

## **What is Learner-Centered Education? A Qualitative Study Exploring the Perspectives of English Language Teachers in Colombia**

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### **Abstract**

Despite a recent influx of conceptual studies on the topic of ‘learner-centered education’ (LCE), the term continues to be interpreted inconsistently by a wide range of stakeholders. This study develops previous quantitative work on teachers’ understandings of LCE by exploring the perspectives of 16 Colombian EFL teachers. The methods consisted of semi-structured interviews based on a pre-interview questionnaire, which included both ‘open response’ and ‘closed response’ components. The study found similarities between participants’ views and the findings of previous quantitative research. Participants considered LCE to be a multifaceted term, but placed more emphasis on ‘practical’ classroom-based aspects (‘Active participation’) than those aspects implying changes to teacher-student relationships and epistemology (‘Power sharing’ and ‘Higher order skills’). Certain interpretations of LCE were considered more important by the study participants than is typically evident in the literature (notably ‘Formative assessment’, ‘Metacognition’ and ‘Humanistic role’), suggesting that a wider range of aspects could be taken into account as part of a more flexible approach to defining LCE. Differences were also found between aspects mentioned in participants’ initial ‘open response’ definitions, compared to their later ‘closed response’ questions, which may have implications for future conceptual research exploring stakeholder perspectives.

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

‘Learner-centered’ education (LCE), also known as ‘student-centered’ education, is a concept that continues to be popular with teachers. Indeed, in a recent survey of 248 English language teachers (Bremner, 2021), 94% responded that knowing about LCE was useful for their professional practice. Despite this, there continues to be a certain amount of uncertainty regarding what the term means. The practical implication of this is that ELT practitioners may find it difficult to reflect about implementing aspects of LCE in their own practice, or to discuss and compare ‘learner-centred’ practices with their colleagues. In recent years, a growing number of conceptual studies have attempted to reduce this uncertainty (Neumann, 2013; Starkey, 2017). Most recently, these conceptual studies have included a meta-analysis of academic journal articles (Bremner, 2020a) and a quantitative study of English language teachers’ perceptions (Bremner, 2021).

The present study further develops our understandings by examining the perspectives of 16 English language teachers in Colombia. The study collected participants’ responses from their initial ‘open response’ definitions (participants expressing LCE in their own words), and then compared them to their ‘closed response’ definitions (the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with pre-established definitions of LCE). The study found clear differences between the open and closed response findings, which may have implications for the way conceptual studies like these are operationalized.

## Literature review

### Multiple interpretations of LCE

The notion of ‘learner-centered education’ has existed for numerous decades and possibly even centuries (for a detailed account of the historical origins of LCE, see Chapter 3 of Wang, 2007). Perhaps for this reason, it remains difficult to tie down the concept to any specific methods, techniques or activities (Tudor, 1992). Chung and Walsh (2000) unpacked the related term of ‘child-centeredness’ and found over 40 different potential interpretations of the concept. More recent research has sought to organize these interpretations by establishing frameworks to categorize LCE. For example, Neumann’s (2013) work focuses primarily on teachers allowing students more control over the learning process, proposing a 3-contoured framework that differentiates between centering learning ‘on’, ‘in’ or ‘with’ the students. A more encompassing framework is that of Starkey (2017), who proposes a model incorporating the ‘cognitive’ aspect (whose primary focus is on learning), the ‘agentic’ aspect (whose primary focus is on empowering students) and the ‘humanist’ aspect (whose primary focus is on attending to students’ needs as human beings).

Schweisfurth (2013: 11-13) argues that a shift towards LCE (from traditionally ‘teacher-centered’ approaches) may involve changes not only in *technique* (from ‘frontal, “chalk and talk”, “transmission”’ to ‘independent or group inquiry’), but also changes in learner *motivation* (from ‘extrinsic’ to ‘intrinsic’ motivation), different teacher-student *relationships* (from largely ‘authoritarian’ to more ‘democratic’ relationships), and finally a shift in *epistemology* (from seeing ‘knowledge as fixed’ to seeing ‘knowledge as fluid’).

In ELT, a key example of conceptual divergence can be found if we compare the work of Nunan (1988) and Jones (2007). Within the English language teaching literature, two main differences exemplify two key distinctions in the way LCE has been defined. Nunan defines LCE in terms of (a) adapting learning to take into account learners’ prior knowledge and experiences; (b) granting learners more power to make decisions about

how and what they learn; and (c) helping learners to become more independent learners, including developing their metacognitive skills. Conversely, Jones, although agreeing with Nunan in some areas such as learner autonomy, places most emphasis on keeping learners active in a range of activities, and the importance of developing real-life communication skills. Interestingly, Jones is keen to stress that LCE '*isn't* a place where the students decide what they want to learn and what they want to do' (p.2, emphasis mine) but rather 'a place where we consider the needs of the students, as a group and as individuals, and encourage them to participate in the learning process all the time'. Jones' interpretation would therefore seem to include Schweisfurth's notions of changes in *technique*, but would perhaps imply fewer changes in *relationships* and *epistemology*.

### **A meta-analysis of literature on LCE**

The aforementioned inconsistencies, combined with my own doubts based on discussions with ELT colleagues, motivated me to carry out a meta-analysis of definitions found in the literature (Bremner, 2020a). In the initial inductive phase, the following ten aspects of LCE emerged:

- 1) *Active participation* (this included terms such as 'active learning', 'hands-on learning', and 'learning by doing', among others).
- 2) *Interaction* (this included all references to pair and group work, as well as references to 'constructivism' in terms of Vygotskian social constructivism).
- 3) *Real-life skills* (i.e. skills learners can use 'outside the classroom').
- 4) *Higher order skills* (this included skills such as 'critical thinking' and 'creativity').
- 5) *Adapting to needs* (this included terms such as 'flexible learning' and 'personalized learning', as well as references to 'constructivism' in terms of basing learning around students' prior knowledge and experiences).
- 6) *Power sharing* (this included terms such as 'learner choice', 'learner control', more 'democratic' teacher-student relationships, as well as the epistemological considerations of seeing knowledge as less 'fixed' and more 'fluid').
- 7) *Autonomy* (this included terms such as 'independent learning' and 'self-regulated learning', as well as references to learners taking 'responsibility' for their own learning and being less 'dependent' on the teacher).
- 8) *Metacognition* (this included terms such as 'learning strategies' and 'learning to learn', among others).
- 9) *Formative assessment* (this included terms such as 'alternative assessment', as well as viewing learning as a 'process' rather than just a 'product').
- 10) *Humanistic role* (this included terms such as taking a 'whole person' approach, considering not only 'cognitive' needs but 'affective' needs).

In the subsequent deductive phase, I collected 326 journal articles with the words 'learner-centered' or 'student-centered' in the title, and analyzed the definitions found within them. Table 1 shows the percentage of texts which explicitly mentioned each aspect, as well as the percentage of texts specifically from language teaching which explicitly mentioned each aspect.

