

Learner-Centred Approaches in English Language Teaching: A Study of Kerala's Discourse-Oriented Pedagogy Model

Mr. Gurjeet Singh¹

Gagandip Kaur²

¹Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, Desh Bhagat University, Mandi Gobindgarh

²Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, Desh Bhagat University, Mandi Gobindgarh

Abstract

English language teaching in Kerala has undergone a significant transformation through the implementation of learner-centred pedagogical practices, particularly Discourse-Oriented Pedagogy (DOP). Rooted in social constructivism and communicative language teaching, DOP seeks to develop learners' communicative competence through the construction of meaningful discourse and collaborative learning. Recent research in English Language Teaching highlights the effectiveness of learner-centred approaches in fostering learner autonomy, critical thinking, engagement, and communicative proficiency (Benson, 2021; Bremner, 2021; Thapa, 2024). This paper examines the theoretical foundations, classroom practices, practical implementation, advantages, and challenges of DOP in Kerala's English language classrooms. Drawing upon foundational theories and recent scholarship, the study argues that DOP remains a relevant and innovative pedagogical model capable of addressing contemporary language learning needs. The paper also identifies emerging opportunities for integrating technology-mediated learning and dialogic feedback practices into discourse-based instruction.

Keywords: Learner-centred pedagogy, Discourse-Oriented Pedagogy, English Language Teaching, constructivism, communicative competence, learner autonomy, Kerala.

Introduction

English has become an essential global language for communication, education, technology, and professional development. In India, English functions as a second language and plays a crucial role in academics and social mobility. From the language of the rulers and the elite, it has become a tool for the common man, evolving from a rigid language of academia into a dynamic digital language, a universal medium for global business, and an accessible tool for social empowerment. In Kerala, despite high literacy rates and educational advancement, learning English has historically faced several challenges. Traditional classroom practices largely emphasised memorisation, grammar drills, textbook-centred instruction, and examination-oriented learning. As a result, many students struggled to achieve communicative competence in English. To address these issues, educational reforms in Kerala introduced learner-centred and constructivist approaches to language teaching through KCF

2007. Formulated and implemented by the government of Kerala almost immediately after NCF 2005, it adopted social constructivism as the foundation of its pedagogic structure. The new curriculum is built upon three core pillars—critical pedagogy, issue-based learning, and social constructivism—and adopts Discourse-Oriented Pedagogy (DOP) for English instruction across all educational levels. This marked a paradigm shift in the teaching of English in classrooms of Kerala, from teacher-centric behaviourism to learner-centric social constructivism.

This paper examines learner-centred approaches in English language teaching with special reference to Kerala's Discourse-Oriented Pedagogy model. It explores the theoretical foundations, classroom practices, practical implementation, advantages, challenges, and future possibilities of DOP in an average English classroom of Kerala.

Discourse-Oriented Pedagogy

Discourse-Oriented Pedagogy is a constructivist language-teaching approach that focuses on language acquisition through connected speech and writing called discourses. The approach argues that language does not exist as isolated sounds, words, phrases or sentences, but as stories, songs, dialogues and letters. This learner-centred approach views learners as active participants in the learning process rather than as passive recipients of information. It emphasises interaction, creativity, collaboration, reflection and experiential learning as essentials for language acquisition.

Traditional classrooms are teacher-centred and rely on conventional pedagogy and lectures. Where the teacher dominates the learning process. Language classes often fail to move beyond passive learning, and memorisation and examinations take precedence over the practice of linguistic skills. In contrast, classrooms based on discourse-oriented pedagogy encourage students to participate actively in discussions, problem-solving tasks, collaborative projects, and discourse construction activities. Here, the teacher is a facilitator who guides learners in constructing knowledge through meaningful activities and social interaction. Students use language meaningfully in real-life situations instead of memorising grammar rules or isolated vocabulary. Thus, learners develop communicative competence through interaction and discourse. The different discourses include dialogue, diary entry, speech, letter, narrative, news report, description, notice, conversation, interview and so on. DOP aims to develop effective language users by pivoting from rote learning toward communicative competence. It transforms classrooms by replacing teacher-led instruction with learner participation, moving from abstract grammar rules to contextualised language use, and shifting focus from the final product to the writing process.

