to learning-centred: Becoming a ‘hybrid’ practitioner

## Abstract

This study examined the educational life histories of five Mexican EFL teachers, and specifically how “learner-centred” they felt their beliefs and practices were at different points in time. The methods used included semi-structured interviews and a written timeline activity. All five teachers began with mainly teacher-centred beliefs and practices, but eventually became more convinced by more learner-centred approaches. However, they struggled to fully put these beliefs into practice due to contextual constraints in their working contexts. This led them to adopt a “hybrid” combination of teacher- and learner-centred practices. The study casts further doubt on the notion of learner-centred education as a “best practice” of education, and stresses the need for contextually appropriate pedagogies to be promoted at policy level.

## Keywords

learner-centred education; learning-centred education; second language learning; life history research; beliefs; teaching practices.

## 1. Introduction

The transition from “*teacher-centred*” education to “*student-centred*” or “*learner-centred*” education<sup>1</sup> is arguably the most common educational change occurring worldwide. Learner-centred education is often viewed as some kind of “best practice” of education, and has been recognised by several international organisations such as UNESCO (Schweisfurth, 2015). Learner-centred education has also found its way into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, in which traditionally passive, grammar-based, teacher-centred approaches have been discouraged and more active, communicative, learner-centred approaches have been encouraged (de Segovia & Hardison, 2009; Kurihara & Samimy, 2007; Zappa-Hollman, 2007). However, reports from around the world indicate that the implementation of learner-centred education has been largely unsuccessful, with the vast majority of classrooms remaining predominately teacher-centred (Schweisfurth, 2011).

Understandably, many people have sought to understand why this has been the case, and several reasons have been identified in the literature. However, perhaps the most important of these is that change planners have failed to acknowledge how *complex* a change from teacher- to learner-centred education may be for teachers. Fullan (2016) defines “complex” educational changes as those involving fundamental changes in teachers’ beliefs as well as their practices, and several authors have suggested that change planners should better support the process of teacher belief and practice change (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Brinkmann, 2018; Geijsel & Meijers, 2005).

This article focuses on the findings of a study which explored the educational life histories of five Mexican EFL teachers, and specifically how learner-centred they felt their beliefs and

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<sup>1</sup> This article considers the terms “student-centred” and “learner-centred” to be synonyms. For consistency, the term “learner-centred” has been used throughout the main body of the text.

practices were at different points in their lives. Although each life history was unique to the individual, several common themes emerged over the five cases. Despite beginning their careers with mostly teacher-centred beliefs and practices, all five teachers became more convinced by more learner-centred approaches. However, they also encountered several obstacles to putting their beliefs into practice. This led them to adopt a more pragmatic attitude, in which they began to utilise a “hybrid” combination of teacher- and learner-centred practices, depending on how appropriate they were perceived to be in different situations. The findings of this study complement those from other case studies (O’Sullivan, 2004; Schweisfurth, 2013; Vavrus, 2009) in challenging the idea of learner-centred education as the undisputed “best practice” of education.

### *1.1. The movement towards learner-centred education*

Learner-centred education is a broad, multifaceted concept which has been defined in several ways (Lea, Stephenson, & Troy, 2003; Nunan, 2013; Schweisfurth, 2013; Starkey, 2017; among others). It is beyond the scope of this article to pick apart the numerous interpretations of the term. Indeed, some have argued that the wide-ranging nature of the concept has made it overly difficult to operationalise (Neumann, 2013; Schweisfurth, 2015). For the purposes of this study, learner-centred education is defined as a teaching approach in which learners cease to be passive receivers of knowledge and become more active participants in their own learning process; learning is contextualised, meaningful, and based, wherever possible, around learners’ prior knowledge, needs and interests; finally, learning is more dialogic and democratic, and learners have more control with regards to what and how they learn.

Schweisfurth (2013) identifies three main “justificatory narratives” which often form part of the discourse for introducing a more learner-centred approach to education. The first is the “economic” perspective, which argues that learners must develop higher order skills such as critical thinking, flexibility and creativity in order to remain as competitive as possible in an ever-changing world. The second is the “cognitive” perspective, which is based around the notion that learner-centred approaches are more likely to lead to enhanced retention, deeper learning, and increased motivation to learn. The third is the “emancipatory” perspective, which sees learner-centred education as a way of reducing traditional power distances between teachers and learners, thus contributing towards a more equal, democratic society.

Despite being introduced in various forms in a wide range of educational contexts, reports around the world indicate that the implementation of learner-centred education has been largely unsuccessful. Although there may be some evidence to suggest that learner-centred education can be more effective than teacher-centred education in certain cases (Cornelius-White, 2007; Felder & Brent, 1996), very few definitive success stories have been identified, especially in developing countries (Brinkmann, 2018; Elkind, 2004).

To examine the reasons behind the largely unsuccessful implementation of learner-centred education in developing countries, Schweisfurth (2011) carried out a meta-analysis of 72 articles found in the *International Journal of Educational Development*. She identified several important obstacles to the implementation of learner-centred education, including:

- *Lack of teacher training* (e.g. Haser & Star, 2009 in Turkey; Koosimile, 2005 in Botswana; Westbrook et al., 2009 in Pakistan);

- *Concepts too difficult for teachers to understand* (e.g. Dello-Iacovo, 2009 in China; Dyer, 1994 in India; Todd & Mason, 2005 in South Africa);
- *Practical and/or material constraints* (e.g. Jessop & Penny, 1998 in South Africa; Urwick & Junaidu, 1991 in Nigeria);
- *Inconsistencies with national curricula and/or examinations* (e.g. Layne, Jules, Kutnick, & Layne, 2008 in Trinidad and Tobago; Mustafa & Cullingford, 2008 in Jordan; Thair & Treagust, 2003 in Indonesia);
- *Cultural issues - learner-centred approaches too far removed from teachers' current beliefs* (e.g. David, 2004 in Eritrea; Gu, 2005 in China; Kanu, 2005 in Pakistan).