**Table 1. % of journal articles mentioning different aspects of LCE (data from Bremner, 2020a)**

Aspect of LCE	% of articles that mentioned this aspect	% of articles <i>from language teaching</i> that mentioned this aspect
Active participation	83%	75%
Interaction	67%	70%
Adapting to needs	64%	60%
Autonomy	57%	65%
Power sharing	47%	50%
Real-life skills	43%	45%
Higher order skills	41%	30%
Metacognition	30%	30%
Formative assessment	19%	10%
Humanistic role	13%	25%

The findings of the meta-analysis showed that ‘Active participation’ (83%) was by far the most common way that LCE had been interpreted in the literature, followed by ‘Interaction’ (67%), ‘Adapting to needs’ (64%) and ‘Autonomy’ (57%), thus corresponding mainly with the more practical aspects highlighted by Jones (2007). The aspects of ‘Power sharing’ (47%) and ‘Metacognition’ (30%), two key components in Nunan’s (1988) interpretation, were found in less than half the journal articles, whereas ‘Formative assessment’ (19%) and ‘Humanistic role’ (13%) were mentioned in less than a fifth of the articles.

### **English language teachers’ perspectives on the concept of LCE**

Up to this point, what has been noticeably absent in the literature has been research examining the concept of LCE from the perspective of language teachers themselves. In order to begin to address this gap, I designed a quantitative survey (Bremner, 2021) which asked 248 English language teachers to state the degree to which they felt each of the 10 aspects above should be included in a definition of LCE. The overall weighted scores for each aspect were as follows:

**Table 2. Aspects that English language teachers felt should be included in a definition of LCE (data from Bremner, 2021)**

Aspect of LCE	Overall weighted score from English language teachers’ perspectives
Active participation	90%
Interaction	89%
Adapting to needs	83%
Metacognition	83%
Autonomy	82%
Real-life skills	77%
Higher order skills	76%
Formative assessment	73%
Humanistic role	72%
Power sharing	71%

The views of teachers are much more balanced than the definitions found in the literature, and suggest that (a) what authors choose to include in a definition may not always reflect what they consider important in a term; and (b) that English language teachers generally viewed LCE as a broad, multifaceted term. In light of the previous, I argued that it would be important to be flexible when interpreting LCE, and to allow stakeholders to choose the aspects of LCE that were most relevant to their individual contexts.

One of the key limitations of the aforementioned survey was that it was purely quantitative, with no opportunity for participants to elaborate on the reasons behind their responses. This represented a clear opportunity to contribute to the existing literature by exploring participants' views of LCE from a qualitative perspective.

### **LearnING-centered education**

A final aspect to be discussed within the context of LCE is the notion of *learnING-centered* education. Some teachers believe that adapting their classes in order to meet learner needs (even if this means using traditionally 'teacher-centered' methods) should still be considered 'learner-centered' (e.g., Croft, 2002). However, others disagree, arguing that, in such cases, a more appropriate term would be *learn<sup>ing</sup>-centered* education (e.g., O'Sullivan, 2004). It would appear that this issue continues to divide the opinions of ELT professionals. Indeed, in Bremner (2021), the category 'Adapting to needs, even if using teacher-centered methods', only received an overall score of 47%, compared to 83% for 'Adapting to needs' in general. However, it must be recognized that a quantitative survey may struggle to encapsulate the complexity behind this kind of question. Again, it was felt that a qualitative extension to the previous quantitative study would be a useful contribution to the existing literature, as it would allow participants to explain the reasons behind their decisions.

## **Method**

### **Aim and research questions**

The aim of this study was to examine Colombian English language teachers' perspectives of the concept of learner-centered education, and to compare their 'open response' definitions to their 'closed response' definitions. To clarify, an 'open response' definition consisted of participants defining LCE in their own words, without being exposed to pre-established stimuli, whereas a 'closed response' definition consisted of participants indicating the degree to which they agreed with pre-established definitions of LCE.

The research questions of the study were as follows:

RQ1. How do participants define LCE in their own words?

RQ2. To what extent do participants agree with the 10 aspects of LCE emerging from the meta-analysis of literature, and how does this compare to their 'open response' definitions?

### **Context and participants**

A total of 16 English language teachers, from a range of different education levels in Colombia, were recruited to take part in this study. Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling, initially based on professional contacts I had gained whilst living in Colombia. Their names (replaced by pseudonyms to protect their identities) and some key information about their contexts and experience, are provided in

Table 3. Due to the small-scale, qualitative nature of this study, this information has been included to provide the reader with a general overview of the key characteristics of the participants, and is not used for cross-tabulation purposes.

**Table 3. Key information about the 16 participants**

Name (pseudonym)	Teaching experience (years)	Most teaching experience in	Teacher training experience?
Angel	5-10	Private language institutes	
Armando	5-10	Private secondary	
Araceli	5-10	Private language institutes	
Claudio	20 +	Higher education	✓
Felipe	10-15	Higher education	
Felicia	0-5	Higher education	
Flavio	10-15	Public secondary	
Jaime	20 +	Higher education	✓
Jonas	5-10	Public secondary	
Leonora	0-5	Higher education	✓
Melisa	5-10	Public secondary	
Mabel	0-5	Private language institutes	
Mariela	5-10	Public secondary	
Norberto	0-5	Higher education	
Pamela	5-10	Private language institutes	
Rosemary	5-10	Higher education	

Participants were given information sheets and consent forms to read before deciding to take part, and were recruited on an opt-in basis. In accordance with APA Ethical Principles, ethical approval was sought by the Bath Spa University Research Ethics Committee prior to starting the research.

### **Data collection**

The main method employed in this study was a written questionnaire, combined with semi-structured interviews to give participants the opportunity to elaborate on the reasons behind their responses. There were two key questions in the questionnaire:

**Question 1: The ‘open response’ question.** Question 1 was an open question which asked participants ‘*What do you understand by the concept of ‘learner-centered education?’*’. It was important to include this question before the subsequent ‘closed response’ question in order for participants’ views not to be influenced by the pre-established definitions. Participants were sent Question 1 three days before attending the interview. The rationale behind giving participants the questions beforehand was that it would give them an opportunity to reflect about their answers before expressing them in the interview (for a discussion of the role of increased time in qualitative interviews, see Bremner, 2020b). Participants provided written responses, which were analyzed, and were also invited to explain their definition and/or add any further details during the interview.

**Question 2: The ‘closed response’ question.** After discussing their answers to Question 1 in the interview, participants were then given a series of options (based on the previously mentioned 10-aspect framework of Bremner, 2020a), and were asked to decide

the extent to which these options should be part of a definition of LCE. A 5-point Likert scale was used, including the following options:

- 2. This should *definitely* be part of the definition of LCE.
- 1. This *could* be part of the definition of LCE.
- 0. *Not sure* whether or not this should be part of the definition of LCE.
- -1. This should *probably not* be part of the definition of LCE.
- -2. This should *definitely not* be part of the definition of LCE.

It should be noted that there were no answers in the -1 and -2 columns, indicating that participants agreed with most of the aspects, and leaned towards ‘not sure’ when they had reservations about a particular aspect of LCE.

Participants were given as long as they needed to fill in their ‘closed’ responses (which took an average of around 10 minutes), and then returned to the interview to discuss their responses. For example, if a participant stated that a certain aspect should ‘definitely’ be part of a definition of LCE, I asked them to elaborate on why they had come to that decision, and asked follow-up questions where appropriate.

I met participants individually to conduct the interviews, which took place either face-to-face in Colombia (pre-COVID-19) or via videocall. Both face-to-face and online interviews were recorded, and were conducted in English, owing to the high level of English language proficiency of the participants.

