

What is Learner-Centered Education? A Quantitative Study of English Language Teachers' Perspectives

August 2021 – Volume 25, Number 2

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Abstract

The concept of 'learner-centered education' (LCE) continues to be defined inconsistently across the literature, and very little research has examined LCE from the perspectives of the teachers themselves. This study addressed this gap by conducting a quantitative survey with 248 English language teachers. The study sought to examine 1) whether or not participants had heard of LCE; 2) how confident they felt explaining the concept; 3) how they would define LCE; and 4) how useful they felt the concept was to their practice. Teachers were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with 10 potential aspects of LCE that had emerged from a meta-analysis of the literature. The study found that the teachers interpreted LCE in a broader way than is typically found in definitions in the literature, generally agreeing that all 10 aspects should be included in a multi-faceted definition of LCE. Some aspects (such as 'Active participation') were considered important by a larger number of teachers. Moreover, certain variations were noted based on factors such as participant nationality, further reinforcing the idea that a more flexible, context-led approach to defining LCE might be more useful than the numerous contradictory definitions found in the literature.

Keywords: *student-centered education; learner-centered education; student-centered education; learner-centered education; student-centered learning; student-centered learning.*

Different Meanings of Learner-centered Education

** Please note: the terms 'student-centered' and 'learner-centered' education are considered synonyms. For practical purposes, the term 'learner-centered', and the acronym LCE, have been used throughout this article. **

What does the term 'student-centered' or 'learner-centered' education (LCE) mean? The challenge when answering this question is that the concept has been interpreted in different ways by different people. Take the following fictional English language teachers as examples:

Teacher 1 – Paul. *Paul has taught English at the university for 15 years now. In the past, he admits his teaching style was rather 'traditional'. However, over time, he has made an*

effort to give the students more control over their learning. Now, he allows the students to make key decisions about the topics they would like to study and has introduced several autonomous learning activities. For these reasons, Paul now considers himself a 'learner-centered' teacher.

Teacher 2 – Olivia. *Olivia found her English classes at school very 'teacher-centered', with the teacher doing most of the talking, and with most of the focus being on grammar. As a relatively new English language teacher, she has tried to do the opposite and has tried to make her English classes engaging, active, and interactive. She encourages students to speak English as much as possible and tries to simulate real situations for students to practice. Olivia would describe herself as a 'learner-centered' teacher.*

Teacher 3 – Jenny. *Like Olivia, Jenny has always placed a great deal of importance on active learning. She feels that learners 'learn by doing', and gives them plenty of opportunities to participate in class. However, Jenny recently attended a training course that encouraged her to do more to adapt her classes to her learners' needs. She consulted with her students, and some expressed that they would like a more traditional lecture style so that they can feel more confident with some of the more difficult grammar points. Therefore, although she generally prefers a more active style, Jenny has added more theoretical, passive lessons in which she explains key language structures to her learners. By adapting to her learner needs in this way, Jenny feels that she is being a 'learner-centered' teacher.*

The three aforementioned teachers claim that aspects of their teaching might be considered 'learner-centered'. However, their understandings of LCE are clearly not the same. Paul's interpretation seems to be based on the notions of autonomous learning and learner control. Olivia, on the other hand, is very much a practical teacher, with more of a focus on active participation. Finally, Jenny's interpretation of LCE is based on adapting her teaching to the learners' needs, even if this means using what many might consider 'teacher-centered' methods.

Does it even matter that different teachers have different interpretations of the same term? This article holds the position that it *does* matter; not because the aforementioned teachers are necessarily 'right' or 'wrong' in their claims, but because such a wide-ranging concept makes it extremely difficult for stakeholders to know what they are talking about when they refer to the term, which may affect their ability to implement aspects of it in their own practice.

Over the last few years, an increasing number of texts have attempted to increase clarity on what is meant by the term LCE (Neumann, 2013; Tangney, 2014; Starkey, 2017; Bremner, 2020), with the latter being a meta-analysis of 326 articles in the educational literature. The present study builds upon the findings of this meta-analysis by gathering the perspectives of 248 English language teachers from a range of different countries.

On the whole, the findings of the study showed a certain degree of similarity to those in the meta-analysis, with teachers viewing LCE as a broad, multi-faceted concept. Nevertheless, as in the meta-analysis, some potential aspects of LCE were judged to be more important than others, and there were also some divergences between the literature and the teachers' perspectives.

As in Bremner (2020), it is important to recognize that this study attempted to explore teachers' understandings of LCE as a *concept*, and did not aim to explore their views as to whether LCE

was desirable or even possible in their contexts. However, as described throughout this article, it was often difficult to detach teachers' theoretical understandings of LCE from their practical evaluations regarding its implementation in real classrooms.

Literature Review

For several decades, there has been a growing recognition that LCE has been defined inconsistently in the literature (Farrington, 1991; Lea, Stephenson, & Troy, 2003; Schweisfurth, 2013). Disagreements about the interpretation of LCE vary from those who have argued that definitions may be missing key points (e.g., Tangney, 2014) to those who have suggested that the term may be too broad to be practically useful (e.g., Bremner, 2020). Neumann (2013) made one of the more forceful cases for greater conceptual clarity when defining LCE, stating:

how can teachers and scholars really know if we are discussing, teaching, advocating, or criticizing the same idea if we only share a broad and uncertain language? When we critique or praise 'student-centered learning,' just what are we critiquing or praising? When we try to create 'student-centered' contexts in our schools and classrooms, just what types of contexts are we creating? And when we teach our teacher-education students about 'student-centered learning,' be it in advocacy or in criticism, just what are we teaching them? (p. 162)

In an attempt to address this confusion, both Neumann (2013) and Starkey (2017) have proposed 3-contoured frameworks for conceptualizing LCE. Neumann (2013) argued that there may be value in distinguishing between learning being centered 'in', 'on' and 'with' the learners (although all three aspects focus primarily on a shift in control from teacher to students), whereas Starkey (2017) suggested a more encompassing framework, including the 'cognitive' aspect (focusing on learning), the 'agentic' aspect (focusing on empowering students) and the 'humanist' aspect (focusing on students' needs as human beings).

More recently, I carried out a meta-analysis of literature that analyzed the definitions of LCE found in 326 journal articles (Bremner, 2020). As a result of the meta-analysis, I proposed either a 6-aspect or 10-aspect flexible framework for conceptualizing LCE, with the idea that different stakeholders could select the aspects that were most relevant to their specific teaching contexts. These frameworks are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Two possible frameworks for defining learner-centered education (Bremner, 2020)

A 10-aspect framework for defining LCE	A 6-aspect framework for defining LCE
1. Active participation	1. Active participation
2. Interaction	(including interaction)
3. Real-life skills	2. Relevant skills
4. Higher-order skills	(real-life and higher-order skills)
5. Adapting to needs	3. Adapting to needs (including human
6. Power sharing	needs)
7. Autonomy	4. Power sharing
8. Metacognition	5. Autonomy
9. Formative assessment	(including metacognition)
10. Humanistic role	6. Formative assessment

In this article, the 10-aspect framework has been used to explore the teachers' perspectives. More information about each of the aspects, including possible related terms, is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptions of the 10 possible aspects of LCE (adapted from Bremner, 2020, p. 8)