The case studies cited above represent only a selection of the numerous examples cited in Schweisfurth's study, and in the literature as a whole. Still, it is worth noting that one of the most commonly raised issues in the meta-analysis was "cultural issues", indicating that there was often a mismatch between the core characteristics of learner-centred education and the beliefs of local teachers. This resonates with the work of authors such as Fullan (2016) and Brinkmann (2018), who have stressed the importance of addressing not only on teachers' *practices* but also their underlying *beliefs* about education. The concept of beliefs is examined in the following section.

## 1.2. Beliefs and educational change

Teachers' beliefs, and their relationships with practices, have received considerably more attention over the last few decades (Baştürkmen, 2012; Borg, 2011). As was the case with learner-centred education, a wide range of definitions of beliefs exist, and numerous other terms are often used interchangeably (Pajares, 1992). However, one definition which has been well-received in the literature is that of Richardson (1996: 113), who defines beliefs as "psychologically held understandings, premises and propositions about the world that are felt to be true." Although there are still many conceptual debates around beliefs, the following characteristics are generally agreed upon in the literature (Baştürkmen, 2012; Pajares, 1992; Phipps & Borg, 2009):

- Beliefs are not thought to be fixed and stable, but may change over time in relation to key experiences. Having said that, beliefs can also be deeply-rooted, and are often resistant to change;
- Beliefs, and belief change, may be both conscious and unconscious;
- Beliefs are organised into "belief systems" (Rokeach, 1968). Related to this is the idea that people may have "core" and "peripheral" beliefs, with core beliefs tending to override more peripheral ones (Phipps & Borg, 2009);
- Beliefs are generally seen as key factors in influencing practice. However, the relationships between beliefs and practices are complex, and there are many instances in which people's beliefs may not correspond with their practices.

As mentioned in the introduction, several authors have argued the importance of teachers' beliefs in educational change processes, and the idea that not only teachers' practices might need to change but also their beliefs was a key driver behind this study. However, what began as a study focusing on the reasons behind teacher belief and practice change soon evolved

into a broader consideration of whether or not learner-centred education was actually a change worth striving for. This reflects a growing body of literature which argues against the implementation of learner-centred education. These views are considered now.

### 1.3. Criticisms of learner-centred education

The movement towards learner-centred education has not received wholesale support. Some authors have strongly defended teacher-centred approaches (Barrett, 2007; O'Neill, 1991), whilst others have argued that learner-centred education is never likely to be appropriate in certain contexts, as it is based on Western notions of “best practice” which may not be compatible with the educational cultures in other countries (Guthrie, 2011; Tabulawa, 2003; Thompson, 2013). Furthermore, many authors have highlighted that learner-centred education, whilst promising at a theoretical level, is unrealistic when implemented in real contexts due to the abundance of material and practical constraints (Barrett, 2007; Croft, 2002; O'Sullivan, 2004; Vavrus, 2009).

The example of Vavrus (2009) from Tanzania is particularly interesting, as it reflects upon the author's experiences as a visiting lecturer from a university in the United States. Vavrus was asked to deliver a training course which encouraged teachers to adopt a more learner-centred approach. However, when beginning to observe the Tanzanian teachers, Vavrus soon realised that it was unrealistic to expect them to implement learner-centred approaches in public Tanzanian classrooms. Nevertheless, Vavrus noted that the teachers *were* able to introduce certain elements of learner-centred education, whilst still operating within a generally whole-class, teacher-centred framework.

Similar findings were reported by Croft (2002) in Malawi, Barrett (2007) in Tanzania and O'Sullivan (2004) in Namibia. For example, Barrett (2007) strongly argued against absolute “polarisations of pedagogy”, proposing that teachers should be allowed to embrace more realistic, contextually appropriate pedagogies. O'Sullivan (2004) suggested that a more appropriate term than “learnER-centred” would be “learnING-centred”, given that the teachers in her study did everything they could do to maximise their students' learning, regardless of the methods that they ended up using (see also Brinkmann, 2018). As indicated earlier, this movement towards a more pragmatic approach was one of the key findings emerging from this study. The main methods used are outlined in the following section.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Aim of the study and research questions

This study formed part of a larger research project which explored the lives of five Mexican English language teachers and their students (Author, 2017). Given the perceived importance of teachers' beliefs in educational change processes, this study focused on the way the teachers' beliefs about learner-centred education had developed over time in relation to their practices. The research questions of the study are summarised below:

1. How did the teachers' beliefs about learner-centred education evolve over the course of their lives? What reasons were given for particular changes, or lack of changes?

2. What relationships emerged between the teachers' beliefs about learner-centred education and their teaching practices? What reasons were given for any matches and/or mismatches between beliefs and practice?

An in-depth, retrospective exploration into teacher belief and practice change over time was identified as an important gap in the educational change literature, responding to the calls of Wideen et al. (1998), Phipps and Borg (2009), Fullan (2016) and others. However, as mentioned earlier, it was actually through the process of exploring these teachers' beliefs and practices over time that led me to question the very idea that learner-centred education should be thought of as some kind of "best practice" of education. Indeed, although the main belief and practice changes reported by participants are summarised in this paper, it is their transition to becoming "hybrid" teachers which receives the most attention.