Theoretical Foundations of Discourse-Oriented Pedagogy

The history of Discourse-Oriented Pedagogy (DOP) can be traced back to the theoretical developments in linguistics during the 1960s and 1970s, particularly through the work of Michael Halliday, who introduced Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Halliday emphasised that language should be understood within its social and cultural context rather than as a mere collection of grammatical rules, marking a shift away from rote memorisation and traditional grammar-based teaching. During the 1980s, these ideas influenced English Language Teaching (ELT), and educators increasingly adopted approaches focused on meaningful communication and the production of complete texts instead of isolated grammar exercises. In the 1990s and 2000s, pedagogy further evolved toward learner-centred and process-oriented teaching methods that encouraged critical thinking, communicative competence, collaboration, and active participation in language creation. From the 2010s onward, DOP expanded into a more inclusive and technology-supported form of education. Contemporary applications incorporate digital tools, collaborative learning environments, and multilingual strategies such as code-switching, where learners use their mother tongue alongside English to support understanding. Initiatives such as the Roshni Project in Kerala demonstrate how DOP has adapted to bridge learning gaps and create more inclusive English language classrooms. Thus, constructivism, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and process-oriented learning formed the theoretical foundations of DOP.

1. Constructivism

Constructivism is one of the major theoretical foundations of DOP. According to constructivist theory, learning is not simply the transmission of information from teacher to student. Learners construct knowledge through interaction with their environment and experiences. The psychologist Lev Vygotsky emphasised the importance of social interaction in learning in his theory of social constructivism. His concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) explains that learners can achieve higher levels of understanding through interactions with teachers, peers, learning activities, reading materials and the environment at large. Thus, discovery learning, collaborative learning, social interaction, active learner participation, contextual learning, problem-solving, debate and scaffolding are the major learning methods of constructivism. Constructivism emphasises the careful study of the processes by which children create and develop their ideas rather than the final product. Discourse-Oriented Pedagogy strongly reflects constructivist principles, as learners engage in meaningful interaction and collaborative construction of discourse.

2. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Communicative Language Teaching, which originated in Britain in the 1960s, was a reaction towards the shortcomings of the situational approach of language teaching. It focuses on meaningful communication rather than rote memorisation of grammatical rules. The primary goal of language learning is communicative competence. CLT encourages learners to use language in authentic contexts and to participate in discussions and interactions. The learners are encouraged to express their ideas and opinions. This helps in developing fluency in the language and confidence. DOP integrates several principles of CLT by promoting meaningful communication through discourse activities.

Process-Oriented Learning

Process-oriented learning evolved in the 1960s and 70s as a reaction against the traditional product-based writing methods. It views learning as a gradual developmental process. Writing and language acquisition occur through stages such as planning, drafting, revising, redrafting, editing, and presenting. In DOP classrooms, process writing facilitates learners' systematic development of language skills.

Recent studies and DOP

Recent developments in English Language Teaching have reaffirmed the value of learner-centred pedagogies in promoting meaningful language learning. Bremner argues that learner-centredness remains one of the most influential principles in contemporary ELT because it encourages active participation, learner agency, and contextualised language use. Similarly, Benson identifies learner autonomy as a crucial factor influencing successful language acquisition in modern classrooms.

Research conducted by Chong and Reinders demonstrates that autonomous learners are more likely to engage in self-directed learning, reflective practice, and collaborative knowledge construction. These findings align closely with the objectives of Kerala's Discourse-Oriented Pedagogy, which emphasises learner participation and the creation of discourse.

Technology-enhanced language learning has also emerged as a significant area of research. Kessler highlights that digital platforms, collaborative writing tools, and online feedback mechanisms facilitate meaningful interaction and support discourse-based language learning. Likewise, Law reports that social constructivist learning environments encourage students to develop linguistic competence through collaborative tasks and authentic communication.