Aspect of LCE	Explanation	Related terms and additional comments
1. Active participation	The teacher organizes learning so that there are opportunities for the students to participate.	Related terms included 'active learning', 'hands-on learning', 'learning by doing', 'project-based learning', 'problem-based learning', among others.
2. Interaction	The teacher organizes learning so that there are opportunities for students to interact with others.	Related terms included 'pair and group work', 'dialogic' teaching, 'team-based' learning, 'group assessment' among others. References to constructivism in terms of social interaction (e.g., Vygotskian social constructivism, social interactionism) were also included in this category.
3. Real-life skills	The teacher not only teaches theoretical knowledge, but also real-life skills that the students can apply outside of the classroom.	This included any reference to using practical skills that would be of use outside the classroom.
4. Higher order skills	The teacher organizes learning so that there are opportunities for students to develop higher order skills such as critical thinking and creativity.	This included general references to 'higher order skills', but also references to specific higher order skills, such as critical thinking and creativity.
5. Adapting to needs	The teacher bases learning around the students' prior knowledge, skills and experiences, and adapts learning based on students' needs and interests.	Related terms included 'flexible learning' and 'personalized learning', among others. Moreover, 'adapting to needs' was considered to be the essential characteristic of constructivism as a learning theory; therefore all references to constructivism in the sense of basing learning around students' prior knowledge, skills and experiences were included in this category.
6. Power sharing	The teacher provides opportunities for the students to be more involved in decision-making regarding what they learn, how they learn, and how they are assessed.	This included any reference to 'learner choice', 'learner control', a more 'democratic' relationship, 'emancipation', 'reduction of power distances', as well as epistemological considerations - viewing knowledge as less of a fixed entity and more open to interpretation.
7. Autonomy	The teacher organizes learning so that there are opportunities for students to work independently, both in and out of the classroom	Related terms included 'self-regulated learning', students taking 'responsibility' for their own learning, becoming less 'dependent' on the teacher, among others.
8. Metacognition	The teacher not only teaches content, but also provides opportunities for students to reflect about how they learn.	Related terms included 'learning strategies', 'learning to learn' and 'lifelong learning', among others.
9. Formative assessment	The teacher provides formative assessment as well as summative assessment.	Related terms included viewing learning as a 'process' rather than just a 'product', 'peer' and 'self-' assessment, 'alternative assessment', among others.
10. Humanistic role	The teacher takes a 'whole person' approach towards the students and their learning, focusing not only on their cognitive needs but also their needs as human beings.	Related terms included focusing on learner 'affect' or 'affective' factors, 'emotions', 'wellbeing' and viewing 'students as individuals', among others.

The findings of the meta-analysis confirmed that LCE has been defined inconsistently in the literature, with a broad range of ‘coverage’ (i.e., how ‘narrow’ or ‘broad’ the definitions were), and several texts not defining LCE at all, despite using ‘student-centered’ or ‘learner-centered’ in the title (or the UK variations ‘learner-centred’ and ‘student-centred’). The meta-analysis also found that ‘Active participation’ (83%) was by far the most mentioned aspect of LCE, whilst the two least mentioned aspects were ‘Formative assessment’ (19%) and ‘Humanistic role’ (13%). The relative weightings for all 10 potential aspects of LCE are shown in Figure 1.

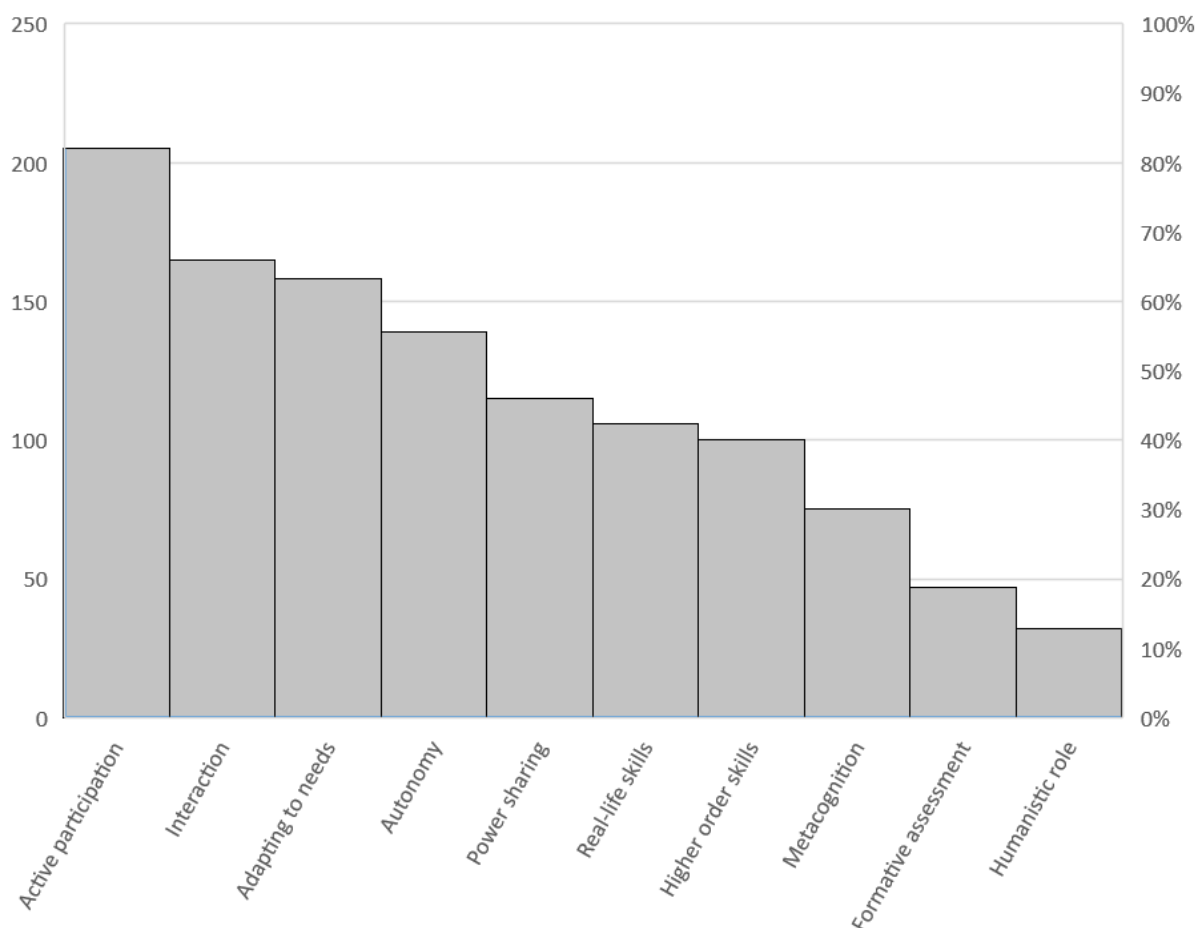


Figure 1. Graph showing relative weightings for the 10 aspects of LCE (Bremner, 2020, p. 16)

The aforementioned meta-analysis included texts from all subject areas, but how has LCE been interpreted in language learning more specifically? In general terms, the lack of consistency in the literature as a whole is reflected in the literature on language learning. For example, Nunan’s work on LCE (Nunan, 1988) and interpretations based on it (e.g. Tudor, 1996) have clearly focused on learners taking control over their learning (i.e., ‘Power sharing’) and not only at learning content but also ‘learning to learn’ (i.e., ‘Autonomy’ and ‘Metacognition’). However, Jones’s (2007) widely cited introduction to LCE appears to be more clearly rooted in ‘Active participation’ and ‘Relevant skills’. In fact, Jones explicitly stated that a learner-centered classroom ‘*isn’t* a place where the students decide what they want to learn and what they want to do’ (p. 12; emphasis mine), which would seem to contradict the central tenet of Nunan’s interpretation of LCE.

In the aforementioned meta-analysis, there were 31 out of the 326 texts related to language teaching; out of these, over a third (11) did not explicitly define LCE, and out of the remaining 20, LCE was defined inconsistently. Table 3 summarizes this inconsistency. On the table, an **X** indicates that a certain aspect of LCE (e.g., ‘Active participation’) was mentioned in the definition found in that particular text, thus demonstrating the ‘coverage’ of definition (e.g., how narrow or wide-ranging the definitions were). The table does not refer to any of the 20 texts specifically, as the aim is not to critique individual texts but rather to provide a visual overview of the inconsistent ways in which LCE has been defined in language learning.