## 2.2. *Participants and context*

The participants of this study were five English language teachers at a Mexican university. These teachers were selected using a purposive, convenience sampling strategy. Purposive sampling was appropriate in this case because the study was specifically interested in exploring the experiences of teachers who 1) had experienced a transition from mainly teacher-centred beliefs and practices towards more learner-centred beliefs and practices; and 2) had several years' experience of trying to implement learner-centred approaches in their classrooms.

The institution in which this research was carried out was the "University of San Martín" (USM) in Mexico. To protect the anonymity of the participants, their real names and the name of the university have been replaced by pseudonyms. The USM is a public, autonomous university in Mexico which allows its teachers a certain degree of "academic freedom" when deciding upon how to teach their classes. At the time of the study, all of the USM's 150 English teachers had been invited to a number of training courses, and many of these were related to learner-centred education. As I was living in the city of San Martín at the time, and had developed several professional contacts at the University, it was relatively easy for me to gain access to the participants and obtain their informed consent. The five participants in the study, along with key biographical information, are summarised below:

*Fig. 1: Key information about the five participants*

<b>Name (pseudonym)</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age range</b>	<b>Years of teaching experience</b>
Rebecca	F	40-45	20-25
Isabella	F	35-40	15-20
Antonio	M	30-35	5-10
Ricardo	M	45-50	20-25
Elizabeth	F	30-35	10-15

For a more detailed description of the context at the USM, which may help the reader to determine the potential "transferability" of this study, see Chapter 1 of Author (2017).

### 2.3. Main sequence of methods

In order to address the aforementioned research questions, I decided to adopt a “life history” approach. Life history research explores how people “personally and subjectively experience, make sense of, and account for the things that happen to them” (Goodson & Sikes, 2001: 39). It is especially appropriate when trying to explore complex phenomena over time, and therefore seemed a good fit when studying the evolution of teachers’ beliefs and practices.

There were four main stages to this research, which are described below:

1. *Classroom observations.* The first stage of data collection involved conducting a series of observations of the teachers within their classroom contexts at the USM. The main aims of these observations were: 1) To build trust with the participants; 2) To provide stimuli for later interviews; and 3) To triangulate observation data with interview data, in order to increase the “trustworthiness” of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Student focus groups, which will not be discussed in this article, were also used to triangulate my observations of the teachers’ current practices.
2. *First life history interviews.* The next stage was to conduct extended interviews (45-80 minutes) with each participant. The main aim of these interviews was to develop an initial idea of the main belief and practice changes that had occurred in each participant’s professional lives. The interviews were semi-structured, thus following the main themes of the research questions whilst also allowing participants and the researcher to explore tangents. After the first interviews, I carried out preliminary data analysis (see next section) and produced a written summary of each participant’s educational life history. These drafts were then sent to each participant for “member checking”, which was another way of increasing the potential trustworthiness of the study.
3. *Timeline activity.* After the initial interview, the teachers were asked to produce written timelines, at home, in order to visually depict some of the main changes that they felt had occurred in their life histories. They were then invited to a second interview so that they could explain what they had written on their timelines. Consistent with previous research (Adriansen, 2012; Sheridan, Chamberlain, & Dupuis, 2011) the timeline activity proved useful in helping participants recall and organise their ideas, and provided a structure to facilitate the running of the post-timeline interviews. An example of one of the timelines has been provided at the end of this paper. The specific details on this timeline are not important, but the example serves to illustrate how much time and effort the participants put into their timelines.
4. *Third interview and production of “summary graphs”.* The last main stage of data collection was a third interview which invited the teachers to rate (from “1” to “10”) how learner-centred they felt their beliefs and practices had been at certain key points in their lives. Through a process of dialogic co-construction, the participants and I created “summary graphs” to summarise the main belief and practice changes in their lives (similar ideas can be found in Berends, 2011; Patterson, Markey, & Somers, 2012). Although these graphs do not do justice to the complex interplay between the teachers’ beliefs and practices, they nevertheless proved useful in illustrating the main trajectories in the participants’ lives. Two examples of these summary graphs have been included in the findings section.

#### 2.4. *Data analysis and presentation*

As is often the case in life history research, data analysis was an ongoing process which began as soon as I started to transcribe the first set of interviews. The main tool used throughout the study was the qualitative analysis tool NVivo. Although programs like NVivo do not analyse the data themselves (García-Horta & Guerra-Ramos, 2009), I found NVivo to be an invaluable way of organising the data and facilitating my subsequent interpretations of it.

Given the specific, individual nature of each case, each teacher's educational life history as analysed separately, using chronological coding to divide their stories into key chronological periods. Then, within each chronological period, thematic coding was used to form categories related to the research questions. It is worth mentioning that there was a mixture of deductive and inductive coding. Given that I had specific ideas from my research questions in mind, there was a certain degree of deductive coding; however, I also tried to keep an open mind so that new themes could emerge in a more inductive fashion. A key example of a theme emerging inductively was participants telling me about their movement towards "hybrid" teaching, which has now developed into the key focus of this paper.

After analysing each case individually, a cross-case analysis was conducted (again using NVivo) in order to bring together the key themes that had emerged from the five participants. As mentioned earlier, the teachers seemed to follow largely similar "journeys", eventually culminating in them reaching a more "hybrid" mix of teacher-centred and learner-centred practices. In the results section, summarised versions of these "journeys" are presented. The findings section begins by presenting a somewhat detailed account of the educational life histories of the first two participants, Rebecca and Antonio. It then briefly mentions the main points emerging in the life histories of the three other participants, Isabella, Ricardo and Elizabeth. For the first two cases, care has been taken to preserve the feel of an individual life history, using direct quotations wherever possible. However, due to limitations of space, it has not been able to do justice to the rich detail which makes each life history so unique.

