Learner's Strategies, Preferences and Styles in Learning English as a Foreign Language:

A Study on the Preferences of Higher Secondary Students in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the learning strategies, preferences, and styles of Higher Secondary students in Bangladesh. For this purpose, 130 students were randomly selected from 10 Higher Secondary colleges to state their views through a questionnaire as to how they preferred learning English as a foreign language. The findings of the study revealed significant results suggesting a closer co-operation between students and teachers as to how learning activities should be arranged and practiced in the English class.

Key words: learning strategies, preferences, styles, correction of works, foreign language,

Objectives of the Study

The aim of the present study is to identify the strategies, styles and learning preferences that the higher secondary students followed while learning English as a foreign language. This study presents an approximate picture about the students' likings, disliking and preferences. As the primary sources of data are the subjects' own insights into the learning process, the focus is on the actions that the learners consciously employ to facilitate learning, and, as Oxford (1989) suggests, make it more enjoyable. These actions are both behavioural (and, therefore, directly observable) and mental (in which case they have to be accessed via student self-observation). Thus the study intends to examine the language learning preferences of the Higher Secondary students of Bangladesh. Particularly, the study seeks answers to the following questions:

- What are the learning strategies, styles and preferences those Higher Secondary students of Bangladesh employ both inside and outside the classroom to expedite learning?
- Whether their strategies, preferences and styles, contradict or correlate with other investigations in Bangladesh/South Asia and abroad.
- Whether the learners' strategies and other modes of learning significantly vary from one another in language learning.

Methodology of the Study

Subjects

For the present study, 130 students of higher secondary class have been randomly selected from 10 colleges to collect data through questionnaire (Questionnaire given in the appendix). The subjects have already been learning English as a language for 11 years. The respondents filled in

a 14-item questionnaire on various issues relating to learning English as a foreign language. The questionnaire is intended to get information from the students. The respondents were randomly selected from a big number of respondents and they were requested to express their views freely.

The 14 items that were focused in this study are as follows:

1. How do you like learning? Learning Style preferred by students.
2. Do you like learning by -----------? (Method of learning)
3. When do you want to be corrected by your teacher?
4. Do you mind if other students/peers correct your work?
5. Do you mind if the teacher sometimes asks you to correct your own work?
6. Which activities do you prefer in learning?
7. Do you feel shy while speaking with others in English?
8. Do you evaluate or assess your written or oral production?
9. Do you feel that your speaking performance varies in different situations?
10. What type of teacher do you like?
11. Do you like to use Media in leaning English?
12. Do you like learning about English culture?
13. When learning new vocabulary, do you like the following?
14. Why do you need English?

Sampling and Instrumentation

The use of questionnaires is one of the most common research methods in foreign language research, because it can produce a large amount of information about many different issues. In this particular research context, learners' methodological preferences for learning English are examined using a slightly modified questionnaire described in the reference of Nunan & Lamb, (1996). The questionnaire (after Nunan & Lamb, 1996) is modified in accordance with our settings.

In the present study, data is collected through questionnaires adapted following the model of Brindley (1984), and Nunan and Lamb (1996). The models of Gardner (1985) and Kenning (2001) are also consulted for reliability, validity and justification of framing the questionnaire. Each of the questions explores a particular FL/SL topic.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Levine (2003) describes three types of analysis – descriptive, analytical and contextual. In this present study, the **contextual method** is followed for the analysis of the data, because this method is easily understandable and timesaving.

For questions which demand responses other than Yes / No, the respondents are in most cases requested to tick one out of 4 to 5 options. The detailed analysis of the data, findings, and interpretation are presented in the following pages.