Table 3. Summary of interpretations of learner-centered education found in journal articles published between 2010 and 2019 (dataset from Bremner, 2020)

Aspect of LCE	Article number (articles arranged from broadest to narrowest definitions)																				Total /20 (%)
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
1. Active participation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X			X		15 (75%)
2. Interaction	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X			X	X	X				14 (70%)
3. Real-life skills	X	X	X	X	X	X				X	X			X							9 (45%)
4. Higher-order skills	X	X	X	X			X	X		X											6 (30%)
5. Adapting to needs	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X			X	X			X	X			12 (60%)
6. Power sharing	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X		X		X								10 (50%)
7. Autonomy	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X							X	13 (65%)
8. Metacognition	X	X	X		X		X	X													6 (30%)
9. Formative assessment	X								X												2 (10%)
10. Humanistic role	X			X		X								X				X			5 (25%)
Total ‘coverage’ /10	10	8	8	7	7	7	6	6	6	5	5	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	1	1	

Table 3 shows that there is a wide range of ‘coverage’ when it comes to defining LCE in language learning. Similar to the findings of the meta-analysis as a whole, ‘Active participation’ (75%) was the most mentioned aspect. This was followed by ‘Interaction’ (70%), possibly reflecting the fact that many language teachers have viewed LCE as a synonym of Communicative Language Teaching (e.g., Griffith & Lim, 2010; Lu, Hou, & Huang, 2010; Martinsen, 2015; Tawalbeh & AlAsmari, 2015). The next most popular aspects were ‘Autonomy’ (65%) and ‘Adapting to needs’ (60%), whilst ‘Power sharing’, the key characteristic of Nunan’s interpretation of LCE, was only mentioned in 50% of texts. The least popular aspects were ‘Real-life skills’ (45%), ‘Higher-order skills’ (30%), ‘Metacognition’ (30%), ‘Humanistic role’ (25%), and ‘Formative assessment’ (10%).

To summarize, the literature paints a rather unclear picture of what ‘learner-centeredness’ might imply in language teaching, albeit there has clearly been more emphasis on certain

aspects as opposed to others ('Active participation' compared to 'Formative assessment', for example). However, it is important to highlight that the findings of the meta-analysis were based solely on the definitions found in academic articles. There would seem to be a clear gap in the literature in terms of what teachers themselves think; indeed, I was unable to find a single journal article that gathered language teachers' perspectives on the concept of LCE. Teachers, after all, are those people who might potentially implement aspects of LCE in their practice, and it is, therefore, important to examine the extent to which *their* interpretations of LCE match (or do not match) with the definitions found in the academic literature.

Method

The general aim of the study was to examine English language teachers' understandings of LCE as a concept, and how these understandings compared with findings in the literature. The study was structured around four key research questions:

RQ1. Have teachers heard of LCE?

RQ2. How confident do teachers feel in explaining LCE?

RQ3. How do teachers define LCE?

RQ4. How useful do teachers feel the concept of LCE is to their practice?

In order to answer these research questions, I designed an online survey (the full survey is included in the [Appendix](#)). Each of the questions in the survey was related to a particular research question. For RQ1 ('Have teachers heard of LCE?') participants were asked a straightforward yes/no question. For RQ2 ('How confident do teachers feel in explaining LCE?') participants were asked to indicate their degree of understanding of LCE on a 5-point Likert scale. For RQ3 ('How do teachers define LCE?') participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed with the 10 potential aspects of LCE that had emerged from the meta-analysis of literature (Bremner, 2020); a 5-point Likert-scale was used from 'Extremely important' to 'Extremely unimportant'. Finally, for RQ4 ('How useful do teachers feel the concept of LCE is to their practice?'), a 5-point Likert scale was used in which participants could respond from 'extremely useful' to 'extremely useless'.

A key methodological challenge was to ensure participants would respond in terms of their *conceptual* understandings of LCE, as opposed to their views on what was practical in their classrooms. In other words, it was important to understand the degree to which participants felt each aspect should be part of the *definition* of LCE, and not the degree to which they felt these aspects were 'good teaching' or even whether LCE was practically feasible in their own classrooms. Because of this potential misinterpretation of the survey, it took several months and numerous iterations before it was ready to be sent to the participants. During this process, I consulted with several university colleagues and piloted the survey three times at different stages of its development. As the final survey has been included in the Appendix, the reader may judge the extent to which I managed to achieve an appropriate balance between clarity and over-explanation.

The survey was completely deductive, given that there were no 'open' questions, and participants had to choose from pre-established options (i.e., the aspects in the 10-aspect framework – 'Active participation', 'Interaction', and so on). A limitation of a purely deductive survey is that it does not allow for 'emerging' responses – i.e., possible definitions of LCE that went beyond the 10 options available – as well as some of the underlying reasons behind

participants' responses. An additional study, exploring participants' perspectives from a qualitative perspective, has also been implemented but is not discussed in this article due to limitations of space.

Ethical approval was sought from the Bath Spa University Research Ethics Committee prior to conducting the research, which covered key issues such as informed consent, anonymity, and data protection. A link to the online survey was distributed via email to several of my current and former colleagues and students, many of whom were able to re-send the survey to their own language teaching contacts. The criteria to take part in the survey were that participants had to be 18 years old or over, and an English language teacher with at least two years of teaching experience. It was felt that requiring a minimum level of teaching experience would enable the respondents to have a greater deal of clarity than pre-service or beginning teachers.

The link to the survey was closed after two weeks, by which time it had been completed by 248 participants. Because of the convenience sampling strategy, the characteristics of the survey participants were inevitably linked to my own teaching experience and contacts. As I had stronger links with colleagues from certain countries, certain countries were particularly well represented (e.g., Syria 40, Thailand 33, Malaysia 31, UK 19, Mexico 18), and others were considerably less represented (e.g., there were only 13 in total from Mainland Europe, 3 from the United States, and only 1 from Africa). Nationalities were categorized based on the 'cultural macro-regions' proposed by Anděl et al. (2018), which were also used in the meta-analysis of literature (Bremner, 2020). The distribution of respondents per region was as follows: South-East Asia 76, North Africa & South-West Asia 58, Europe 43, Latin America & Caribbean 34 (all from Latin America), East Asia 28, South Asia 4, United States & Canada 3, Australia & New Zealand 1, Russia & 'Neighbours' 0, Sub-Saharan Africa 0, Pacific Islands 0.

Most participants (47%) had over 10 years of teaching experience, with 28% having 2-5 years' experience and 25% having 6-10 years' experience. Most participants (57%) held a Master's degree, whilst a small proportion (14%) held a doctoral degree. Most participants (55%) stated that they had the most experience in Higher Education, with 25% in Secondary Education and 13% in Pre-school or Primary Education. Finally, more than half of the respondents (53%) stated that they had at least some experience training English language teachers.

The quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, and graphs were produced to illustrate the findings for each research question. Comparisons between respondents with different characteristics (years of experience, teacher training experience, educational level, and region) were also conducted, and some examples of specific analyses have been included in the findings that follow. Comparisons by cultural macro-region were made only where there were at least 20 respondents in a particular region (thus excluding South Asia, United States & Canada, Australia & New Zealand, Russia & 'Neighbours', Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Pacific Islands).

Findings

RQ1. Have teachers heard of LCE?

The results of the survey indicated that 229 participants (92%) stated that they had heard of the concept of LCE, whilst 19 (8%) had not. There was not a statistically significant difference ($p=0.36$) between teachers with 11 or more years of teaching experience (94%) and those with 2 to 10 years' experience (91%), and no significant difference ($p=0.11$) between teachers in Higher Education (95%) and those teaching in Basic Education (89%). However, teachers with

teacher training experience (96%) were significantly more likely ($p=0.009$) to have heard of LCE than those without teacher training experience (88%). In terms of cultural macro-region, Latin America (97%) and South-East Asia (96%) had the highest proportion of participants who had heard of LCE, followed by Europe (93%), East Asia (89%) and North Africa and South-West Asia (88%), although no statistically significant differences were found between any two regions.

RQ2. How confident do teachers feel in explaining LCE?

Participants who reported that they had not heard of LCE were not asked to complete the rest of the survey, meaning that the sample size for the remaining questions was reduced from 248 to 229. The next question in the survey asked respondents to state the extent to which they would feel confident explaining the concept of LCE to a colleague in their field. The responses to this question are shown in Figure 2.