#### 2.5. *Limitations of the study*

Two main limitations of this study must be acknowledged. The first is its very small sample size. Although similar themes emerged across all five teachers' life histories, it is clearly not appropriate to generalise the findings to all teachers at the USM, much less to a wider population. Nevertheless, given that I have described the context and findings in detail (with considerably more detail in Author, 2017), individual readers will be able to decide how the themes emerging from the study may be transferable to their own specific contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The second limitation is the inherently self-reported nature of life history research. Participants may not be able to remember certain events; they may also choose not to disclose the whole truth for a number of reasons. Although these issues may be unavoidable, certain steps were taken to increase the credibility of the findings. Timelines were used to stimulate recall (Adriansen, 2012; Sheridan et al., 2011), and I took several steps to build trust and transparency between myself and the participants. I made it clear on several occasions that I was not judging them, and there was no "one right answer" that I was expecting to hear.

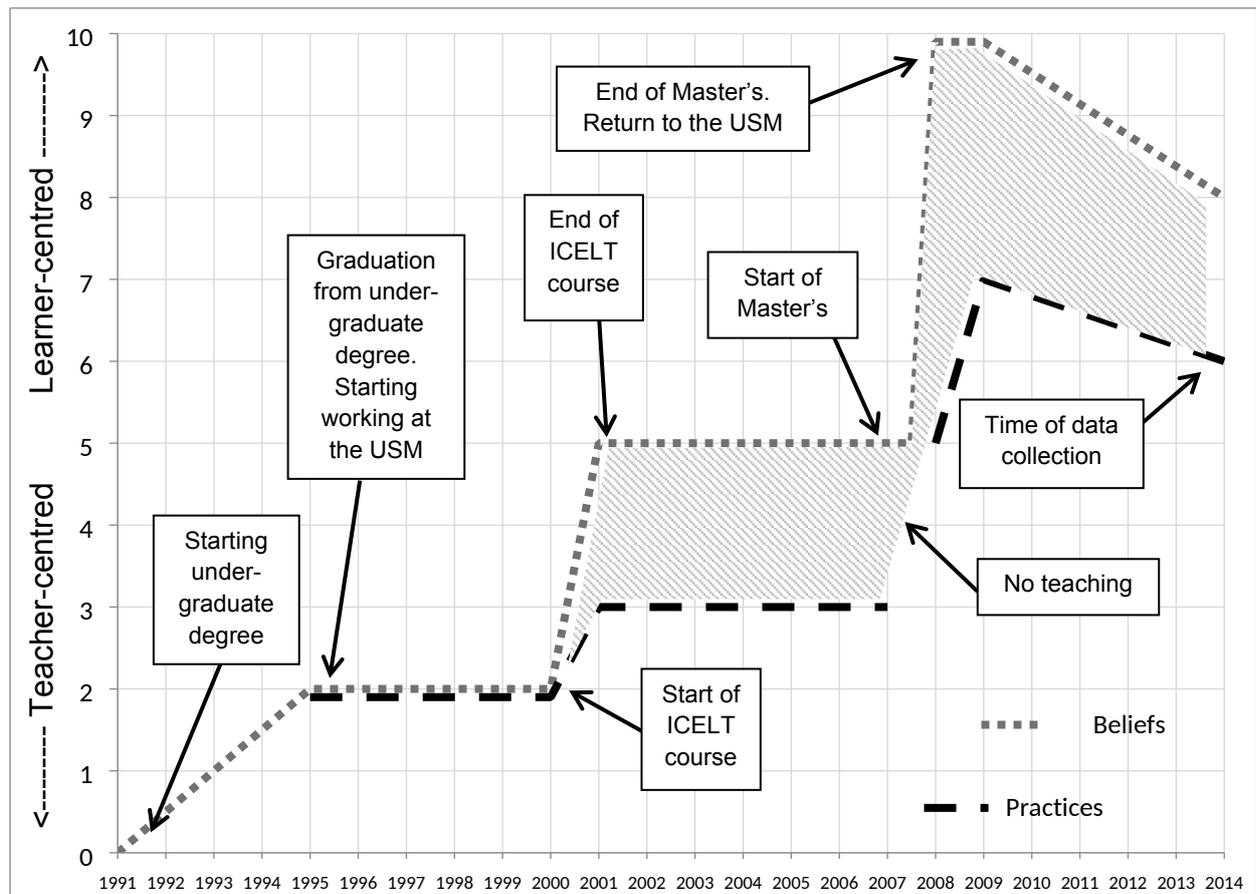
It was not possible to triangulate what participants told me about their past teaching practices. However, I was able to triangulate their current practices by observing them and conducting focus groups with their students. On the whole, teachers' perspectives on their current practices were similar to the practices that I observed, with only a few exceptions which I was able to discuss and clarify during the third interviews. In Author (2017), I was able to include "triangulation boxes" to systematically integrate triangulation into the main body of the life history narratives. Unfortunately, due to limitations of space, I am not able to do so in this article, although I do include brief references to my observations in the narratives that follow.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. *The educational life history of Rebecca*

The graph below is an example of a "summary graph" for the first participant, Rebecca. The grey dotted line indicates how learner-centred Rebecca felt her *beliefs* were, whilst the black dashed line indicates how learner-centred she felt her *practices* were. On the graph, I have highlighted some of the main events which Rebecca identified as having a key influence on her beliefs and practices.