The percentage of the score for every item is calculated as follows:

Score of the item (%)   =   Total responses   x 100
                                  Number of respondents

1. How do you like learning?

SL	Option	Response
i)	individually	44%
ii)	in pairs	37%
iii)	in small groups	11%
iv)	in large group	8%

Table 1: Learning style viewed by the students

The results for this item suggest that students generally prefer to work either *individually*, 44%, or *in pairs*, 37%. On the other hand, 11% of students like learning *in small groups* while, 8% students prefer learning *in a large group*. This result of this study is supported by the study of Okan & Erdogun (2005), which reveals that 50% students prefer learning *individually*, whereas 35% students, the second highest percentage, prefer learning *in pairs*. This view also supports the study of Kavaliauskiene (2003), which discloses that 33% students prefer learning *individually*, and another 33% students have a preference in learning *in pairs*; 20% students choose to learn *in small groups;* while the rest 14% students want to learn *in large group*.

Riazi and Riasati (2007) of Shiraz University find that only 35.2% students prefer working individually, while 64.8% students prefer other modes of learning the language, such as learning in groups. Therefore, it may be right to comment that learners' choice differs significantly from one another in respect of the mode of learning.

2. Do you like learning by-----------?

SL	Option	Response	
		yes	No
a)	memorizing ?	11%	89%
b)	problem solving?	39%	61%
c)	getting information yourself?	58%	42%
d)	listening to tapes / cassettes and taking notes?	63%	37%
e)	reading and taking notes?	68%	32%
f)	repeating what you hear?	14%	86%

Table 2: Way of Learning viewed by the students

The learning preferences differ greatly among the individual learners. Major priorities in the order of importance cover the following areas: 68 % learners prefer reading and taking notes; 63% students favour listening to tapes and taking notes; 58 % getting information themselves; 39% respondents like problem-solving tasks. Other learning styles received the following percentage points: learn by memorizing 11%, and learn by repeating what one hears 16 %.

It is surprising that learning by memorization is not preferred because traditionally learning by memorization was seen to be the strong and right method for learning in traditional schools.

Okan & Erdogun (2005) in their research find that 75.7% of students prefer learning by listening and taking notes. This preference is shown by 52.2% of their teachers (p=0.01). The result of their study showed that learners did not want to adopt a totally passive role in the learning process, since they could have otherwise focused on the first two options, 'listening' or 'reading'. They found that the low percentages received for 'repeating what they hear' (32.2%) support students' reluctance to be viewed as passive learners.

Riazi and Riasati (2007) discover that 78.5% students want to learn by 'listening and taking notes'; "reading and taking notes" also receives the second highest score (67.6%). Therefore, "listening" and "reading" are the two most favourite ways of learning found in their study.

3. **When do you want to be corrected by your teacher?**

SL	Option	Response
a)	immediately, in front of everybody?	6%
b)	later, at the end of the activity?	30%
c)	later, in private?	64%

Table 3: Correction of works viewed by the students

The issue of correction seems to bother learners. It is found that 64% respondents prefer to be corrected **later, in private**, and 30% students like to be corrected by the teacher **later, at the end of the activity immediately, in front of every one**; on the other hand. 6 % students would not mind to be corrected **immediately, in front of every one**. It is understood from the findings that students feel shy if their weakness is shown before other students; on the other hand they feel humiliated if they are corrected before their fellow mates. Teachers have to be sure that they are using correction positively to support learning.

Correction is a very subtle matter. Gentle re-formulation is often useful, when the student has a chance of correcting himself in passing. The best time to correct is as 'late as possible'. Moreover, teachers have the problem of 'dominating students', and therefore, such correction can be counter-productive. Correction is done appropriately if it is supportive, offers insights and does not interrupt language learning.

The study of Užpaliene and Kavaliauskiene (2005) among the secondary students in Lithuania reveals that students do not like to be humiliated being corrected publicly. Their study discovers that 80% learners prefer to be corrected later, in private.

Ancker (2000) surveyed answers to the question 'Should teachers correct every error students make when using English?' The survey covered responses from teachers, teacher trainees and students in 15 countries. 25% (out of 802) of teachers and 76% (out of 143) of students support this viewpoint, while 75% of teachers and 24% of students, respectively, are against such correction.