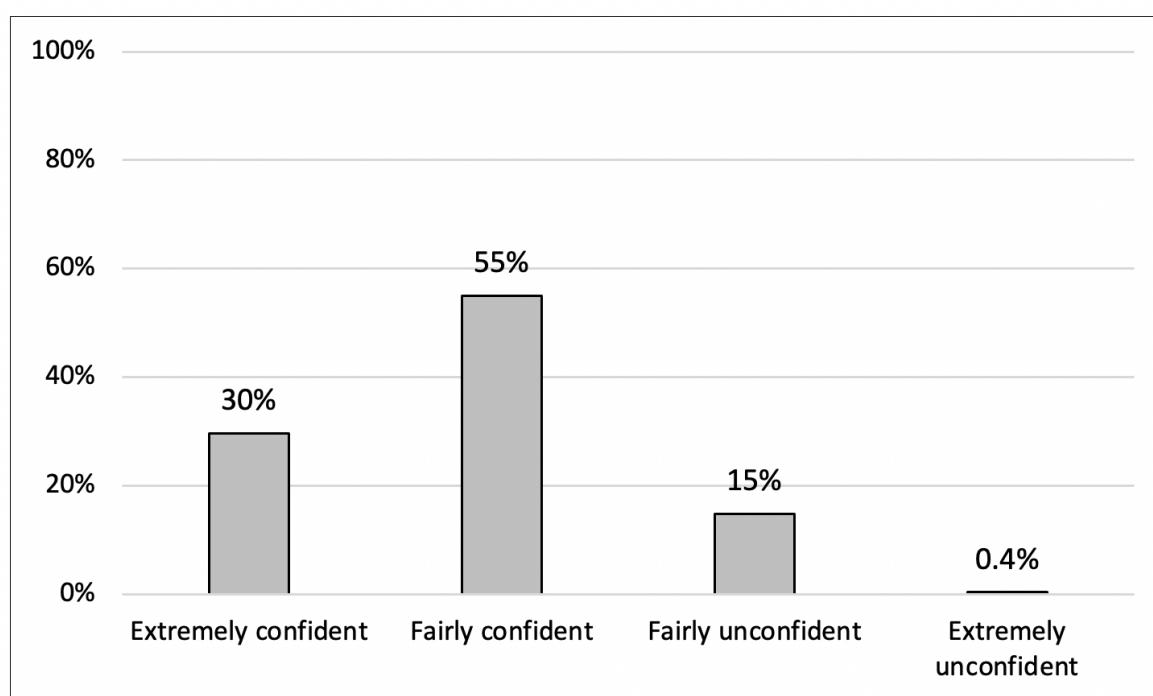


Figure 2. Graph showing how confident participants felt in explaining learner-centered education to a colleague

Figure 2 shows that most participants felt reasonably confident explaining LCE to someone else in their field. ‘Fairly confident’ was the most popular answer with 55%, followed by ‘Extremely confident’ with 30%. Around 15% of the participants felt ‘fairly unconfident’, whilst only 1 participant (0.4%) answered that they were ‘extremely unconfident’. Given that there has been quite a lot of uncertainty in defining LCE in the literature, it was somewhat surprising to observe that on the whole teachers reported being confident defining LCE. Admittedly, this may have been influenced, in part, by ‘positive inclination bias’, given that participants may have been more likely to participate in the survey if they knew about and/or were interested in LCE.

Participants with 11 or more years of teaching experience (67% overall score) were significantly more confident ($p<0.001$) than those with 10 years’ experience or fewer (48%).

Those with teacher training experience (64%) were significantly more confident ($p < 0.001$) than those without teacher training experience (49%). There was not a significant difference ($p = 0.28$) between teachers in Basic Education (54%) and those in Higher Education (59%). Regarding cultural macro-regions, Europe (60%) and South-East Asia (60%) were the most confident respondents, followed by North Africa and South-West Asia (57%), Latin America (51%), and East Asia (50%), although no statistically significant differences were found between any two regions.

RQ3. How do teachers define LCE?

Figure 3 ranks all 10 possible aspects of LCE, from most to least important, by allocating an overall percentage rating (based on 1 point for 'Extremely important' and $\frac{1}{2}$ a point for 'Fairly important').

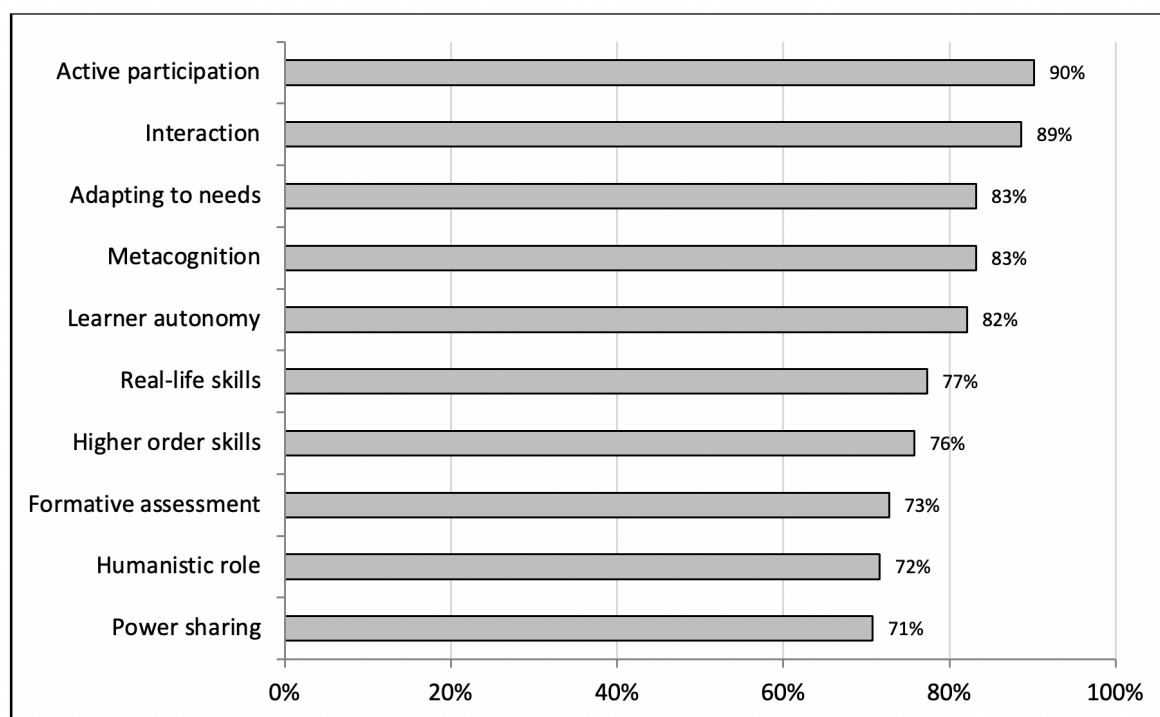


Figure 3. Graph showing the 10 possible aspects of learner-centered education ranked by relative importance

The main message in Figure 3 is that all 10 potential aspects of LCE were considered important by the survey respondents. Indeed, although 'Power sharing' was the least popular aspect, it still achieved an overall percentage rating of 71%, with over half the participants (53%) feeling that it was 'extremely important'. The more practical, classroom-based aspects (e.g., 'Active participation' and 'Interaction') were seen as slightly more important than aspects that imply more flexibility and learner control (e.g., 'Adapting to needs', 'Power sharing', 'Higher-order skills', and 'Formative assessment'). However, the gap between the highest-rated aspects ('Active participation' (90%) and 'Interaction' (89%)) and the lowest rated aspects ('Formative assessment' (73%), 'Humanistic role' (72%), and 'Power sharing' (71%)) was not excessively large, suggesting that most respondents would be happy to include them in a broad, multi-faceted interpretation of LCE.

A final question asked to both survey and interview participants, which did not form part of the 10 categories shown in Figure 3, was the extent to which they agreed that LCE should imply ‘Adapting to needs’, *even if this meant adopting typically teacher-centered approaches* (cf. the case of ‘Jenny’ described in the Introduction). The responses to this question are shown in Figure 4, with the general aspect of ‘Adapting to needs’ also included on the graph for comparison.