Fig. 2: Graph showing key changes in Rebecca's beliefs and practices



Rebecca's educational life history began with her experiences of school and university, which she felt were generally teacher-centred. It was therefore no surprise that she started to teach in a generally teacher-centred way when she began teaching in 1995. Indeed, she stated that she simply did not know that there were any other ways to teach:

**Rebecca:** "My beliefs at the time were very traditional. I was teaching in the way I had been taught. [...] I didn't actually know what I was doing; it was unconscious; I was just doing it because I thought it was the right thing to do at the time."

(Interview 2, Rebecca)

In 2000, Rebecca attended an In-service Certificate in English Language Teaching (ICELT) course, offered by the British Council, which encouraged its participants to adopt more communicative approaches to language teaching. After this course, Rebecca stated that the extent to which she believed in learner-centred education rose from a "2" to about a "5". However, she considered that her practices only became marginally more learner-centred. She indicated that one of the reasons for such a minimal change was that the course was overly prescriptive, without taking into account her real classroom contexts:

**Rebecca:** "Now I understand why the [ICELT course] didn't work: because there was no connection with the classroom. Teachers go on courses and they leave the experience there, and then they forget about everything and go back to the classroom."

(Interview 1, Rebecca)

In 2007, Rebecca travelled to England to study a Master's degree in Education. It was at this point that the most significant change in her beliefs occurred: she considered the extent to which she believed in learner-centred education increased from a "5" to a "10" by the end of the course. In particular, she stated that being asked to *reflect* on her teaching practices was one of the most important factors in influencing her beliefs:

**Rebecca:** "There was a lot of discussion, and a lot of reading, and talking about the things that we were reading. And I would say that discussion and reflection were the most important tools for actually understanding and making meaning of the things that we were doing."

(Interview 1, Rebecca)

After the Master's, Rebecca returned to Mexico with plenty of motivation to implement more learner-centred approaches in her classroom. To a certain extent she was able to do so, and she received some excellent initial student feedback:

**Rebecca:** "I knew this was the way to do things when students evaluated the course. The comments they made were like 'this is a different English class from the ones that we have been to!'"

(Interview 1, Rebecca)

However, she also encountered a number of obstacles which limited the extent to which she could put her beliefs into practice. A key example was being forced to use textbooks:

**Rebecca:** "I do not like textbooks. I haven't found a way of working with them. I don't think that I'm doing it well [...]. And that makes me feel like I'm failing, because I don't think a textbook matches the principles of student-centred learning. I would say that's the biggest constraint of all."

(Interview 2, Rebecca)

Another issue Rebecca highlighted was that learner-centred approaches were not always well-received by her students. Indeed, she cited an example of a student who explicitly told her he preferred a more teacher-centred approach:

**Researcher:** “And do you think the students still value the teacher-centred teacher?”

**Rebecca:** “Yeah, definitely, you know the other day one of my students [...] said that he didn't like group work. [...] ‘Why don't you like it?’ ‘I don't know, I don't see the point of working in groups. I don't find it useful. [...] I prefer it when the teacher explains everything. I prefer the more teacher-centred approach’.”

(Interview 1, Rebecca)

Such contextual constraints eventually forced Rebecca to reach a middle ground between her beliefs and practices:

**Rebecca:** “I feel a little bit frustrated, I feel that it's not working, and I feel a lack of confidence in myself [...] it's just that I prefer them talking and interacting and doing things [...]”

**Researcher:** “So you're kind of battling between what you would like to do and what you feel you should do or are obliged to do?”

**Rebecca:** “Yes, definitely.”

(Interview 1, Rebecca)

By the time of data collection, Rebecca indicated that the degree to which she felt she believed in learner-centred education had fallen from a “10” in 2009 to around an “8” in 2014. This suggests that she had begun to move towards becoming a more “hybrid” mix of teacher- and learner-centred practices:

**Rebecca:** “In some cases I could not fully implement the learner-centred approach, and well, I had to do something, so it was a hybrid approach of what the institution said I should be doing and what I could actually do.”

(Interview 2, Rebecca)

The way Rebecca described her current practices was consistent with my observations of her, as demonstrated by my summary notes:

“Although a lot of Rebecca’s teaching could be defined as ‘student-centred’, I also observed a number of activities which I considered to be more ‘teacher-centred’. [...] For example, she did include some explicit grammar explanations, gap-fill exercises, and traditional listening comprehension tasks. Moreover, in between some of the more ‘student-centred’ activities, Rebecca spent a fair amount of time lecturing to the group.”

(Sample of notes from my classroom observations with Rebecca)

In her experience, Rebecca also found that some areas, such as particularly difficult grammar points, were simply more effective when taught in a teacher-centred way:

**Rebecca:** “Actually I don't think we can just leave grammar out in that sense. I think they do need it, and sometimes it's the fastest and easiest way of doing it.”