Recent studies further indicate that constructivist approaches improve learners' ability to apply grammatical knowledge in authentic contexts. Tazeen and Kader found that contextualised grammar

instruction leads to better writing performance and deeper language understanding than traditional rule-based instruction. A systematic review by Thapa concludes that student-centred pedagogies consistently improve engagement, motivation, critical thinking, and communicative competence among language learners.

These findings provide contemporary empirical support for the principles underlying Kerala's Discourse-Oriented Pedagogy and demonstrate its continuing relevance in twenty-first-century language education.

Kerala's Discourse-Oriented Pedagogy Model

Discourse-oriented pedagogy focuses on language acquisition by presenting language embedded in meaningful contexts or discourses that the learner can experience rather than in isolation. It engages learners in various textual genres such as stories, riddles, poems and conversations. This ensures that skill development takes place within the context of experiencing a variety of discourses and writing for a variety of purposes and audiences. The main focus of DOP is on process learning rather than on product learning. Thus, the input and the output alone do not make a discourse. One of the major features of DOP is its ability to cater to the needs of the learners at all proficiency levels – primary, secondary and higher secondary. DOP uses an 'inclusion discourse' – narrative as a thread to bind the various discourses.

1. Narrative as the inclusive discourse

Narrative is a familiar, longstanding form of teaching. Storytelling, visual, oral, and written, has always been a space for constructing identity and empathy. Storytelling is an ancient, universal human practice that originated with spoken language. It has evolved from prehistoric cave paintings (~30,000+ years ago) and oral traditions into written epics, literature, and digital media. It has historically functioned to explain natural phenomena and pass down cultural values. Stories are everywhere, and everyone participates in storytelling. It can be fables and fairy tales, or grandma stories we listen to as children, or those lessons on evolution we study in history classes. Children and grown-ups are all interested in listening to narratives. Moreover, both cognitive processes and various writing genres are fundamentally structured around narrative. Thus, it is an effective tool in sustaining learners' interests.

DOP employs narrative as the inclusive discourse in language classrooms. It serves as a thread to bind the various discourses. The discourse can be an incident, an anecdote, a story, a fairy tale, a biography, a historical account, a joke, a piece of gossip (grapevine) – anything that creates the learner's interest. One of the major features of narrative is that it capitalises on the emotional aspect

of language. A narrative or story can be retold from different perspectives. It has the potential to influence the way learners think.

2. Learner Participation

One of the major features of DOP is active learner participation. Students engage in many activities such as group discussions, group activities, role-play, and discourse construction tasks. The activities integrate all four language skills. However, a close observation of a DOP class reveals that the quality of listening/reading comprehension is radically different from that of regular comprehension in a controlled classroom situation. The importance given to the different skills follows the natural sequence: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

3. Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning is a constructivist strategy in which learners share the responsibility of learning. The common goal can be achieved only when all group members perform their duties satisfactorily. Pair work and group activities are central to DOP classrooms. Students learn from peers through interaction and cooperation. The success of narrative discourse depends on sequencing the plot. DOP classrooms utilise intentional narrative gaps to stimulate learner curiosity. These gaps are bridged as learners develop different discourses. The class is transformed into a community where students reconstruct knowledge through dialogue, debate, group discussions, role play and shared writing.

4. Contextualised Grammar Teaching

In DOP classrooms, linguistic elements like structure and vocabulary are contextualised within the broader discourse. Grammar is taught through meaningful contexts rather than isolated drills. Learners identify grammatical structures from discourse. It focuses on communicative purpose rather than rote memorisation, helping learners produce coherent discourse. This helps the learner gain practical knowledge of sentence patterns and structures in various contexts, rather than of the grammar rules. Authentic texts such as newspaper reports, speeches, interviews, comic strips, novels, poems, and memoirs are used for this purpose.

5. Process Writing

Process writing is an approach that creates texts by emphasising planning, drafting, and revising rather than just the final product. It breaks writing into manageable steps— prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing—designed to help writers organise thoughts, refine ideas, and improve clarity. In DOP, writing is treated as a developmental process involving brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, and presenting. Through various activities, the learner is provided with the necessary content,

vocabulary and structure that he can employ while engaging in writing. Editing is done at various levels. There is always an opportunity for the learner to do self-editing in a DOP classroom. Apart from that, there is peer editing and the teacher's correction through megaphoning. This helps locate errors and facilitates better use of lexical, grammatical and rhetorical aspects of language.