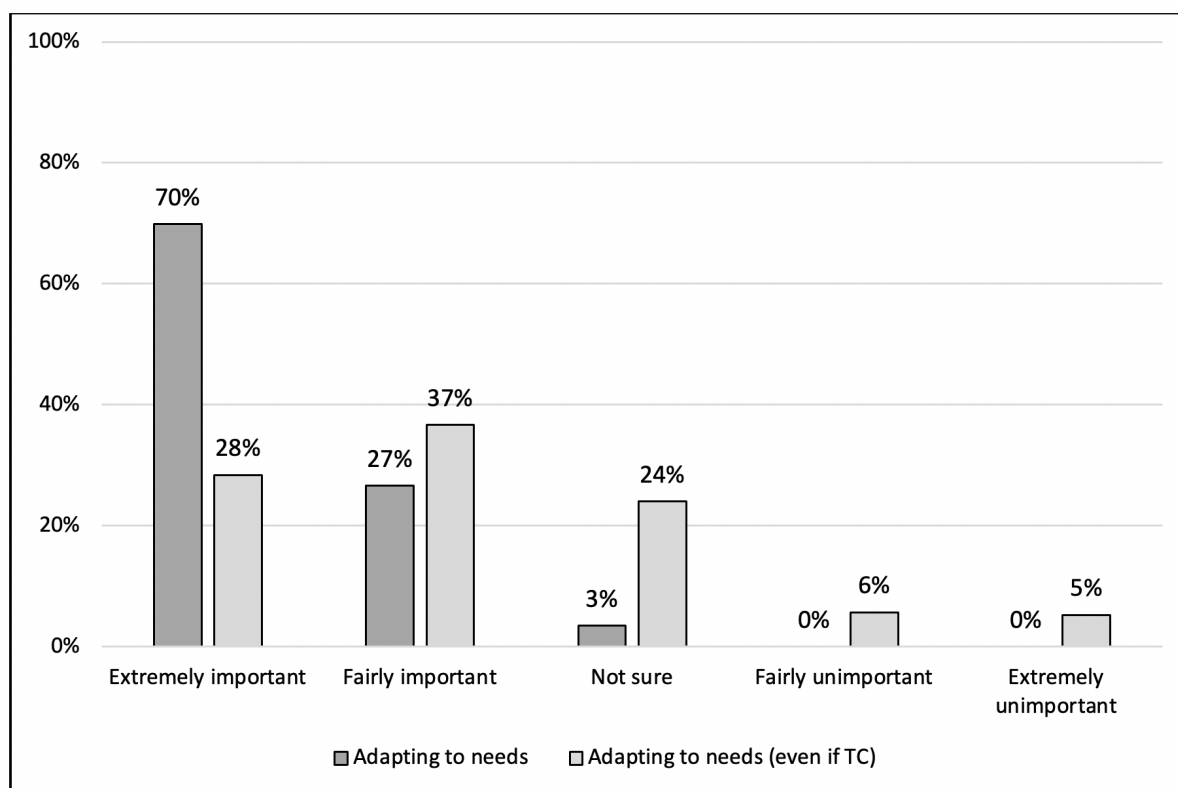


Figure 4. Graph showing participants’ responses for the aspects ‘Adapting to needs’ and ‘Adapting to needs (even if teacher-centered)’

Figure 4 shows that ‘Adapting to needs (even if teacher-centered)’ was considerably less popular than the general category of ‘Adapting to needs’. This indicates that, for many teachers, adapting to needs is not enough; in other words, ‘learner-centered’ teachers must adapt to learners’ needs whilst at the same time delivering activities that are ‘learner-centered’ (e.g., active and interactive activities). However, it is also noteworthy that 28% of respondents stated that this aspect was ‘extremely important’, and 37% felt it was ‘fairly important’; that is to say, almost two thirds (65%) of the participants felt that ‘Adapting to needs (even if teacher-centered)’ should be part of the definition of LCE. Therefore, although its overall percentage score (47%) is lower than any of the other 10 aspects in Figure 3, it is difficult to ignore this potential interpretation of LCE.

As with RQs 1 and 2, the data were analyzed to examine whether responses varied based on teaching experience, educational level, teacher training experience, and cultural macro-region. Firstly, respondents with 11 or more years of teaching experience produced significantly higher

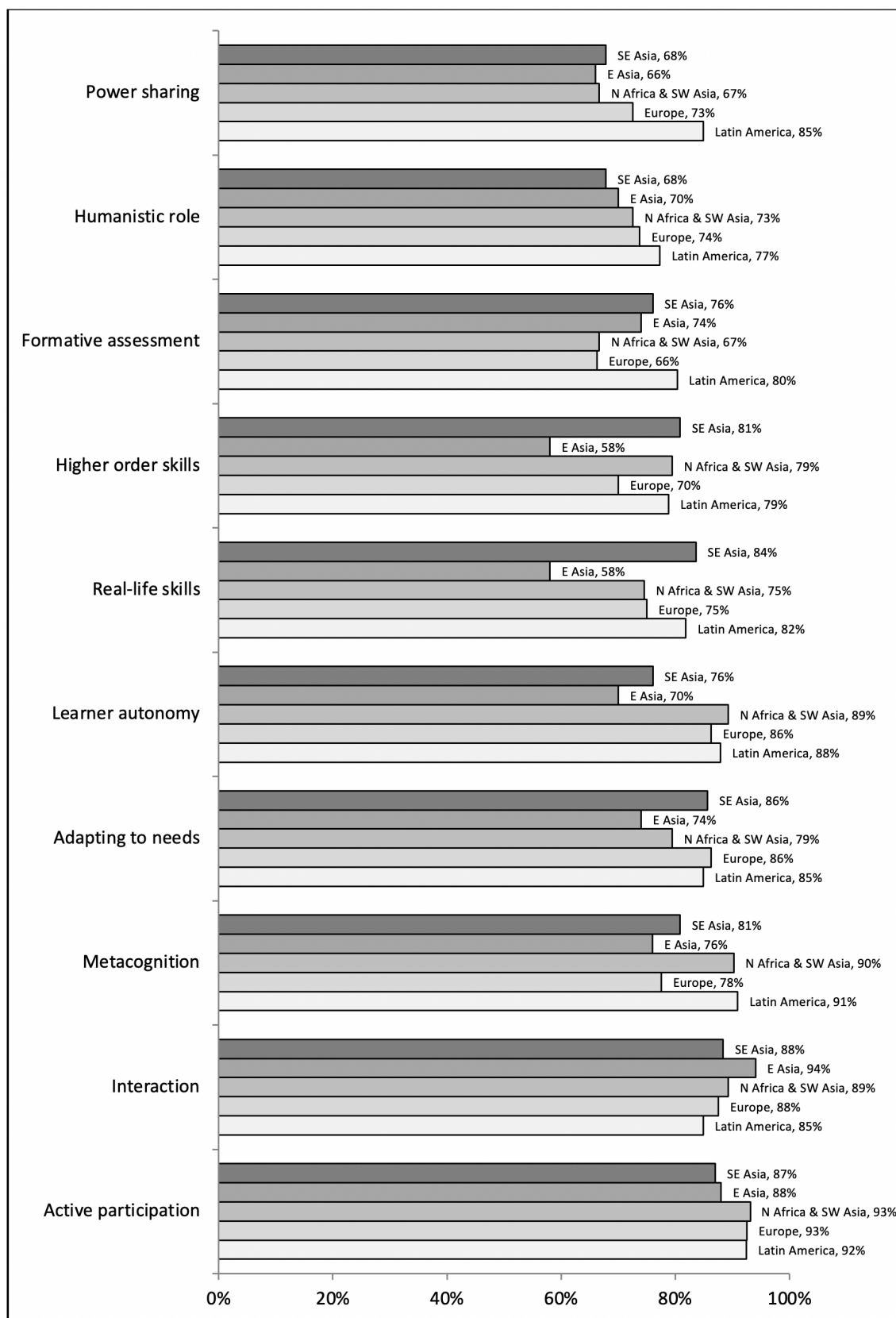


Figure 5. Graph showing relative weightings of aspects of LCE by cultural macro-region

scores for each of the 10 aspects ($p=0.016$); in other words, they agreed that a wider range of potential aspects of LCE should be included in its definition. Secondly, respondents with teacher training experience also produced significantly higher scores for all 10 aspects ($p=0.034$). The overlap between the last two comparisons (teaching experience and teacher training experience) is unsurprising, given that teachers with 11 years or more teaching experience would presumably be more likely to have teacher training experience. No significant differences were found between respondents in Basic Education and those in Higher Education ($p=0.168$).