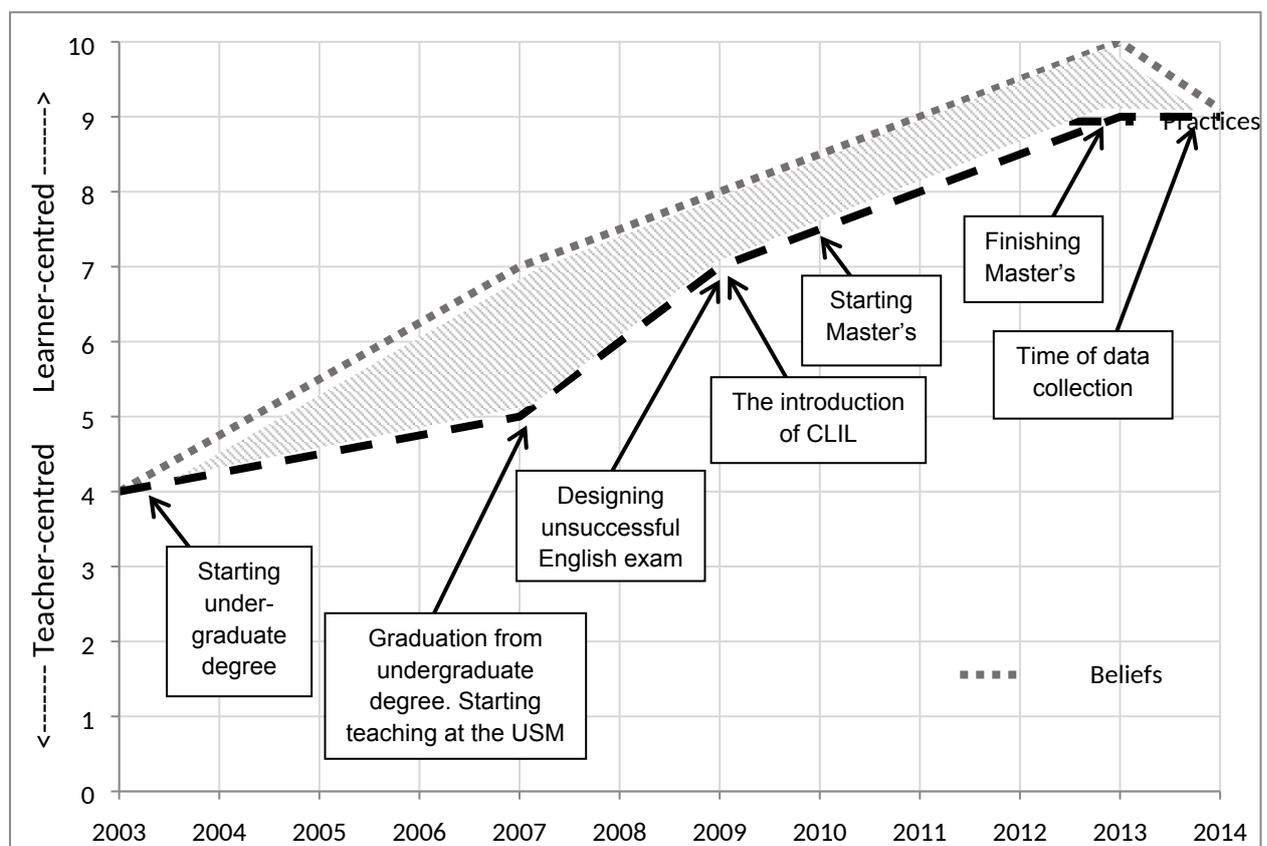
(Interview 1, Rebecca)

The final quotation is a clear example of Rebecca beginning not to see learner-centred education as the absolute “best” teaching approach in every single situation. It demonstrates that, even in the absence of contextual constraints, teachers may have sound pedagogical reasons for using teacher-centred approaches.

### 3.2. *The educational life history of Antonio*

Antonio’s educational life history has a lot in common with that of Rebecca, although there were also some important differences. For example, a quick glance at the summary graph below shows that Antonio’s story involved a much more gradual transition towards more learner-centred beliefs and practices:

Fig. 3: Graph showing key changes in Antonio’s beliefs and practices



Like Rebecca, Antonio highlighted that his early experiences of education, including his time studying his undergraduate degree, were predominately teacher-centred. However, after beginning his first formal teaching job in 2007, Antonio began to question the effectiveness of teacher-centred approaches. In particular, he recalled an incident where he had to design an English exam which he tried out with his own students. After discovering that results were reasonable for grammar but very poor on the communicative skills, this was the moment in which he felt that he needed to change his practices:

**Antonio:** “We created an exam, [...] and they used my group [as a pilot], and when I was grading the test, I had a breakthrough. I discovered that grammar wasn't the best option. [...]

The test was on reading, listening, writing, and a little bit of grammar. In grammar they did more or less ok, but on the rest, awful. That's why I was like 'no, we have to change this'."

(Interview 2, Antonio)

Over the next few years, Antonio began to experiment with more learner-centred approaches in his classes. These changes were accompanied by the introduction of Content-Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) at the USM, in which Antonio was encouraged to adapt his classes to the specific language used in different disciplines. He also studied an online Master's degree offered by a UK university, which helped him to further reflect about how he might introduce more learner-centred approaches into his classes.

In general, Antonio received very positive feedback from students after implementing a more learner-centred approach. However, although he felt his beliefs and practices became more learner-centred, Antonio identified a consistent gap between his beliefs and his practices. Like Rebecca, this mismatch seems to have been linked to the contextual constraints he experienced in his working context. For instance, despite being encouraged to teach communicatively by the USM's English Department, he could not do so because different Heads of Schools required him to use a predominately teacher-centred, grammar-based textbook. Indeed, when reflecting on current obstacles at the USM, he felt the most important contextual constraint was the university "administration":

**Antonio:** "I always thought the main obstacle [...] for doing things differently was the university. Well not the university, the 'administration' [...] They gave us training on different perspectives, like for example e-learning, distance learning, the new trend 'competences'; they are changing and changing, but things are still the same; they never really change, because of this. This is the main problem. They always want exams: 'you have to give an exam, because that's proof, for us, that you're doing things!' [...] 'you have to come to class', 'you never have to be absent', 'give them homework'. It's always the same. [...] So nothing changes really, because of them."