### **Key methodological considerations during the interview process**

Although it is unrealistic to expect complete ‘objectivity’ during qualitative interviews (Kvale, 1996), it was nevertheless important for me to remain as neutral as realistically possible, and to avoid divulging my own views on the topic. However, in order to maximize the credibility of the study, it was also vital that I made sure, where possible, that the participants had understood the questions and were providing faithful answers to their views. Throughout this article, I have attempted to include several examples of researcher-participant interactions, in order to be as transparent as possible about the potential ways in which I might be seen as influencing the data collection process. The excerpt below provides one example of how I tried to check participants’ responses whilst trying not to ‘lead’ them towards a particular answer:

**Researcher:** So ‘*Adapting to needs*’. What did you put for that one?

**Norberto:** I put ‘one’. Because I think that it’s very good to keep students’ prior knowledge, experiences in mind in order to create and to construct new ways of learning.

**Researcher:** But not a ‘two’?

**Norberto:** I’m not sure. [...] I think, yes, it will be pretty important, experiences are important. When we listen to them, we can decide on what to continue doing or what to avoid doing, in order to create an effective class.

**Researcher:** Ok, so do you want to change it? I’m not trying to make you change your answer, but would you make it a ‘two’? I mean the ‘twos’ really need to be the things that are *really* important, so if you think it is really important, and it should *definitely* be part of the definition, then it should be a ‘two’.

**Norberto:** Well in that case, I will keep it as a ‘one’.

**Researcher:** Ok, so it’s not as important as the others you mentioned that did get a ‘two’, ‘*Active participation*’, and so on.

**Norberto:** Yes.

**Researcher:** Ok, that’s fine.

In the previous excerpt, a reader skimming the transcription quickly might reach the conclusion that I was trying to ‘guide’ Norberto towards a certain answer. However, on closer inspection, it should hopefully become clear that the questions allowed me to check that Norberto had understood the difference between ‘*definitely* should be part of the definition’ (‘two’) and ‘*could* be part of the definition’ (‘one’). In the end, Norberto decided to remain with his original decision of a ‘one’. These checks were vital in maximizing the credibility of the participants’ responses, thus increasing the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Another key challenge throughout the process was encouraging participants to reflect about LCE as a *concept*, as opposed to what they thought was *possible* in their classrooms. This was something I tried to emphasize at various points throughout the participant information sheet and during the interviews, but it was often very difficult to keep teachers’ minds fixed on how they would define LCE in purely theoretical terms. Below I have included a further excerpt which demonstrates how I attempted to remind participants to think about LCE as a concept:

**Mariela:** In this part [‘Power sharing’] I was a bit confused. I wasn’t sure if it was that important. [...] Like the students’ needs are really important but when you involve the students in the course design it’s kind of difficult to integrate all their needs

**Researcher:** Yes, but remember, it’s not about whether or not it’s difficult, it’s whether or not that is ‘learner-centered’, that’s the question.

**Mariela:** Yes, yes. I would say not that much.

Again, a quick reading of the excerpt might suggest that I was trying to lead Mariela towards a certain response. However, on closer examination, my clarification helped Mariela to respond not in terms of how *difficult* it was to implement ‘Power sharing’, but rather the extent to which ‘Power sharing’ should be part of a theoretical definition of LCE.

It was also interesting to note that several participants (7 out of 16) decided to make changes to at least one of their answers during the interviews, which is a typical characteristic of this kind of exploratory research. Here is an example of this happening with Rosemary:

**Researcher:** So ‘*Real-life skills*’, you put that as a ‘zero’.

**Rosemary:** Yes, I think I’m going to change that ‘zero’ to a ‘two’. I was reflecting when I was waiting for you and then I thought that maybe when you find a methodology that is learner-centered you are also teaching your students to face challenges and to work on them individually and collectively, but for *all* their lives [...]

**Researcher:** So that’d be an essential part of the definition of learner-centered education?

**Rosemary:** Definitely, yes.

I revisit the possible implications of participants developing their ideas through the affordances of increased time in qualitative research in the later Discussion section.

### **Data analysis and presentation**

After all of the 16 interviews were completed, the interviews were transcribed, and then both questionnaire written responses and interview transcriptions were coded using the qualitative data analysis tool NVivo 12. For RQ1 (*How do participants define LCE in their own words?*) each definition was coded into one or more of the 10 potential aspects of LCE (‘Active participation’, ‘Interaction’, and so on). Although I had planned to use a



combination of inductive and deductive coding, I found that all aspects of each definition could be coded deductively, within the 10 codes that had emerged from my previous meta-analysis of literature (Bremner, 2020a). In other words, the 16 definitions did not provide me with any ‘new’ interpretations of LCE. Once the initial ‘open response’ definitions had been coded, I created a tally of how many times each aspect had been mentioned most over the 16 cases.

For RQ2 (*To what extent do participants agree with the 10 aspects of LCE emerging from the meta-analysis of literature, and how does this compare to their ‘open response’ definitions?*), participants had already allocated Likert scores to their responses. However, I also made sure to record and transcribe participants’ interview responses, in which they justified their responses to each question. These helped provide explanatory value to the findings, and some examples of these explanations are included in the Findings that follow.

In order to analyze the results of RQ2 across participants, an overall ‘score’ was allocated to each aspect (1 point for ‘*definitely*’ should be part of the definition; ½ point for ‘*could*’ be part of the definition; 0 points for the others). In order to compare ‘open response’ and ‘closed response’ definitions, I compared overall tallies from RQ1 to overall ‘scores’ from RQ2. These comparisons are presented and analyzed in the following section.

## **Findings**

### **RQ1: How do participants define LCE in their own words?**

In this first section, I discuss the participants’ initial ‘open response’ definitions. A very wide range of definitions emerged from all 16 participants’ initial definitions. In Table 4, I have provided shortened versions of each definition, and have indicated which aspects of LCE are evident in such definitions (based on the 10 categories emerging from the meta-analysis of Bremner, 2020a). It is important to note that although the definitions have been reduced so that they can concisely fit into the table, all references that participants made to the 10 categories have been retained (in other words, no references were ‘lost’ through reduction).

Table 4 shows that ‘Adapting to needs’ (10 out of 16) was by far the most mentioned aspect in participants’ initial open response definitions. ‘Autonomy’, ‘Metacognition’ and ‘Power sharing’ were mentioned 5 times, ‘Active participation’ and ‘Humanistic role’ were mentioned 4 times, whereas ‘Real-life skills’, ‘Higher order skills’ and ‘Formative assessment’ were only mentioned once. ‘Interaction’, in the context of learners interacting with others in pair and group work, was not mentioned in any of the participants’ initial definitions.

It is important to note that the coding of these initial definitions into clear-cut categories (i.e. containing, or not containing an ‘**X**’) was not an ‘exact science’, given that it relied on my interpretations of the words found in each definition. Moreover, just because a participant did not make reference to a particular aspect in their initial definition, does not necessarily mean that they would have disagreed that this aspect could form part of a definition of LCE. Indeed, as we will see shortly, when participants were asked to judge the extent to which they agreed with pre-established categories, ‘Interaction’ scored relatively highly.