Finally, Figure 5 shows the relative scores allocated to each of the 10 aspects by cultural macro-region. It is worth highlighting that the number of participants in some groups was quite low (for example, Latin America 33 and East Asia 25), so it is important to be somewhat tentative when generalizing the findings. The overall tendencies across countries would seem broadly similar: LCE appears to be understood as a broad and multi-faceted term across cultural macro-regions. However, the analysis identified four statistically significant differences between regions, namely: a) Latin America compared with East Asia ($p=0.005$); b) Latin America compared with Europe ($p=0.02$); c) North Africa & South-West Asia compared with East Asia ($p=0.047$); and d) Latin America and South-East Asia ($p=0.049$). All other comparisons between cultural macro-regions were statistically insignificant.

The most significant difference evident in the data was between Latin America and East Asia ($p=0.005$). Indeed, although findings were largely similar for the most popular two aspects ('Active participation' and 'Interaction'), there were clear differences between the scores for 'Power sharing' (85% in Latin America compared to 66% in East Asia), 'Higher-order skills' (79% in Latin America compared to 58% in East Asia), 'Real-life skills' (82% in Latin America compared to 58% in East Asia), 'Learner autonomy' (88% compared to 70%) and 'Metacognition' (91% compared to 76%). These findings illustrate that a term like LCE may be interpreted in different ways in different cultures, and would further support the argument that it may be worth moving away from a standardized definition of LCE, towards a more flexible definition, contingent on the context(s) in which LCE is implemented.

Comparisons to the literature. In the final part of this section, the results of this study are compared to the findings of the meta-analysis of literature (Bremner, 2020). It must be emphasized that this is not a direct statistical comparison, meaning that it is not appropriate to comment on statistical significance as in previous sections. However, given that the 10 categories were the same in both the meta-analysis and the survey, it is possible to place the findings next to each other in order to see if there are any obvious differences between the findings from the literature and the views of the teachers. In order to create what was considered the 'closest' comparison, only total answers for 'extremely important' were counted in this section (as opposed to 1 point for 'extremely important' and ½ point for 'fairly important' used previously). Figure 6, therefore, compares those aspects mentioned in definitions in the literature and those aspects considered 'extremely important' by participants in the survey.

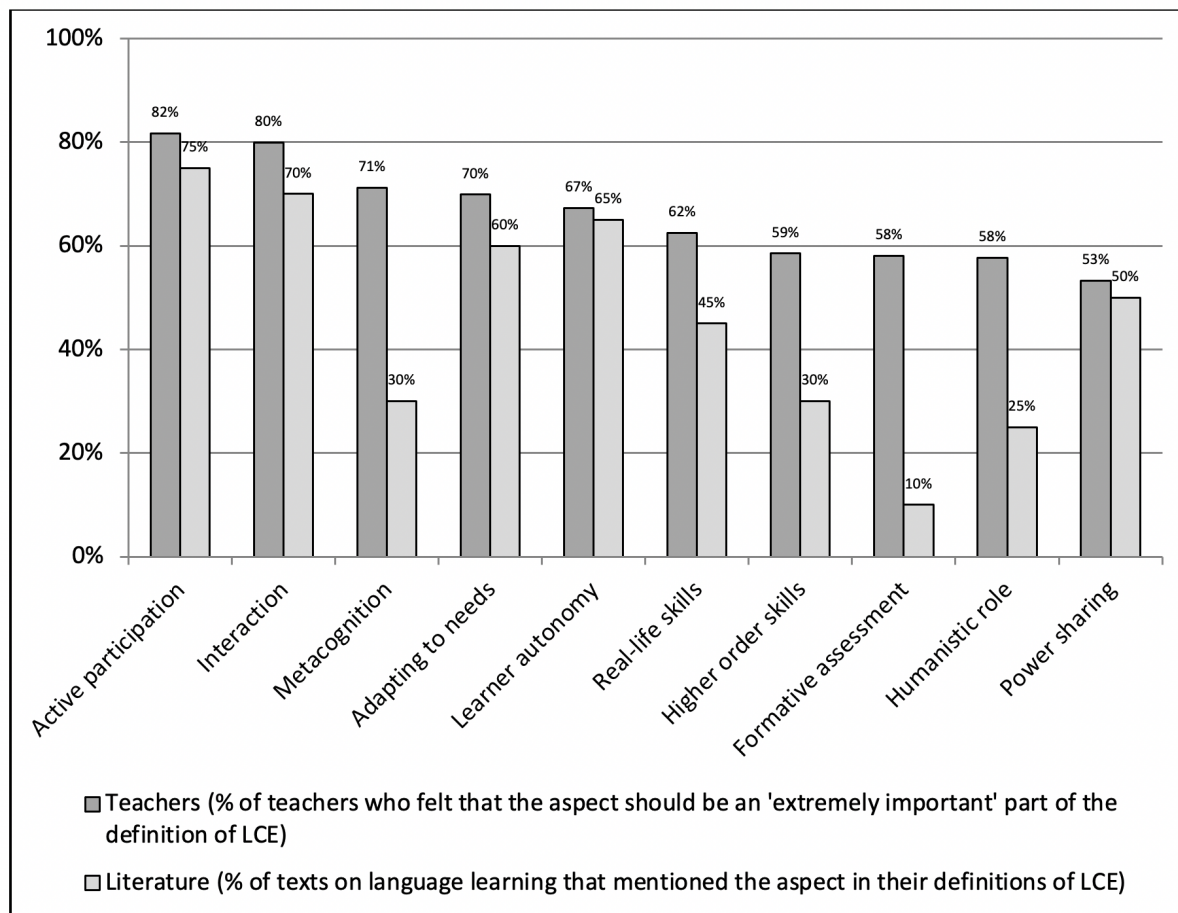


Figure 6. Graph comparing findings from the literature with findings from the survey

Figure 6 shows that there was a certain degree of similarity between certain aspects ('Active participation', 'Adapting to needs', 'Learner autonomy' and 'Power sharing') but clear differences in others. For example, there were large differences between the relative importance placed by teachers on the aspects 'Metacognition' (71%), 'Formative assessment' (58%), and 'Humanistic role' (58%) compared to the number of times these aspects were mentioned in definitions in the literature (30%, 10%, and 25% respectively). Although it must be reiterated that this is not a direct statistical comparison, the overall message is that teachers appear to adopt a broader, more multi-faceted approach to defining LCE than is evident in the literature.

RQ4. How useful do teachers feel the concept of LCE is to their practice?

The final research question examined participants' perceptions of the usefulness of LCE as a concept. The overall tendency was that LCE as a concept was viewed positively. 60% of respondents answered that knowing about LCE was 'extremely useful', 34% that it was 'fairly useful', with only 4% answering that they were 'not sure', 1% stating that it was 'fairly useless' and no participants feeling it was 'extremely useless'. It was somewhat surprising to have such a positive response from the participants. However, like in RQs 1 and 2, perhaps this may have been due to the positive inclination bias of participants who were interested in taking a survey on LCE.

Participants with 11 years or more teaching experience (84% overall score) found LCE significantly more useful ($p=0.003$) than those with 2 to 10 years teaching experience (72%).

Moreover, respondents with teacher training experience (83%) found LCE significantly more useful ($p=0.002$) than those without teacher training experience (71%). There was no significant difference ($p=0.17$) between respondents from Basic Education (73%) and respondents from Higher Education (79%), echoing the lack of significance found in Research Questions 1, 2, and 3. In terms of cultural macro-region, Latin America (85%) found LCE the most useful, followed by North Africa & South-West Asia (81%), Europe (76%), South-East Asia (75%), and East Asia (68%). The only comparison considered statistically significant ($p=0.04$) was between Latin America (85%) and East Asia (68%).