(Interview 2, Antonio)

The quotation above clearly demonstrates Antonio's frustration at the obstacles that prevent him from teaching in the way he would like. However, like Rebecca, it is worth noting that, towards the end of his educational life history, he identified a slight reduction in the extent to which he believed in learner-centred education. For example, he stated that it was important to evaluate new teaching approaches to see if they are the most appropriate for the context:

**Antonio:** "[Learner-centred education] is a good approach, but it's something different [...] We have to evaluate it, just to see if it's appropriate for this context, I think."

(Interview 2, Antonio)

Finally, he stressed the importance of keeping his options open, and made it clear that he was willing to change his mind if necessary:

**Antonio:** "I can always change my mind; I continue reading about teaching, methodologies keep on evolving, [...] I don't know, I'm not sure if someone will ever be certain about this."

(Interview 2, Antonio)

In conclusion, Antonio still strongly believed in the merits of learner-centred education by the time of data collection. However, like Rebecca, he had reached a stage in which he had begun

sceptical that learner-centred education should not be seen as a perfect approach to be used in every single context.

My observations of Antonio were consistent with the way he described his current practices. On the whole, I would characterise the classes I observed as learner-centred: there were several communicative, real-life tasks and the students were constantly encouraged to participate. However, there were also a number of more teacher-centred characteristics, such as lecturing whilst the students listened passively.

### 3.3. *The educational life histories of Isabella, Elizabeth and Ricardo*

Due to limitations of space, it has not been possible to present the life histories of the other three participants in a great amount of detail. However, all three reported very similar trajectories to Rebecca and Antonio. All three began with mostly teacher-centred beliefs and practices, but these began to change over time due to a wide range of different experiences. After becoming convinced of the value of more learner-centred approaches, they all made a conscious effort to try and implement them with their students, and reported a generally positive response after doing so. However, like Rebecca and Antonio, they identified significant constraints which stopped them from converting their beliefs into real classroom practices. Finally, towards the end of their educational life histories, all three reported a similar transition towards a more “hybrid” mix of teacher- and learner-centred practices. Isabella, for example, reflected the following:

**Researcher:** “How has [trying to implement learner-centred education] gone down? Has it been successful?”

**Isabella:** “Somewhat successful. Some students are so shaped into the old-fashioned way that when they receive this new approach they don't know how to react to it, they're so used to having to write and copy things down but not to create, and not to speak freely. Some of them are not ready for this, so I have to do something in class for them to participate.”

(Interview 1, Isabella)

**Isabella:** “<pointing to the timeline> ‘Modifying the teaching as the students needed’? Like we mentioned before, sometimes the classes are ‘hybrid’; some students don't need so much teacher guidance, but others do; they're more shy and they need more grammatical structures to feel confident; they cannot produce if they don't know the rules.”

(Interview 2, Isabella)

Again, the way Isabella described herself was largely consistent with my observations, as demonstrated by my sample notes below:

“Although a lot of what I saw during Isabella’s classes could be described as student-centred, there were also some examples of more teacher-centred practices. [...] For example, certain parts of the lessons were taken up with explicit grammar explanations, and some of the grammar was presented in quite a mechanistic fashion: e.g. showing students the positive, negative, question and negative question forms. Isabella also used individual and choral repetition of grammar points and vocabulary items.”

(Sample of notes from my classroom observations with Isabella)

The fourth participant, Ricardo, also emphasised the value of keeping an open mind regarding educational changes, and not to blindly follow certain approaches:

**Ricardo:** “We can't apply the methodology totally, because the situation in the classroom doesn't let us do that. [...]. I think that what we have to do is to use the best parts of all of the methodologies [...]. There are a lot of things that I don't believe, but when I learn something new, even though I might not believe in those options, I try to use them with my students, and then I come to my own conclusions, ‘well, it is in fact possible’, or ‘it is possible, but in different conditions’, or ‘I can adapt that idea, to try and make it viable’. So I think my beliefs are changing constantly.”

(Interview 1, Ricardo)

Like Antonio, Ricardo also stressed the importance of context when considering the implementation of learner-centred education, and warned against changes being introduced prescriptively:

**Ricardo:** “I don't think that the ‘truth’ can be applied to [all] situations; for example in student-centred learning, sometimes we want to apply this as a ‘recipe’ or as a ‘best way’ of teaching, but it is not possible, since we are applying it in different contexts.”

(Interview 2, Ricardo)

Finally, Elizabeth highlighted that her current beliefs and practices were the combination of all her experiences, and not necessarily based on one particular approach:

**Elizabeth:** “I think a mixture of everything has worked for my students [...]. Because I have different kinds of students, I have to use of a mixture of everything I have learnt as a teacher.”

(Interview 1b, Elizabeth)

Indeed, despite rating the degree to which she believed in learner-centred education as a “10”, Elizabeth was also keen to stress that there was “no best way” to teach:

**Elizabeth:** “I think there's no best way, because you have to think about your students; what is good for some of them may not be good for the others.”

(Interview 1b, Elizabeth)

At this point, it is worth noting important distinctions between the ways in which the participants appear to have interpreted the term learner-centred education. Although all five teachers made reference to a more pragmatic “hybrid” approach by the end of their educational life histories, Rebecca and Antonio indicated that the extent to which they believed in learner-centred education had dropped slightly (to an “8” and a “9” respectively). However, Isabella, Ricardo and Elizabeth still rated their beliefs as a “10”. This suggests that their interpretation of learner-centred education might imply a built-in acceptance that *any combination of methods or approaches* may be adopted, as long as students' learning needs are taken into account. This conceptual issue is addressed again in the following section.