**Table 4. Summary of participants' initial 'open response' definitions of LCE**

Participant name	Definition	Active participation	Inter-action	Real-life skills	Higher order skills	Adapting to needs	Power sharing	Autonomy	Meta-cognition	Formative assessment	Humanistic role
Ángel	'Students are invited to learn about themselves and how they like to explore knowledge. [...] It's trying to think how the students are going to feel inside your classroom, [...] considering their personalities and their learning styles.'					X			X		X
Armando	'A teaching and learning process where a teacher and a student participate to fulfil their goals and needs.'					X					
Araceli	'To plan our classes based on the communicative approach. [...] To provide as much production as possible. [...] Topics related to the world they are living in, and organizing your teaching to give them loads of activities to practice English.'	X		X							
Claudio	'When the learner has choices about the activities [...] based on his type of intelligence or what he likes, and he can make decisions. [...] Also [...] not only as a student, but as a human being, I think that is also part of learner-centered education.'					X	X				X
Felicia	'The teacher is not going to be the person who just tells you a concept and you learn it. The teacher is going to be like a mentor for you. [...] The student can identify knowledge by themselves.'						X	X			
Felipe	'The teacher is like a tool; how he designs or presents in a way so that he's not the focus of the class; the learner has to be responsible, he or she has to get engaged by himself or herself.'							X			
Flavio	'Engaging students to participate actively, solving problems, and developing critical thinking, helping students to set up conditions for their own learning and attending to different areas such as their pace of learning, and reflecting on how they learn.'	X			X	X		X	X		
Jaime	'Power in the classroom to make decisions and take action. [...] Students being able to participate in those decisions and in those actions.'						X				
Jonas	'The students are asked to participate in class, and to take decisions about topics they want to learn. [...] It's about them, the students, putting into practice their skills to learn many different things; not only a topic, but how to be human beings.'	X					X		X		X

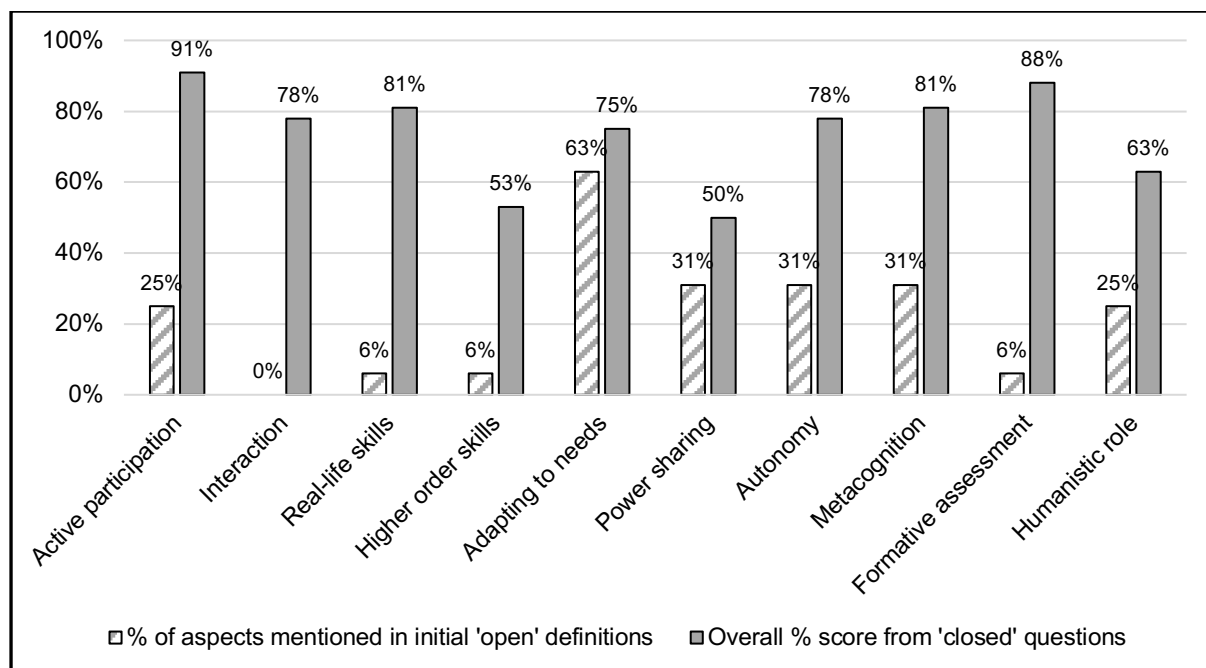
<b>Participant name</b>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Active participation</i>	<i>Inter-action</i>	<i>Real-life skills</i>	<i>Higher order skills</i>	<i>Adapting to needs</i>	<i>Power sharing</i>	<i>Autonomy</i>	<i>Meta-cognition</i>	<i>Formative assessment</i>	<i>Humanistic role</i>
Leonora	‘Taking into account not only cognitive processes, but also social ones, relationships and context.’					X					X
Melisa	‘Everything teachers do to help students to achieve the goals of the class. [...] It’s thinking about the materials we are going to use, and thinking about the needs of our students.’					X					
Mabel	‘An opportunity for different students to be aware about their own learning process. [...] To allow students to make decisions about what, how and when they want to learn.’						X		X		
Mariela	‘An approach in which the main protagonist is the student, his or her needs, and also the way the student gets involved in the class. [...] The teacher is just a facilitator in the learning process.’	X				X					
Norberto	‘A learner is not a blank page; a learner is someone who has either previous experiences or knowledge. [...] The learner-centered approach is supposed to take that into account.’					X					
Pamela	‘The student has to be more autonomous and they are in charge of their own learning [...]. The teachers are more flexible with the students, with what and how they teach, and they take the students’ needs into account.’					X		X			
Rosemary	‘The teacher gives the students the tools [...], so that they can learn how to learn by themselves. [...] You plan your lessons thinking about your students’ needs. [...] There is formative assessment; it’s more important than the summative.’					X		X	X	X	
<i>Total times aspect mentioned in ‘open response’ definitions</i>		4 (25%)	0 (0%)	1 (6%)	1 (6%)	10 (63%)	5 (31%)	5 (31%)	5 (31%)	1 (6%)	4 (25%)

**RO2: To what extent do participants agree with the 10 aspects of LCE emerging from the meta-analysis of literature, and how do their responses compare to their ‘open response’ definitions?**

In this second section, I discuss the participants’ ‘closed’ responses. Table 5 summarizes how each participant responded to the ‘closed response’ questions, and Figure 1 compares these results to the initial ‘open response’ definitions in graphical form. Given the small sample sizes involved, Figure 1 provides a visual overview of the main trends in the study, but should not be interpreted as a statistical generalization.