Discussion of Key Findings

In this section, the most important findings emerging from the study are summarized. From the data, four key messages emerged:

1. Most teachers have heard of LCE, and are ‘fairly’ confident defining it

The vast majority of respondents indicated that they were familiar with the concept of LCE and that most were ‘fairly confident’ defining it, although, as mentioned earlier, the data may be somewhat skewed due to participants who were already interested in LCE choosing to take part in the study.

It was noted that teachers with more experience, and those with teacher training experience, were more likely to be confident explaining it. This is relatively unsurprising and supports common notions that teachers become more confident with key concepts as they have time to develop their practice.

2. Teachers appear to view LCE as a multi-faceted concept

Arguably the key finding in this study was the overwhelming tendency to view LCE as a broad, multi-faceted concept. Overall, all 10 of the potential aspects of LCE proposed in Bremner (2020) were considered important enough to include in a wide-ranging definition. Some aspects were considered more important than others – for example ‘Active participation’ had an overall score of 91%, compared to ‘Power sharing’ with an overall score of 71%. This relative focus on active participation, mirroring the findings from the meta-analysis of literature, suggests that teachers may view LCE through a more practical lens than is often evident in the literature. However, from a methodological perspective, this may also be because the teachers were – perhaps subconsciously – thinking about what was *possible* in their classrooms, as opposed to what LCE means as an abstract concept. Moreover, the difference between ‘Active participation’ and ‘Power sharing’ was not massive – only 20% – and the overall conclusion is that all 10 aspects were considered important.

It is worth noting that certain aspects that have been relatively underrepresented in the literature (particularly ‘Metacognition’, ‘Formative assessment’ and ‘Humanistic role’) were considered very important by the majority of teachers. Again, this reinforces the notion that the definition of LCE should be multi-faceted, but also may suggest that the literature could recognize such aspects more frequently. This would support, for example, the work of Tangney (2014), who has argued for more recognition of humanistic teaching in definitions of LCE.

It may be the case that the authors of the journal articles in the literature would have agreed with the survey respondents if they were to have taken the survey themselves. For example, an author of a journal article may not have included ‘Formative assessment’ in their article’s definition of LCE, but might have considered ‘Formative assessment’ ‘extremely important’

when provided with this option in the deductive survey. This echoes my previous discussions (Bremner, 2020) on the potential discrepancies between ‘theorization’/ ‘conceptualization’ and ‘definition’. Indeed, when authors of journal articles define terms, they tend to focus on aspects they consider of vital importance. However, for a wide-ranging term like LCE, which has been defined so ambiguously in the literature, it would seem that a more encompassing, multi-faceted approach to defining terms may be necessary in order to avoid such ambiguity.

3. Many teachers feel that ‘Adapting to needs’ is learner-centered – even if this means using teacher-centered methods

‘Adapting to needs’ was a popular interpretation of LCE. However, one of the most interesting examples was the additional question asked to participants in the survey: should a teacher still be considered ‘learner-centered’ if they adapt to learner needs, even if this means using teacher-centered methods? Whilst ‘Adapting to needs’ achieved an overall score of 83%, placing it in joint third out of the 10 possible aspects, ‘Adapting to needs (even if teacher-centered)’ only achieved a score of 47%. Although this demonstrates a certain degree of skepticism that teacher-centered methods could be used under an overall learner-centered approach, it must not be forgotten that 28% of respondents stated that this aspect was ‘extremely important’, and 37% felt it was ‘fairly important’. In other words, almost two-thirds (65%) of participants felt that ‘Adapting to needs (even if teacher-centered)’ should be included in a definition of LCE.

Authors such as O’Sullivan (2014), Brinkmann (2019) and Bremner (2019) have argued that in such cases, a more appropriate term than ‘learnER-centered’ education would be ‘learnING-centered’ education. However, two-thirds of the teachers in this survey indicated that adapting to needs, using any method necessary, should be part of our understanding of ‘learnER-centered’ education. Conceptually, the issue here is that not all interpretations of LCE view ‘Adapting to needs’ as a key component. For example, teachers whose interpretations of LCE consist mainly of ‘Active participation’ and ‘Interaction’ might argue that *not* doing so, even to respond to learner needs, would be going against the key essence of learner-centeredness. Indeed, these teachers might feel that although ‘Adapting to needs’ is an important part of LCE, all adaptations must still involve active and interactive methods in order to be classified as ‘learner-centered’. The differences in opinions here, evident from the real practitioners who took part in the survey, would seem to reinforce the need for LCE, as a concept, to be flexible. If we are to accept a broad, multi-faceted interpretation of LCE (which is what the teachers in this study would seem to support) then we must allow different people the opportunity to choose the aspects that are most relevant to them, and to implement them in contextually appropriate ways.

4. LCE as a concept continues to be viewed positively

A final key message emerging from the study is that, despite the challenges inherent in defining and implementing LCE, the concept seems to remain popular with teachers. The majority of participants in the survey felt that being aware of the concept would be useful for their ongoing practice as language teachers. The message, it would seem, is clear: many language teachers continue to find the ideas introduced by LCE relevant and interesting to their professional practice.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Several key limitations of the study should be recognized. The first is its sample size. Although the sample of 248 respondents is reasonably large, in order to draw tentative conclusions a

larger scale and a random sample of teachers, from a wider range of countries and educational contexts, would increase the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, extending the study to teachers of languages other than English may be an interesting extension to the study.

One of the biggest methodological challenges permeating this research was the challenge of focusing participants' minds on LCE as a *concept*, as opposed to them thinking about the feasibility of implementing aspects of LCE in their own classrooms. Although I took numerous steps to try and avoid misunderstandings, it is possible that some participants may have answered in terms of what they considered to be *possible* in their classrooms. Future conceptual research on LCE may consider alternative ways of addressing this limitation, in order to reduce the chance of participants potentially misinterpreting the questions asked.

Finally, perhaps the most important limitation of this study was its quantitative, deductive research design. Although having a pre-established 10-aspect framework provided a useful structure to the research, the findings would have been enhanced by collecting qualitative data, and in particular by gathering the teachers' 'open' definitions. Indeed, although qualitative approaches by their very nature require a considerable amount of time for data collection and analysis, some might argue that they yield more valuable insights into what participants feel is most important, as well as allowing exploration into the underlying reasons behind participants' responses. As mentioned earlier, a qualitative extension to this study has been implemented, which may go some way to addressing this limitation, but further qualitative studies on teachers' conceptions of LCE, taken from a range of different contexts, would continue to develop our understandings of the potentially diverse ways in which LCE has been interpreted.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Stuart Read for his invaluable help in planning and reporting this study.

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To cite this article:

Bremner, N. (2021). What is learner-centered education? A quantitative study of english language teachers' perspectives. *Teaching English as a Second Language Electronic Journal (TESL-EJ)*, 25(2). <https://tesl-ej.org/pdf/ej98/a9.pdf>

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Appendix

Copy of Survey [[back to article](#)]

Conceptualising learner-centred education: English language teachers' perspectives

Information sheet and consent to participate

Invitation to take part in a research study

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study. **It is up to you whether you would like to take part.** Before you decide whether to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read this carefully and feel free to email the lead researcher, <name> at <email> if you have any questions.

Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you if you would like to take part. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to take part.

What is the research about?

Name of study: Conceptualising learner-centred education: English language teachers' perspectives

Name of lead researcher: <name> <job title> <university name>

This study aims to explore:

- What English language teachers understand by the concept of "learner-centred education"; and
- Whether or not they think the concept of learner-centred education is useful.

This study is **not** interested in finding out:

- How learner-centred your classes are;
- The extent to which you consider learner-centred education to be "good teaching";
- The extent to which you feel learner-centred education is possible in your teaching context.

This study is interested in finding out how **you**, personally, would define learner-centred education, and whether you, personally, find the concept useful. This study is not interested in "testing" what you know, or feel you should know, about learner-centred education. The concept of learner-centred education has been defined in many different ways, so there is no "one right answer".

Why have I been asked to take part?

You have been asked to take part because you are an **English language teacher, with a minimum of two years' teaching experience.**

The concept of "learner-centred education" has been defined by several academics and scholars, but there is limited information regarding how English language teachers themselves understand the concept.

What will the study involve?