#### 4. Discussion

Although each participant's life history was unique to them, the five participants in the study followed similar trajectories in terms of belief and practice change. They began with largely teacher-centred beliefs and practices, but eventually, for various reasons, started believing in

more learner-centred approaches. They attempted to put these learner-centred beliefs into practice, and reported a certain degree of success whilst doing so. However, they were also frustrated by the contextual constraints which prevented them from putting their beliefs into practice. The idea that contextual constraints might prove obstacles for the implementation of learner-centred education has been highlighted numerous times in the literature (Author, 2015; Schweisfurth, 2011; Song, 2015), and there would seem little value in elaborating on this point. However, what appeared to be most noteworthy in this study was that all five teachers eventually reverted to a more pragmatic “hybrid” approach, which implied using a combination of learner-centred and teacher-centred approaches.

When faced with the realities of their classrooms and their students’ learning, the teachers’ ideals were superseded by pragmatic concerns regarding how they might best help their students’ learn. Several case studies from the educational change literature show examples of this (Barrett, 2007; Croft, 2002; O’Sullivan, 2004; Vavrus, 2009). Moreover, parallels may be drawn with the notion of “core” and “peripheral” beliefs (Phipps & Borg, 2009). For example, although Isabella stated that she strongly believed in a more interactive, dialogic approach to language teaching, she nevertheless reverted to a more structured, grammar-based approach when she felt it was in the best interests of her students. In this case, Isabella’s “core” beliefs (in doing what was best for her students) appears to have overridden her relatively “peripheral” beliefs (in the value of learner-centred education).

An interesting conceptual debate emerges here which was mentioned at the end of the previous section. Elizabeth, for example, acknowledged that teacher-centred approaches are often the most appropriate way to teach in a particular situation, but still expressed that the degree to which she believed in learner-centred education would be a “10”. This suggests that the very concept of learner-centredness may imply a willingness to do everything possible to achieve learning, even if this means adopting typically teacher-centred methods. This view is echoed by the work of Croft (2002) in Malawi, who argued that teachers who did everything in their power to respond to students’ needs, even if this meant teaching in a teacher-centred way, should be considered the *epitome* of learner-centredness. O’Sullivan (2004), on the other hand, makes very similar points to Croft, but proposes that a new term, that of “learnING-centredness” would be more suitable when referring to a teacher who uses any approach in order to facilitate students’ learning. This is an interesting debate, and studies seeking more clarification on teachers’ understandings of the concept of learner-centred education could be the focus of future research.

## 5. Implications and conclusions

Although this study has a very small sample of participants, its findings, supported by similar findings reported elsewhere, may lead us to further question the extent to which learner-centred education should be thought of as the undisputed “best practice” of education. This would not necessarily mean rejecting the concept of learner-centred education, but it would mean allowing enough flexibility to adapt to local contexts, and moving away from overly simplistic “polarisations of pedagogy” (Barrett, 2007).

The aforementioned points may sound like common sense. After all, most teachers probably reach some kind of “hybrid” balance between different approaches in their day-to-day teaching. However, what is most worth emphasising is that this kind of flexible, pragmatic teaching is often not taken into account within policy documents and teacher training courses.

Indeed, in many cases, new approaches such as learner-centred education are introduced in as “one-size-fits-all”, “off-the-shelf” solutions which teachers must try to reproduce in their contexts (Schweisfurth, 2015; Wedell, 2009). Teachers are therefore trained to *master* these new approaches, and may be viewed negatively if they are unable to do so.

However, given the difficulties in implementing learner-centred education in contexts where there are such overwhelming contextual constraints, it would seem that a more sensible approach would be to train teachers to become skilled “hybrid practitioners” or, if we prefer the term “learning-centred”, to become skilled “learning-centred practitioners” (O’Sullivan, 2004; Brinkmann, 2018). In other words, instead of encouraging teachers to master new approaches, training courses would better serve them if they helped teachers think about how they could *balance their ideals with the contextual constraints they are likely to encounter in real classrooms*. When taking this attitude towards change, inconsistencies between beliefs and practices would no longer be seen negatively; on the contrary, a skilled “hybrid practitioner” (i.e. a teacher who was able to decide, in a principled way, which activities to use in a given situation), would be highly valued.

In order to support teachers in becoming skilled “hybrid practitioners”, a more flexible kind of teacher training is needed. Again, this idea is not new; for several years, Kumaravadivelu (2003, 2012) has proposed “post-transmission” or “post-method” approaches to language teacher training, whilst authors such as Diaz Maggioli (2012) have outlined several ways of “scaffolding” teachers’ decisions as they consider different approaches to adopt in different situations. Finally, Malderez and Wedell (2007) offer an interesting idea called the “pendulum model”, which suggests that teachers should reflect in detail about their own contexts *before* they are exposed to any new approaches. Only after they have had time to think about their contexts in detail, are they invited to consider the extent to which they might be able to implement (adapted versions of) different approaches in their own contexts.

This form of contextually appropriate teacher training implies a significant investment in time and resources. However, perhaps most importantly, it may require a change in attitude from educational policy makers who often see education change as a simple, straightforward, “one-size-fits-all” process. Learner-centred education, whilst potentially a very promising change, is neither simple nor straightforward, and certainly does not “fit” into all classroom contexts. Until these key ideas are recognised by a larger proportion of educational decision-makers, real change may continue to allude those who wish to implement a more “learner-centred” approach to education.

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