**Table 5. Summary of participants’ responses to the ‘closed response’ question**

<i>Aspect of LCE</i>	Overall score /16 (Overall %)	This should <u>definitely</u> be part of the definition of LCE (1pt)	This <u>could</u> be part of the definition of LCE (½pt)	<u>Not sure</u> whether this should be part of the definition of LCE (0pt)
Active participation	14.5 (91%)	n=13 Ángel, Araceli, Armando, Claudio, Felipe, Flavio, Leonora, Jaime, Jonas, Mabel, Mariela, Melisa, Rosemary	n=3 Felicia, Norberto, Pamela	n=0
Interaction	12.5 (78%)	n=10 Armando, Claudio, Felicia, Felipe, Flavio, Jaime, Jonas, Leonora, Mabel, Mariela	n=5 Araceli, Melisa, Norberto, Pamela, Rosemary	n=1 Ángel
Real-life skills	13 (81%)	n=12 Ángel, Araceli, Armando, Claudio, Felipe, Flavio, Jaime, Jonas, Leonora, Melisa, Norberto, Rosemary	n=2 Felicia, Mabel	n=2 Mariela, Pamela
Higher order skills	8.5 (53%)	n=4 Araceli, Felipe, Flavio, Leonora	n=9 Ángel, Armando, Claudio, Jaime, Jonas, Mabel, Mariela, Melisa, Norberto	n=3 Felicia, Pamela, Rosemary
Adapting to needs	12 (75%)	n=9 Ángel, Araceli, Armando, Claudio, Leonora, Jaime, Jonas, Mabel, Mariela	n=6 Felicia, Felipe, Flavio, Melisa, Norberto, Rosemary	n=1 Pamela
Power sharing	8 (50%)	n=5 Ángel, Armando, Jaime, Mariela, Melisa	n=6 Araceli, Claudio, Flavio, Jonas, Leonora, Rosemary	n=5 Felicia, Felipe, Mabel, Norberto, Pamela
Autonomy	12.5 (78%)	n=11 Armando, Felipe, Flavio, Jaime, Jonas, Leonora, Mabel, Mariela, Melisa, Pamela, Rosemary	n=3 Araceli, Claudio, Norberto	n=2 Ángel, Felicia
Metacognition	13 (81%)	n=11 Ángel, Armando, Claudio, Felicia, Flavio, Jaime, Jonas, Leonora, Mariela, Melisa, Norberto	n=4 Araceli, Felipe, Pamela, Rosemary	n=1 Mabel
Formative assessment	14 (88%)	n=12 Ángel, Araceli, Armando, Claudio, Felicia, Felipe, Jaime, Mabel, Mariela, Norberto, Pamela, Rosemary	n=4 Flavio, Jonas, Leonora, Melisa	n=0
Humanistic role	10 (63%)	n=9 Ángel, Araceli, Armando, Claudio, Felipe, Jaime, Jonas, Leonora, Melisa	n=2 Flavio, Rosemary	n=5 Felicia, Mabel, Mariela, Norberto, Pamela



**Figure 1. % of aspects mentioned in initial ‘open response’ definitions, compared to overall % scores from the ‘closed response’ questions**

As Figure 1 shows, there were considerable differences between the scores from Question 2 of the interview, compared to the aspects participants mentioned in their initial definitions (Question 1). Indeed, it was only the aspect of ‘Adapting to needs’ that yielded fairly similar results for the open (63%) and closed (75%) response questions. Possible reasons and implications of this are examined in the Discussion section.

As mentioned in the Methods section, participants were invited to discuss the reasons behind their responses in the interviews. A selection of examples of these are provided below, divided into sub-sections based on the different aspects of LCE. Due to the close links between certain aspects, some have been combined into the same sub-section – for example ‘Active participation’ and ‘Interaction’ below.

**Active participation and Interaction.** A clear example of the differences between ‘open response’ and ‘closed response’ definitions was for ‘Active participation’ (91%) and ‘Interaction’ (81%). For example, whereas only 4 out of 16 participants mentioned ‘Active participation’ in their initial definitions, 13 responded that this aspect should ‘definitely’ be part of the definition in Question 2. Indeed, ‘Active participation’ was seen by many teachers as ‘essential’ for learner-centered education to occur:

*Norberto:* The ‘learning by doing’ thing, I think, is essential to any learning process.

*Rosemary:* I think learner-centered education has to make it possible for students to participate, actively, during their learning process, so I think teachers must organize lessons so that students can actively participate all the time.

Even Jaime, whose open response definition focused exclusively on ‘Power sharing’, was quick to recognize the importance of ‘Active participation’:

*Jaime:* I think, well, more than others that I have read across these options, it’s one of those that sounds like very obvious, you know, with the concept of student-centered learning.

‘Interaction’ (81%) also achieved a much higher score in Question 2 compared with Question 1. ‘Interaction’ was not mentioned in any of the participants’ open response definitions, but 10

out the 16 teachers reported that it should ‘definitely’ be part of a definition of LCE. Felicia for example, highlighted:

*Felicia:* When you teach in another language, it’s really important that it’s not just the teacher talking all the time, but for there to be interaction between the students, student-to-student and student-to-teacher, it’s like the main point of what they’re doing.

‘Interaction’ did not receive complete support from the interviews, with 6 participants responding that it was only fairly important. Rosemary, for example, highlighted that interaction was not always necessary in a learner-centered class:

*Rosemary:* I think it’s part of the definition, but not necessarily, because if they are working individually on a project, there are different goals for learning. I think it depends on them, the subject, or the objective of the lesson.

**Real life-skills and Higher order skills.** An aspect linked to both ‘Active participation’ and ‘Interaction’ was ‘Real-life skills’, which achieved a fairly high overall score of 81%, despite only being mentioned explicitly by one participant in the open response definitions. For example, although Norberto’s open response definition focused on adapting to learner needs, he felt ‘Real-life skills’ should ‘definitely’ be part of the definition of LCE, commenting:

*Norberto:* Of course, as language teachers we have to always think about how what we’re trying to teach can be used in a real-life environment. [...] Anything that we bring into the classroom should have some use in the outside world.

The aspect of ‘higher order skills’, whilst still moderately popular with a score of 53%, produced a range of opinions. 4 of the 16 participants felt that it should ‘definitely’ be part of the definition, whilst 9 felt that it ‘could’ be part, and 3 answered that they were ‘not sure’. Melisa, for example, stated:

*Melisa:* I’m not sure if [higher order skills] should be a ‘must’ for this concept, [...] I would say this is, I don’t know, ‘transversal’, I don’t know how to say it

*Researcher:* It transcends, like learning in general? It’s not just about learner-centered education?

*Melisa:* Yes, that’s what I want to say. So that’s why I’m not sure if it’s *only* related to this concept.

The views of Melisa suggest that while she may encourage higher order skills with her students, they are not necessarily a fundamental part of her interpretation of LCE. This would seem similar to Rosemary’s argument about whether ‘Interaction’ should be considered an essential part of the definition.

**Autonomy and Metacognition.** ‘Autonomy’ (78%) and ‘Metacognition’ (81%) also scored considerably higher on the closed response component of the interviews in comparison to participants’ initial open response definitions. 11 participants expressed that both ‘Autonomy’ and ‘Metacognition’ should ‘definitely’ be part of the definition, despite only 5 participants mentioning these aspects in their initial definitions.

The overlap between these two aspects was clear; indeed, Claudio highlighted that there were clear links between the two:

*Claudio:* In the process of becoming autonomous and making the class learner-centered, we have to give students the skills or the tools to become autonomous and to understand the way in which they learn. [...] So I think it is important to work on metacognition; helping them understand how they learn to learn and that’s also one of the processes to get to autonomy, which would be the final goal.

**Power sharing and Adapting to needs.** ‘Power sharing’ received mixed messages from the Colombian teachers. Only 5 participants felt that it should ‘definitely’ be part of the definition of LCE, with 6 responding that it ‘could’ be part of the definition, and the remaining 5 ‘not sure’. Within the ‘definitely’ group, there were comments like:

*Angel:* Students need to have the opportunity to decide on the way this learning is going to happen. [...] They need to take part in that decision-making process.

However, more skeptical participants highlighted potential problems with allowing students to make key decisions in their learning:

*Jonas:* I mean, the teacher is the person who is planning the different lessons and activities, so I think although it is important, sometimes teachers need to decide what to do in the classroom.