My study supports the investigation of Ismaili (2003) among the secondary students in Malaysia. His study reveals that students do not like to be humiliated being corrected in front of every one. His study discovers that 80% learners prefer to be corrected later, in private.

4. **Do you mind if other students/peers correct your work?**

SL	Option	Response
i)	yes	32%
ii)	no	68 %

Table 4: Peers Correction of works viewed by the students

As can be observed in the table, a significant number, 68 % students would not mind having their written work corrected by other students, though 32% may not prefer this. Teachers have to be sure that they are using correction positively to support learning**.**

In Stapa's (2003) research on learners' perceptions on self-/peer-correction, only 36% of learners would not mind having their written work corrected by peers, while a vast majority, 64% are against peer-correction. . Actually, in many cases students feel humiliated to be corrected by some one in a similar position.

Gupta & Gupta (2006) investigated the preferences of under graduate students in India about the role of peers in correcting each other's work, and found that 66% students appreciated correction by the peer group. Generally speaking, self-correction of written work is easier for students than self-correction of oral presentations, because the former is less threatening to learners and the latter requires note taking due to shorter memory spans of retaining utterances. Kavaliauskiene (2003) finds that 79% of respondents claim that teacher's correction is necessary and 84% think it is effective; 33% of learners agree that self-correction is necessary and 77% thinks that it is effective; 30% of students agree that self-correction implies their independence. Note that developing language awareness is an important outcome of self-correction;

Stapa (2003), in his research on perceptions on self- and peer-correction among the 352 English for specific purposes (ESP) students in Belgium, discovered that only 36% of learners would not mind having their written work corrected by peers, while a vast majority of 64% are against

peer-correction. As far as self-correction is concerned, 23% of respondents would not mind correcting their own work, while 77% would mind rectifying their own mistakes.

5. Do you mind if the teacher sometimes asks you to correct your own work?

SL	Option	Response
i)	Yes	34 %
ii)	No	66%

Table 5: Self-correction of works viewed by the students

Regarding self-correction of own work, large number of students indicates that they would gladly correct themselves without external intervention, while some students disagree with them. This statistics also supports the study of Gupta & Gupta (2006), which revealed that 71% students prefer their work corrected by themselves.

6.   Which activities do you prefer in learning?

SL	Option	Response(√)	
		Yes	No
a)	language games	65%	35%
b)	role play	17%	83%
c)	music/song	37%	63%
e)	talking with and listening to other students	68%	32%
f)	memorizing conversations/dialogues	25%	75%
g)	Story telling	27%	73%

Table 6: Learning Activities

Learners learning activities preferences are ranked in order of percentage: talking with and listening to peers 68%; language games 65%; music/song 37% and story telling 27% students. The least liked activities include role-plays (17%); memorizing dialogues/conversations (25%).

The outstanding point about these results is that students think that person to person (student-to-student) interaction is most advantageous among the options cited here; this is the highest chosen activity, because learners can interact with each other and, thus, share experience and solve difficulties while communicating in a target language.

7.   Do you feel shy while speaking with others in English?

SL	Option	Response
i)	yes	52%
ii)	no	38%
iii)	Sometimes	10%

Table 7: Personality style viewed by the students

52% learners feel shy of speaking English with others; but 38% students are active in language behaviour and practice.

8. **Do you evaluate or assess your written or oral production?**

SL	Option	Response
i)	no	52%
ii)	yes	38%
iii)	Sometimes	10%

Table 8: Self-assessment as viewed by the students

Self-evaluation is an effective learning tool for the learners, yet the students do not usually practice it during the learning process. The above table shows that 52% students admit of not evaluating their oral or written production themselves, though 38% of the respondents claim practicing this; on the other hand, 10% students disclose that they do it but not always.