6. Teacher as Facilitator

In contrast to the authoritarian teacher in a traditional classroom, the teacher DOP acts as a guide and facilitator rather than an authoritarian instructor. He facilitates knowledge construction by sensitising learners on the theme around which the entire classroom activities are woven. He is a motivator and a scaffolder rather than a transmitter of knowledge. Ultimately, a DOP class succeeds when the teacher effectively sensitises learners to the political, social, economic, and moral dimensions of the issues. He is a resource person providing ideational, linguistic and technical support; at the same time, he is a co-learner and a researcher. As a democratic leader, the teacher creates a conducive learner-friendly environment in his classroom. However, he is an evaluator who helps learners towards self-correction by enabling them to locate errors and by facilitating better use of lexical, grammatical and rhetorical aspects of language. Key skills for an effective DOP teacher include strong communication, proactive classroom management, creative teaching, learner-centred methods, and a collaborative mindset. Teacher mediation is essential for the successful implementation of DOP.

7. Constructivist Learning Environment

Constructivism in discourse-oriented pedagogy considers learners as active creators of knowledge who construct by producing, analysing, and engaging with connected language. The connected language or discourses include stories, dialogues, interviews, diaries, and reports. It emphasises that learning is a social, collaborative process where students use prior knowledge and interaction to construct meaning, rather than passively receiving information. For this, authentic learning materials, real-life experiences of the learners and activities that foster critical thinking and problem-solving are used.

Practical Implementation of DOP in Kerala English Classrooms

The practical implementation of DOP follows a modular approach. It involves several stages and classroom practices such as pre-reading, reading and post-reading sessions. The pre-reading session includes an entry activity employed to sensitise learners on the theme around which the entire classroom activities are woven. Here, various learning materials and effective strategies are used to generate different perceptions on the issue discussed in the lesson.

The second session is reading. Here, students interact with the text through silent reading, loud

reading, collaborative reading, discussion, prediction, and interpretation. Teachers encourage learners to infer meanings from context. Scaffolding is done when required. Activities such as group reading, reading circles, role-play, think-pair-share, and discussion-based comprehension are used. This stage promotes collaborative meaning-making rather than passive reading. Vocabulary activities, grammar, poetic devices and other conceptual, ideational, literary and structural aspects are taught using contextual clues during reading sessions.

Every DOP lesson culminates in discourse construction. This forms the post-reading session. Learners create different forms of discourse based on the lesson. Various discourses include diary entries, dialogues, speeches, letters, interview questions, newspaper reports, story-completion, poster making, narratives, and descriptive paragraphs. The discourses are constructed both individually and in groups, so that learners can rework them and make refinements. This is further refined through peer and teacher editing. The final product is presented in class and later compiled together in a book. This process improves their composition skills and enhances their confidence.

Role of Learners in DOP Classrooms

Learners play an active role in DOP classrooms. They are expected to participate actively in class and collaborate with peers by sharing their opinions and ideas on the issues discussed. They should construct discourses, engage in problem-solving and reflect on their learning. Thus, learners become responsible for their own learning process. This promotes autonomy, confidence, and critical thinking.

Advantages and Challenges of DOP in Kerala Classrooms

Recent research supports many of the benefits observed in DOP classrooms. As students learn to use English effectively in practical, real-life situations, DOP fosters communicative competence. Discourse construction activities encourage imagination and self-expression. Their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities are enhanced as they actively analyse, interpret, and evaluate knowledge in a DOP classroom. Learner-centred environments improve motivation, engagement, and language proficiency while fostering learner autonomy and self-regulated learning. Interactive and collaborative activities create a supportive learning environment. This reduces fear and anxiety. The vocabulary and grammar embedded discourses provide the learner with meaningful learning experiences that considerably improve understanding and retention. Collaborative learning and a conducive learning environment of DOP classrooms promote teamwork and social skills. DOP accommodates learners with different abilities and learning styles. The discourse construction is a process writing activity. It helps learners improve organisation, coherence, and expression.