A possible issue with the previous quotation is that Jonas may have been thinking in practical terms with regards to the *possibility* of allowing students increased choice and control, as opposed to how LCE should be defined *theoretically*. As stressed in the Methods section, this was a constant issue throughout this research and although I tried to mitigate against it, practical concerns may have interfered with the participants' conceptual understandings of LCE. An example in which this was less of an issue was Rosemary:

*Rosemary:* I think it's an important part [of the definition of LCE], but maybe not the *core*. I mean you definitely have to listen to your students and when I say listen to them, that is not to give them what they want all the time, but to always take their opinions into account when you are planning future lessons.

The examples of both Jonas and Rosemary suggest that although taking learners' views into account may be important, the teacher is nevertheless vitally important in the decision-making process. With this in mind, it is perhaps unsurprising that the aspect of 'Adapting to needs' was relatively more popular than 'Power sharing', with 10 participants feeling it should 'definitely' be part of a definition of LCE. As mentioned earlier, this aspect was the only one to score relatively highly in both the open and closed response definitions. Jonas, for example, stated:

*Jonas:* I think it's very important because sometimes we have different kind of students and some of them might have particular needs, so we have to adapt the materials to them, and to be flexible.

Some participants related this flexibility to the notion of constructivism; that is, considering students' prior knowledge and experiences:

*Claudio:* I said it should definitely be part, because when we're talking about learner-centeredness, the students need some sort of baseline to start constructing new knowledge. [...] It's part of learner-centeredness, because it's taking into consideration what he or she already knows.

The qualitative nature of the interviews allowed me to explore the notion of 'Adapting to needs' in more detail with the participants. Related to the discussion of learning-centred education (see Literature Review) I asked them if they would still consider themselves 'learner-centered' if they adopted traditionally teacher-centered methods (lecturing, drilling, etc.), but with the ultimate aim of 'Adapting to needs'. Out of the 16 participants, only Araceli expressed that she could consider herself just as 'learner-centred' if she utilized more 'teacher-centred' methods in an attempt to adapt to her learners' needs. Araceli's view seemed to be based around the idea of doing everything possible to help her students learn:

*Araceli:* It should 'definitely' be in the definition, because [...] you need to give the students activities in which they can practice, but you also need to teach grammar, [...], because I think that it is necessary that you don't only focus on the fun part, but also on the topics you are teaching.

*Researcher:* But would you consider that teaching to be learner-centered still?

*Araceli:* That's what I'm realizing now. [...] I think that as a teacher if you are still teaching grammar or focusing on the more formal elements, yes, that would still be part of a learner-centered approach.

However, not all participants were as sure as Araceli, with most participants not sure when I asked them this further question. The general lack of certainty when answering this question was summed up well by Jaime:

*Researcher:* So I want you to imagine a teacher who is drilling and lecturing but the reason that they do that is because they feel that that it is the best way for their students to learn in that moment. Would you

consider that to be learner-centered?

*Jaime:* I think at certain points in our teaching we all mix and use different approaches and that might also depend on what we perceive in our classroom and what we might think our students need at certain points, we make the decisions. So I think, yes, absolutely, because I mean, how could I say no? [...] But I would expect that mostly, if I am talking about a student-centered approach, most of the approaches would be related to [*Power sharing*] [...] So neutral; not sure whether this should be part of the definition of learner-centered education or not.

Perhaps one of the most important factors was whether or not participants considered ‘Power sharing’ to be a key part of their understanding of LCE. Flavio’s views are telling here:

*Researcher:* Do you think that a teacher can still justify that they are being learner-centered, because they are thinking about the needs of the students?

*Flavio:* No, I don’t think so. [...] I think that in some classes, there could be transitions between the approaches; at the beginning, we could have the teacher-centered approach and then, at the end, a learner-centered approach, or vice-versa. [...] If the teacher is providing opportunity to empower his students, I think that that is learner-centered. But if the teacher is the one that finally takes the decision, I think that that would be teacher-centered education.

**Formative assessment.** The penultimate aspect was that of ‘Formative assessment’. Despite only being mentioned in 1 of the 16 initial open response definitions, it was interesting to note that ‘Formative assessment’ was very well-received by the Colombian teachers, with an overall score of 88%, placing it second overall in the closed response question. Armando, for example, seemed to link formative assessment with students’ ‘process’ of learning:

*Armando:* By having formative assessment, learners are going to feel that they are part of a learner-centered process because; we’re not talking about ‘you failed’ or ‘you passed’; we are talking about your process.

The fact that some aspects like ‘Formative assessment’ achieved high scores in the closed response questions despite barely appearing in participants initial open response definitions, would seem to mirror its general lack of representation in the academic literature. I revisit this point in the subsequent Discussion section.

**Humanistic role.** The final aspect of LCE was that of ‘Humanistic role’. Although this was one of the lowest scoring aspects overall, it nevertheless achieved a score of 63%, suggesting that it was still considered somewhat important by the Colombian teachers, and was mentioned in 4 out of the 16 open response definitions. In the closed response question, 9 participants expressed that it should ‘definitely’ be a part of LCE, such as Armando, who stated:

*Armando:* If we have that empathetic perspective towards others, it means that we are having that humanistic perspective. I do think it’s really important in learner-centered education.

Of the remaining participants, 2 felt ‘Humanistic role’ ‘could’ be part of the definition, whilst 5 were ‘not sure’. Mariela, for example, responded:

*Mariela:* I didn’t have a very clear idea, but [...] yes, the students need to be comfortable if they want to learn [...] so yes, it is important.

*Researcher:* But if you were designing a definition, would you put this in?

*Mariela:* I don’t think so.

In the previous example, it was not that Mariela did not value the notion of humanistic teaching, but rather that she did not feel it should be a key part of the definition of LCE. This was similar to Rosemary’s views on the role of interaction in LCE and Melisa’s views on higher order skills.