If you decide to take part, you will be asked to carry out a short online questionnaire. The questionnaire will ask you:

- Some **background information** about yourself: country of work, age, teaching experience, education, and teaching context. *You will **not** be asked to give your name or any information which might identify you personally.*
- How **familiar** you are with the concept of "learner-centred education", and how **confident** you would feel describing it to a colleague.
- How you would **personally define** "learner-centred education", based on a list of 11 possible interpretations.
- How **useful** you feel the concept of "learner-centred education" is for your professional practice.

All questions are *multiple choice*, and there are no open questions. It is estimated that you are likely to take 10-15 minutes answering the questionnaire.

Are there any benefits in taking part?

There are no tangible benefits to taking part in the study. However, being able to reflect upon the concept of learner-centred education may be interesting and may prove useful for your future teaching.

Are there any risks involved?

The level of risk in this study is very low. As explained below, your data will be kept strictly confidential (not shared with anyone else) and will be anonymous (we will not collect any personal information and you will not be identifiable). However, if you do have any doubts or concerns about the study, feel free to contact the researcher, <name>, at any time <email>.

Will my participation be confidential?

The only people who will have access to the data will be the researcher, who is strictly prohibited from sharing the data with anyone else.

Will my participation be anonymous?

Your data will be completely anonymous. You will not be asked to give your name or any other personal information which might lead you to be identified.

How will the data be stored and processed?

The data will be stored on a password-protected computer in a locked office at <university name>, at all times. The data will be destroyed after 2 years, in line with <country name> Data Protection guidelines.

Data from all participants will be brought together and analysed in statistical form for use in academic publications and presentations.

What will happen to the results of the research?

As mentioned earlier, the results of the research are part of a larger research project on the conceptualisation of learner-centred education in language teaching. The findings may be published in international journals and presented at academic conferences.

Where can I get further information?

Please contact the researcher directly at <email> if you would like any further information.

Informed consent

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and considering taking part in this study. Remember - **your participation in this study is voluntary**.

If you would like to take part, please indicate your consent by answering the question below.

I have read and understood the information above. I agree to take part in this research study and for my data to be used for the purpose of this study. * *Required*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Eligibility criteria

Could you please confirm that you are: an English language teacher, with at least 2 years' teaching experience, and that you are 18 years old or over.

- ☐ YES (I am an English language teacher, with at least 2 years' teaching experience, and I am 18 years old or over.)
- ☐ NO (I am not an English language teacher, and/or I have fewer than 2 years' teaching experience, and/or I am younger than 18 years old.)

Background information

In which country do you have the most experience teaching English?

	18-25	26-35	36-45	46+
What is your age?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Years of experience		
	2-5	6-10	11+
For how many years have you taught English to speakers of other languages?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please indicate what education/training you have received **in a discipline related to language teaching**. Some of these might include (but are not limited to): TESOL, English Language Teaching, Applied Linguistics, Education, Education Studies. *Please note: you may need to select more than one option.*

- ☐ Undergraduate degree
- ☐ Master's degree
- ☐ Doctoral degree
- ☐ Other relevant training course (e.g. CELTA/DELTA or equivalent)

(if applicable) Please write the name your undergraduate degree here (e.g. BA Language Teaching).

(if applicable) Please write the name of your Master's degree here (e.g. MA TESOL).

(if applicable) Please indicate the discipline of your doctoral degree (e.g. PhD in Education).

(if applicable) Please indicate the name(s) of any other relevant training course(s) you have taken.

What educational levels have you taught? *(Please select as many answers as applicable)*

- ☐ Pre-school
- ☐ Primary
- ☐ Secondary
- ☐ Higher education
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

In what educational level do you feel you have the most experience?

- ☐ Pre-school
- ☐ Primary
- ☐ Secondary
- ☐ Higher education
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

Do you have experience training English language teachers?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

If yes, in what context?

- ☐ University undergraduate level
☐ University postgraduate level
☐ Pre-service training courses (e.g. CELTA or equivalent)
☐ In-service training courses (e.g. DELTA or equivalent)
☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

Familiarity with the concept

Have you heard of the term "learner-centred education"? *Please note: this does not mean you understand it.*

- ☐ Yes (I have heard of the term "learner-centred education")
☐ No (I have never heard of the term "learner-centred education")

Confidence in explaining the concept

	EXTREMELY CONFIDENT (I would be able to explain the concept without any problems.)	FAIRLY CONFIDENT (I would be able to explain the concept, but there would be one or two aspects that I would not be sure about.)	FAIRLY UNCONFIDENT (I might be able to explain some aspects of the concept, but there are several aspects that I would not be sure about.)	EXTREMELY UNCONFIDENT (I would not be able to explain the concept at all.)
To what extent would you feel confident explaining the concept of "learner-centred education" to someone else in your field?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Your personal definition of the concept

Please look at the table below and read each explanation carefully.

To what extent do you think that the following aspects should be part of the definition of "learner-centred education"?

	EXTREMELY IMPORTANT (I consider this aspect to be a fundamental part of the concept of "learner- centred education".)	FAIRLY IMPORTANT (I consider this aspect to be a somewhat important part of the concept of "learner- centred education", but it is not fundamentally important.)	NOT SURE (I am not sure whether or not I would consider this aspect to be part of the concept of "learner- centred education".)	FAIRLY UNIMPORTANT (I do not consider this aspect to be an important part of the concept of "learner-centred education".)	EXTREMELY UNIMPORTANT (I do not consider this aspect to have anything at all to do with the concept of "learner-centred education".)
1. ACTIVE PARTICIPATION. The teacher organises learning so that there are opportunities for the students to participate.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. INTERACTION. The teacher organises learning so that there are opportunities for students to interact with others.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. REAL-LIFE SKILLS. The teacher not only teaches theoretical knowledge, but also real-life skills that the students can apply outside of the classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. HIGHER ORDER SKILLS. The teacher organises learning so that there are opportunities for students to develop higher order skills such as critical thinking and creativity.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5a. ADAPTING TO NEEDS. The teacher bases learning around the students' prior knowledge, skills and experiences, and adapts learning based on students' needs and interests.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

5b. LEARNING IS ADAPTED TO STUDENTS' NEEDS, EVEN IF THIS MEANS EMPLOYING "TEACHER-CENTRED" METHODS. For example, after considering her students' needs, a teacher decides that the most effective way to teach a particular grammar point is to lecture to the whilst they listen passively.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. POWER SHARING. The teacher provides opportunities for the students to be more involved in decision-making regarding what they learn, how they learn, and how they are assessed.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. LEARNER AUTONOMY. The teacher organises learning so that there are opportunities for students to work independently, both in and out of the classroom.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. METACOGNITION. The teacher not only teaches content, but also provides opportunities for students to reflect about how they learn.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT. The teacher provides formative assessment as well as summative assessment.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. HUMANISTIC ROLE. The teacher takes a "whole person" approach towards the students and their learning, focusing not only on their cognitive needs but also their needs as human beings.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Usefulness of the concept

	EXTREMELY USEFUL (I consider the concept of "learner- centred education" to be very useful for my practice.)	FAIRLY USEFUL (I consider the concept of "learner- centred education" to be fairly useful for my practice.)	NOT SURE (I am not sure whether or not I consider the concept of "learner- centred education" to be useful for my practice.)	FAIRLY USELESS (I do not consider the concept of "learner- centred education" to be particularly useful for my practice.)	EXTREMELY USELESS (I do not consider the concept of "learner- centred education" to be useful for my practice at all.)
To what extent do you consider the concept of "learner- centred education" to be useful for your professional practice?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

End of questions

You have now completed all the required sections.

Please click "**Finish**" to complete the survey.

Thank you!

Thank you for taking part in this research study. We really appreciate you taking the time to participate in this study.

Your perspectives on the concept of "learner-centred education" are very important, as they will help increase our knowledge of how different English language teachers interpret the term. This information will be useful when planning for the training of future English language teachers.

If you would like to:

- Ask any questions
- Discuss any issue you may have had with the research, or
- Receive a copy of the final research report

Please feel free to contact the researcher, <name>, by email <email address>.

Thank you again for participating.

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