Evidently, students are not usually aware of the importance of self-evaluation in learning. Therefore, they have to depend on the formal evaluation system, such as examination or interview. Our findings in this study contradict the findings of Riazi and Riasati (2007). Their study reveals that most of the students (91.3%) evaluate themselves and their knowledge, based on their performance in authentic communication. But the present study directly supports the findings of Stapa (2003), which discovers that students do not like to evaluate themselves, rather they show preference for being assessed by the teachers formally.

9. **Do you feel that your speaking performance varies in different situations?**

SL	Option	Response			
		very good	good	weak	very weak
i)	with the teachers	27%	34%	29	10
ii)	with peer groups	58%	35%	5%	2 %
iii)	with parents or family members	25%	32%	40%	3%
iv)	in authentic situation (shopping, railway station, etc)	42%	36%	26%	14%

Table 9: Level of performance as viewed by the students

The present study reveals that 58% students suggest that their performance is very good while speaking with peers. On the other hand, 35% students confirm of performing well with peers. While speaking in authentic situations 42% students claim that their performance is very good and 36% learners term their performance good. However, 35% feels that their performance is weak while speaking with the parents and family members, though 32% students feel that their performance is good in family environment.

10. What type of teacher do you like?

SL	Option	Response
a)	friendly and informal	41%
b)	friendly but formal	65%
c)	friendly and sympathetic	90%
e)	formal and sympathetic	75%
f)	formal and strict	35%
g)	humorous and informal	24%

Table 10: Liking about teachers by the students

The teacher should have patience, confidence, imagination, enthusiasm, humor and creativity. He/She should be friendly, sympathetic and on good terms with the students, and have an affirmative attitude towards the students and encourage them, when necessary. The finding of this study discloses that 90% learners like friendly and sympathetic teachers; whereas 75% learners prefer formal and sympathetic teachers; another 65% learners have a preference for friendly but formal teachers. Students, by 41%, prefer friendly and informal teachers and most of the students dislike humorous and informal teachers.

11. Do you like to use Media in leaning English?

SL	Option	Response	
		Yes	No
a)	using television in leaning English	93%	7%
b)	using video films in leaning English	98 %	2%
c)	using films in leaning English	78%	22%
e)	using tape recorder in leaning English	61%	39%
f)	using radio in leaning English	55%	45%

Table 11: Importance of using media as viewed by the students

Most of the learners prefer learning through audio and audio visual aids. Television, videos and films are the most popular media with language learners. 93% students prefer television as an important tool for learning English; 98% learners accept video films; 78% students also think that films can be used for learning English. Comparatively, fewer students (61%) choose tape recorders, while 55% choose radio as the teaching aid. According to Celce-Murcia (2001), the high choice of the audio or video aids by the learners may be the fact that such media motivate students by bringing a slice of real life into the classroom and by presenting language in its more complete communicative context. Another reason may be the fact that students like to see what

they hear, and such media are more vivid and attention catching than radio or tapes. Pande (2006) finds 83.9% students prefer television and videos.

12. Do you like learning about English culture?

SL	Option	Response
i)	yes	25%
ii)	no	75 %

Table 12: Learning English culture as viewed by the students

It is observed from the table above that most of the students (75%) believe that culture learning is not a must for English language learning, which indirectly emphasizes the view and involvement of real life situations in English speaking countries. These students seem to prefer that language and its subject matter should be related to their own day-to-day activities, and not to the life and activities found in native English speaking countries. The textbook *English for Today* for HSC class is written based on communicative views of language learning. Learners' native culture is used for language practice. Lessons revolve around historical, social, cultural, economic and political activities of Bangladesh. The results indicate that the curriculum policy of Bangladesh directly reflects the preferences of the learners.

The findings directly contradict the findings of Riazi and Riasati (2007). Their study finds that 71.7% students believe that culture and language are interwoven; they think learners should learn about foreign language culture for successful language acquisition. But Rabindra (2006), in his research among the Undergraduate Tamil speaking students in Tamil Nadu State of India, finds that 41% students advocate in favour of 'Learning about foreign culture' while, 59% students directly oppose learning the foreign culture in learning English as a foreign language.