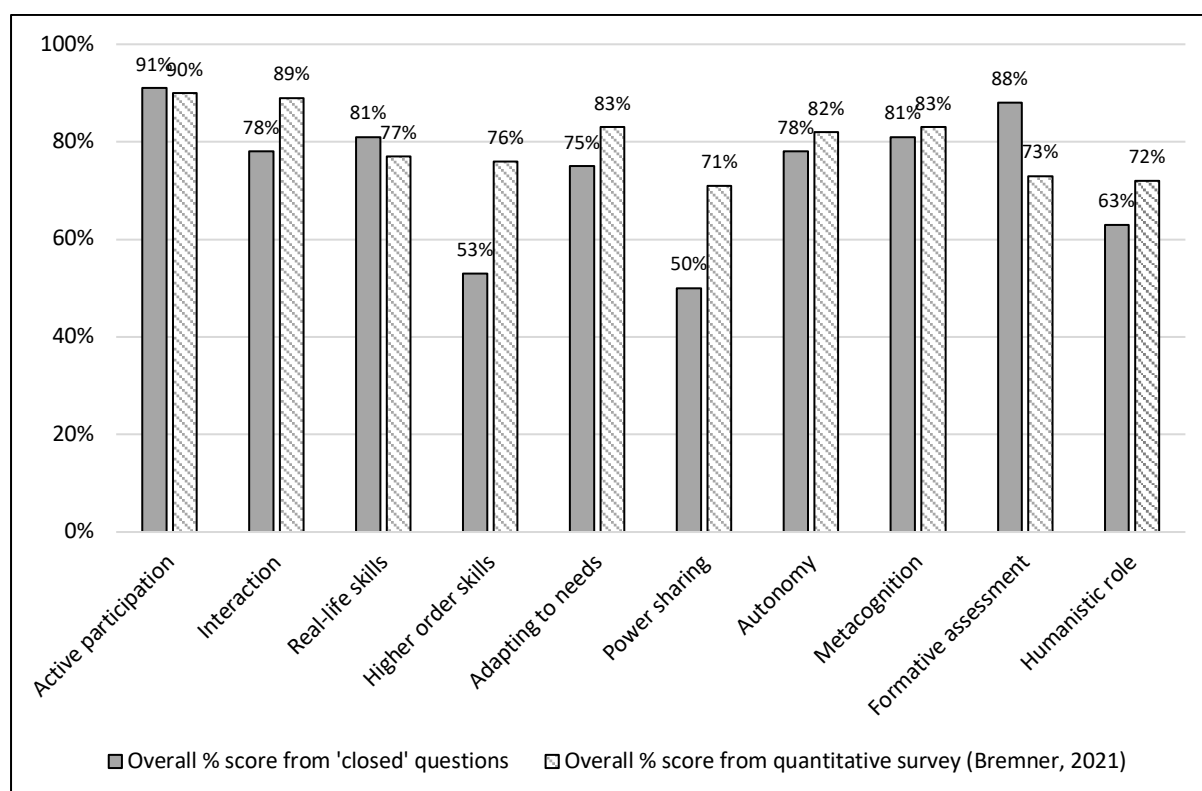
## Discussion

Three main discussion points emerged from the findings, which are examined in the following sub-sections.

### 1) Teachers support the view of LCE as a multifaceted concept, but focus mostly on practical, technical aspects

This study again highlights the broad, complex nature of the concept of ‘learner-centered education’. Overall, the teacher participants agreed that all 10 of the potential aspects emerging from the meta-analysis of literature (Bremner, 2020a) should be part of a wide-ranging definition of LCE. Indeed, there were no aspects that were universally rejected, and all aspects received an overall score of at least 50%.

Figure 2 demonstrates the similarities in the overall tendencies by placing the summary of qualitative responses alongside the quantitative scores of Bremner (2021). Although it must be recognized that the sample size in this qualitative study is too small to make statistical comparisons, the graph tentatively suggests that participants appear to hold broadly similar views to the 248 teachers in the quantitative survey, with only slightly larger differences in certain aspects such as ‘Higher order skills’, ‘Humanistic role’, ‘Power sharing’, ‘Formative assessment’ and ‘Interaction’.

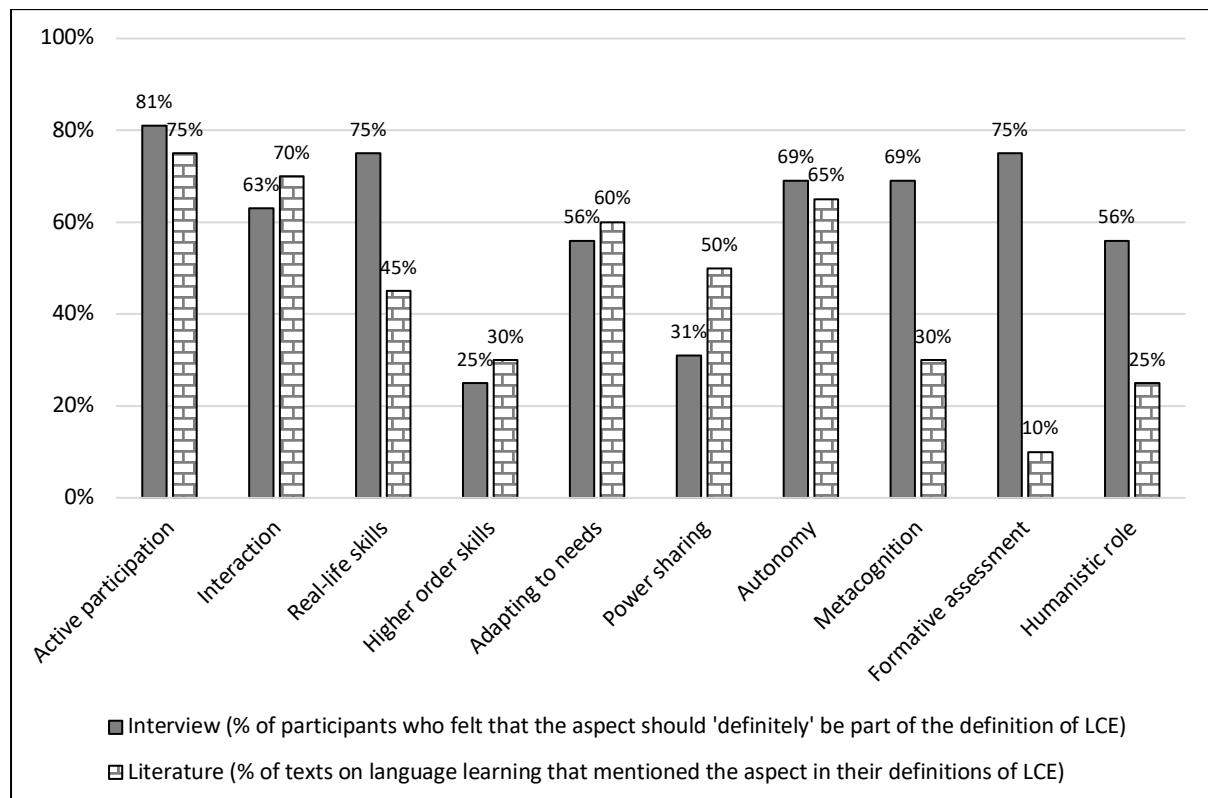


**Figure 2. % scores from closed response questions, compared with % scores from the quantitative survey of Bremner (2021)**

Although all potential aspects of LCE scored fairly highly on both the qualitative and quantitative instruments, it is worth noting that ‘Active participation’ and ‘Interaction’ scored slightly higher than other aspects. The largest difference was evident between ‘Active participation’ and ‘Power sharing’. Indeed, ‘Active participation’ scored 42% higher than ‘Power sharing’ on the closed response question, despite the latter being a key aspect mentioned in key conceptual works in the literature (Neumann, 2013; Nunan, 1988). Here, as in the meta-analysis of literature (Bremner, 2020a), it would appear that teachers placed more

importance on more practical, classroom-based aspects of learner-centeredness (as in Jones, 2007) as opposed to those that imply increased learner control (as in Nunan, 1988). This represents an emphasis on what Schweisfurth (2013) has called changes to *technique* as opposed to changes in *relationships* or *epistemology*.

The qualitative findings also highlighted certain differences between the Colombian teachers' perspectives and the definitions found in the literature. Figure 3 summarizes these key differences, by comparing the aspects that participants felt should 'definitely' be part of the definition with those aspects mentioned in academic journal articles (Bremner, 2020a). Again, the graph's aim is to visually illustrate overall tendencies and does not intend to be a direct statistical comparison.



**Figure 3. Aspects that participants felt should 'definitely' be part of the definition of LCE, compared with aspects mentioned in journal articles on language learning (Bremner, 2020a)**

Although it must be reiterated that Figure 3 does not represent a direct statistical comparison, there are some stark differences between the qualitative data and the literature in certain categories. The clearest difference is 'Formative assessment', which was mentioned in only 10% of texts on language learning, whereas 12 out of the 16 Colombian participants felt it should 'definitely' be part of the definition of LCE. There were also large differences between the scores in 'Metacognition' and 'Humanistic role', which, although based on a relatively small sample size, support the findings emerging from the quantitative survey (Bremner, 2021). These findings, in conjunction with the generally higher scores on the other aspects, would reiterate the notion that teachers would seem to embrace a more wide-ranging, encompassing definition of LCE than is evident in the literature. This may suggest that the academic literature, at least in terms of peer-reviewed journal articles, may be underrepresenting certain interpretations of LCE.