Technology-mediated language learning environments further strengthen participation and reflective learning through digital collaboration and feedback mechanisms.

Despite its advantages, DOP faces several challenges. Managing group activities and individual participation becomes difficult in overcrowded classrooms. Many schools still prioritise examination performance over communicative competence. Some teachers are unfamiliar with learner-centred methods and discourse-based activities. They might revert the DOP classroom to traditional ones. Teachers and parents accustomed to traditional methods may resist innovative pedagogical practices. Process writing and collaborative activities require more classroom time. Differences in language proficiency affect participation and interaction. Some schools lack adequate teaching materials, ICT facilities, and classroom infrastructure.

Suggestions for Effective Implementation

To strengthen learner-centred pedagogy and the implementation of DOP, several measures can be adopted. Regular workshops and professional development programs should be conducted to train teachers in learner-centred strategies. This can help teachers adapt the activities to suit learners' needs and classroom conditions. Group activities and peer learning should be promoted consistently. Digital tools, multimedia resources, and online platforms can support interactive learning. To do so, the school infrastructure should be improved. Schools should provide adequate classroom space, teaching aids, and technological facilities. Curriculum and assessment reforms should emphasise language use and communication skills. Activity-based assessment methods evaluating communicative competence, creativity, and participation, rather than rote memorisation, should be used.

Conclusion

In the twenty-first century, language learning requires more than grammatical accuracy. Learners need communication skills, creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking abilities.

Learner-centred approaches have brought significant changes to English language teaching by transforming classrooms into interactive and participatory learning spaces. Kerala's Discourse-Oriented Pedagogy (DOP) model represents a major educational reform that emphasizes communication, collaboration, creativity, and contextualised learning. It integrates constructivist principles and the communicative language teaching approach. Through active participation, peer interaction, process writing, and scaffolding, learners gradually develop communicative competence and confidence in using English. The integration of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills further strengthens language acquisition and promotes meaningful learning experiences.

The practical implementation of DOP in Kerala classrooms demonstrates several advantages, including enhancement of creativity, critical thinking, learner autonomy, and social interaction.

Students become active participants in the learning process rather than passive recipients of information. Teachers also play an important role as facilitators and guides, supporting learners through interactive classroom practices.

However, the implementation of learner-centred pedagogy is not without challenges. Inadequate infrastructure, lack of teacher training, large classes, and a focus on examinations continue to hinder the successful implementation of DOP in schools. Therefore, continuous teacher training, curriculum support, activity-based assessment, and technological integration are necessary for strengthening learner-centred English language teaching. With proper institutional support and innovative classroom practices, Kerala's Discourse-Oriented Pedagogy model can significantly improve English language learning outcomes among ESL learners of Kerala.

Bibliography

- Benson, P. (2021). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Bremner, N. (2021). Learner-centredness. *ELT Journal*, 75(2), 213–215. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccab002>
- Chong, S. W., & Reinders, H. (2022). Autonomy of English language learners: A scoping review of research and practice. *Language Teaching Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688221075812>
- Kessler, G. (2023). Technology-mediated language learning and teaching. *Language Learning & Technology*, 27(1), 1–15.
- Law, Y. Y. E. (2023). Fostering learner autonomy: A social-constructivist approach to designing English language teaching activities. *TESOL Journal*, 14(1), e696. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.696>
- Susanti, A., Sharif, T. I. S. T., & Masardo, A. (2025). Dialogic feedback in English language teaching (ELT): Modalities, outcomes, and research trends. *English Language Teaching Educational Journal*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.12928/eltej.v8i1.14057>
- Tazeen, A., & Kader, N. A. (2024). Beyond rote learning: Using constructivist approach to enhance grammar comprehension and application in English writing. *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.1664>
- Thapa, D. (2024). A systematic review on current research trends on student-centered pedagogies in English as a foreign language (EFL). *Journal of Educational Research and Innovation*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.3126/jeri.v4i1.75793>