To communicate effectively, many learners do not feel the need to acquire foreign language cultural competence; this acquisition appears as a burden if foreign cultures are "imposed" on the learners; this results in some resistance to English language learning. English is taught in Bangladesh as a foreign language, and as lingua franca or common language. The goal in learning English language is to seek skills in communicating with diverse nations worldwide, not merely with the speakers of English speaking countries. So, learning English culture is no more a necessary phenomenon in global context.

13. When learning new vocabulary, do you like the following?

SL	Option	Response	
		Yes (%)	No (%)
i)	thinking of relationships between known and new	71%	29%
ii)	using new words in a sentence	40%	60%
iii)	saying or writing words several times	24%	76%

iv)	avoiding verbatim translation	31%	69%
v)	guessing the unknown	74%	26%

Table 13: Learning English vocabulary as viewed by the students

The above statistics reflects that 74% learners prefer "Guessing the meaning of unknown words" as the most emphasized vocabulary learning strategy in the classroom. 71% students favour thinking of relationships between the known and the new as the important tool of learning vocabulary. This finding positively correlates with the study of Riazi and Riasati (2007), which discloses that 78.5% students express their preference towards guessing the meaning of unknown words. Nation (2001) suggests that whenever a guessable word occurs in a reading text the teacher should train the learners in guessing from the context. Thus, a reasonable explanation might be drawn that teachers should continuously motivate students to guess the unknown words and to infer meaning from context rather than heavily rely on dictionary use.

14. Why do you need English?

SL	Option	Response
a)	passing examination	85%
b)	understanding teacher's lecture	22%
c)	using English with others	74%
e)	reading English books and newspaper	44%
f)	getting good job	81%
g)	using internet	6%
h)	watching TV programmes	37%
i)	writing letters	55%

Table 14: Need for English viewed by the students

Students' attitude towards English and their realization of why they need English determine how they will learn English. In response to the question "Why do you need English?" most of the students, 85 %, think that they need English to pass the examinations; 81% students state that they need English to get good jobs. Large numbers of students (74%) say that they need English to communicate with others. 55% students say that they need English for writing letters; 44 % students say that they need English to read books and English newspapers; 37% students report that they need English for watching television programmes. Only 22 % students reported that they needed English to understand the teachers' lecture. This implies that teachers sometimes use English in the class. The above statistics shows that most of the students study English because it is a curricular subject, and they have to study it to pass the examinations. However, the number of students who recognize the need for English in practical life is not small either.

Conclusion

Effective language teaching and learning can only be achieved when teachers are aware of their learners' needs, capabilities, potentials, and preferences. In this study, we have dealt with the strategies, preferences and likings of a cross section of students from Bangladesh. Here, we have observed that students have their own choice in the methodology and mode of learning English. Types of learning that emphasize receptive skills only are not appealing to students. They did not like to be sitting passively in classrooms, but to be actively engaged in classroom practices. Students' tendency toward working individually and/or in pairs is well perceived in this study. The modes "listening" and "reading" are the two most favourite ways of learning found in the study. The issue of correction seems to bother learners. It is found that respondents prefer to be corrected later, in private contexts. Students did not like to be corrected immediately, in front of every one. The learners also appreciate peer correction and self-correction.

"Talking with and listening to other students" receive the highest attention of the students. An outstanding point is that students think that person-to-person (student-to-student) interaction is most useful among the options given to them. The study finds that a huge percentage of students feels shy in speaking English in real life situation and their level of performance vary person to person. In terms of media, students would like to see more television programs and videos and films, which make language learning more exciting and meaningful. "Learning about native English culture represented by the language" is extremely disliked by students as English culture is seen to be foreign culture. Students' most favoured vocabulary learning strategies are guessing the meaning of unknown words, not looking them up in dictionary and thinking of relationships between known and new vocabulary. It is found that most of the students study English because it is a required curricular subject, and that they have to study it to pass the examinations. However, a good number of students realize the actual need for English in practical life.

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