## **2) Teachers' initial 'open response' definitions are quite different to their later 'closed response' definitions**

An important point to highlight was the differences between participants' initial open response definitions and their overall scores in the closed response question. As Figure 1 demonstrated, aspects such as 'Active participation' (25%) and 'Interaction' (0%) were hardly mentioned at all in participants' initial definitions, but were nevertheless the highest scoring aspects when participants were asked to rate a selection of pre-established options (91% for 'Active participation' and 78% for 'Interaction'). Indeed, when interviewed, Jaime expressed that 'Active participation' was perhaps the most 'obvious' aspect of all, and yet this was an aspect that he did not choose to include in his initial definition. The only aspect that received broadly similar 'open' and 'closed' response scores was that of 'Adapting to needs'. Could we perhaps infer from this that 'Adapting to needs' may be considered some kind of overriding essence of learner-centered education? More research, with larger samples of teachers from a wider range of contexts, would be needed in order to further examine this possibility.

The distinctions between 'open' and 'closed' response definitions examined in this study may have implications for future qualitative research. They demonstrate that the ideas that initially come into participants' minds may not necessarily represent all the ideas they might eventually want to express. Admittedly, an argument could also be made that presenting participants with pre-established categories may have narrowed participants' visions of the topic and possibly even 'led' them into answering in a particular way. However, in the case of this particular study, the argument that participants were led towards particular responses is not particularly convincing, given that they were given ample opportunities to justify their responses through the qualitative nature of the interviews. Indeed, rather than being led towards specific answers, it could be argued that being exposed to a wider range of ideas and being invited to reflect about them in detail actually contributed towards enhancing the trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the findings. Moreover, the fact that several participants decided to change their initial scores in the deductive component of the interview (as in, for example, Rosemary's excerpt in the Methods section), indicates that participants' responses were not necessarily fixed, but rather developed as they reflected during the interview process. Therefore, a possible implication of including both initial and delayed definitions is the importance of giving participants time to reflect on their responses, especially given the arguments for increased time when inviting participants to explore complex phenomena, an important step in increasing the trustworthiness of qualitative studies (Bremner, 2020b; Sandelowski, 1999).

This point leads to an additional reflection about the differences between 'definition' and 'conceptualization'. In Bremner (2020a), I suggested that 'definitions', such as those presented in academic journal articles, tend to be somewhat brief and limited, whereas 'conceptualization' tends to involve a deeper degree of reflection around the possible elements that may form part of a term. In this study, it could be suggested that when teachers were asked to offer their initial 'open response' definitions, they may have felt compelled to provide a shorter 'definition'. However, when they were given increased time to reflect upon the multiple possible meanings of LCE, they began to engage in a much deeper process of 'conceptualization'.

Perhaps the only caveat to the aforementioned argument is that having increased time, and having access to the pre-established 10 aspects of LCE, may have unconsciously encouraged participants to think about their *practical* experiences of the effectiveness of certain approaches, as opposed to how LCE should be defined *theoretically*.

### 3) Can ‘teacher-centered’ methods be ‘learner-centered’?

Several interesting discussions ensued regarding whether a teacher who employed teacher-centered methods, in order to adapt to learner needs, should still be considered ‘learner-centered’. Overall, there remained mixed messages from the Colombian participants, which was consistent with the findings of the quantitative survey (Bremner, 2021). Araceli was the participant who felt that adapting to needs in this way should ‘definitely’ be considered learner-centered, whereas the other participants were less convinced. Here, it would seem that most participants in this study considered ‘Adapting to needs, even if this means employing teacher-centered methods’ to be more akin to a ‘learnING-centered’ approach, and not necessarily a ‘learnER-centered’ one (Brinkmann, 2019; O’Sullivan, 2004).

To some participants, it would seem to depend upon how much ‘Power sharing’ is involved. Flavio, for example, argued that if *teachers* were the people who made the ultimate decision, then ‘Adapting to needs’ would still be seen as ‘teacher-centered’, whereas if *learners* were to make the decision, this could be considered ‘learner-centered’. However, Flavio’s view is based on the assumption that ‘Power sharing’ should indeed be part of the definition of LCE, which was not always the case (as in, for example, the definitions of Felicia, Felipe, Mabel, Norberto and Pamela). As in previous research (Bremner, 2020a, Wang, 2007), this would again suggest that a more flexible approach to the conceptualization of LCE, contextually grounded and/or dependent on the interpretations of individual teachers, may be more appropriate than one-size-fits-all, standardized definitions.

## Conclusion

This qualitative study explored 16 Colombian English language teachers’ perspectives of the concept of learner-centered education. It provides a welcome addition to the conceptual literature by inviting teachers themselves to offer their interpretations of LCE, and to use the medium of qualitative interviews to develop and justify their responses. The findings largely confirm, and provide explanatory value to, the findings of previous quantitative research, suggesting that teachers view LCE as a more broad, multifaceted term than is often portrayed in the literature. As argued previously, these findings reiterate the need for future conceptualizations of LCE to incorporate a certain degree of flexibility, so that teachers, teacher educators, academics and policymakers can select the aspects that are most applicable to their own contexts. It is important to reiterate that, whatever interpretation of LCE is chosen, it is vitally important for stakeholders to clearly define which aspects they are referring to when they define LCE. Future research could explore interpretations of LCE in a wider range of countries and with larger samples, thus further developing our understandings of the way LCE is interpreted in different contexts. Indeed, it would be interesting to discover the extent to which the perspectives of the Colombian teachers in this study are similar and/or different to teachers in other contexts.

It must be recognized that a key limitation of the study was that, despite many attempts to avoid it, participants may have been answering in terms of what they felt was possible in their classrooms as opposed to what they felt LCE meant on a theoretical level. For example, participants may have believed that ‘Power sharing’ was ‘learner-centered’, but did not feel they should include ‘Power sharing’ in their definitions, given how challenging was to transfer power to their students in their Colombian classrooms. Future research could seek to explore how these methodological challenges might be reconciled, both in qualitative and quantitative research.

Furthermore, it would be fascinating to read further methodological articles which explore the differences between what participants express immediately, in their own words, and what they

express after having more time to reflect and/or after engaging with pre-established stimuli. Given that there were such considerable differences between the initial ‘open response’ definitions and later ‘closed response’ definitions, further research would help qualitative researchers reflect upon what may be lost and/or gained by these different approaches to qualitative research design.

An ELT practitioner reading this might view all of the above as simple academic nitpicking. However, increased conceptual clarity has clear practical implications as well as theoretical ones. It may be worth for English language teachers and their teaching teams to reflect upon what learner-centered education means to them and/or to their institution. Teachers, managers, and even students could reflect about what they actually mean when they mention the term ‘learner-centered’, and whether other people actually understand what they mean by it, in order to avoid ambiguities, inconsistencies and misunderstandings. Overall, as I hope to have made clear throughout my conceptual work, discussions around LCE, with the aim of enhancing classroom practices, will be much easier if stakeholders have a clearer understanding of what the term means, even if LCE looks slightly different in each individual context.

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