PROMOTING ENGLISH TEACHING - A STUDY ON STUDENTS' LANGUAGE LEARNING PREDILECTIONS IN BANGLADESH

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Promoting English Teaching -

A Study on Students' Language Learning Predilections in Bangladesh

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Abstract

For effective language learning and teaching, both learner-skills and learner-assumptions should be given due attention. In promoting this idea, students should be provided with the opportunity to clarify and assess their preferences, particularly in reference to definition of objectives in general and awareness of strategies in learning. Moved with the conviction that learners and learners' preferences are of crucial importance in the development of learner autonomy, we asked 230 students of the same University, to state their views as to how they prefer learning English. As a further step, 23 teachers working at the same university with the same students were also asked to express their views regarding the extent of their awareness of their students' learning preferences. The data obtained reveal significant results suggesting a need for a closer co-operation between students and teachers as to how learning activities should be arranged and implemented in the classroom.

Introduction

Many EL teachers experience student resistance when they introduce an instructional activity in the classroom. Some students want more opportunities to participate in free conversation, expressing their wish towards a more communicatively oriented approach. On the other hand, there are those who would prefer more emphasis on grammar teaching. We believe that the teacher, in making decisions regarding the type of activities to conduct in a language classroom, should take into account such learner diversities. In this respect, Corder states:

In the end successful language "teaching-learning" is going to be dependent upon the willing co-operation of the participants in the interaction and an agreement between them as to the goals of their interaction. Co-operation cannot be imposed but must be negotiated (1977, p. 13).

We would like to reiterate the last sentence in the quotation above: "Co-operation cannot be imposed but must be negotiated." If we truly believe that considering subjective preferences felt by the learner is crucial for effective language learning, then some kind of negotiation is needed between the participants, in our case, teachers and students. Information has to be exchanged about roles and expectations, both teachers' and learners' awareness of each other's needs and resources has to be raised and compromises have to be reached between

what learners expect and want and what the teacher feels he/she can and ought to provide (Brindley, 1989, p. 73). [-1-]

Although many teachers acknowledge the need to understand the ways in which learners differ in terms of needs and preferences, they may not consult learners in conducting language activities. The basis for such reluctance to cooperate may be that learners are not generally regarded capable of expressing what they want or need to learn and how they want to learn it. Besides, it is argued by many teachers, quite rightly too, that in some societies, social roles of teachers and learners are so rigidly drawn that expecting learners to participate in decision-making in the classroom may not be viewed as appropriate.

We agree such a consultation-negotiation approach will inevitably involve a change in the power structure in the classroom. That is especially true in Turkey, where a majority of learners and teachers wish to continue to play the role of "pupil-acquirer of knowledge" and "teacher-transmitter of knowledge," to use Stevick's (1976) terms. Such a process of change surely requires sharing information about each other's perceptions of classroom aims and events, and a compromise on actual needs and preferences.

Learners' preferences have been emphasized in some research. Reid (1987), for example, based on survey data, distinguished four perceptual learning modalities:

1. Visual learning (for example, reading and studying charts);
2. Auditory learning (for example, listening to lectures or audio tapes);
3. Kinesthetic learning (involving physical responses); and
4. Tactile learning (hands-on learning, as in building models).

He then administered a questionnaire to 1,388 students of varying language backgrounds to investigate their preferred modalities. This revealed that the learners' preferences often differed significantly from those of native speakers of American English. They showed a general preference for kinesthetic and tactile learning styles, and for individual as opposed to group learning.

In another survey, Willing (1987) investigated the learning styles of 517 adult ESL learners in Australia. Based on their responses to a 30-item questionnaire, willing sought to identify how differences in cognitive learning styles affected learners' preferences in six different areas:

1. Predilections for particular kinds of classroom activities;
2. Predilections for particular types of teacher behavior;
3. Predilections for particular grouping arrangements;
4. Predilections for particular aspects of language which need emphasis;
5. Predilections for particular sensory modes, such as visual, auditory, or tactile learning; and
6. Predilections for particular modes of learning on one's own outside class.

It was found that differences in cognitive styles affected learners' preferences for particular approaches to learning. For example, concrete learners tended to choose the following:

- In class, I like to learn by games.
- I like to learn English by working in pairs.

Learners with analytical learning styles, however, reported the following preferences:

- I like to study grammar.
- I like the teacher to let me find my mistakes. [-2-]

Although Richards and Lockhart (1994) argue that such information can prove to be significant as to whether both teachers and learners approach learning in the same way, they still oppose the idea of putting "learners into boxes labeled according to cognitive styles" (pp. 62-63). Nunan (1989) points out that accommodating learners' needs and preferences is vital in designing a learner-centered curriculum. Such importance given to students' feelings has also been stressed in Barkhuizen's (1998) study, in which he reports an investigation of high school ESL learners' perceptions of the language teaching-learning activities presented in their classes. The outcome of such investigation surprised the teachers in that perceptions of teachers and students differed greatly from each other. Block (1994, 1996), in this respect, states that a harmony between students and teachers' aims regarding task assignment and performance must be maintained. In line with the views of the researchers mentioned above, this study also aims to contribute to the literature in this field.

The Study

Subjects

The subjects who participated in this research are 230 ELT students (158 female; 72 male) and 23 instructors (01 female; 22 male) teaching in Southern University. The students ranged between 18 - 25 years of age; teachers were between 25 and 45.

Questionnaire

The data for this study were collected through a 13-item questionnaire, adapted from Brindley (1984). The questionnaire had two versions; Version 1 was designed for students, and Version 2 for teachers. Apart from addressing and reference conventions, the versions do not differ significantly. Only items 3 and 4 were not included in the teachers' version, because they were relevant to students only.

Each item in the questionnaire explores a particular L2 topic. However, they can be categorized into three major classes: Learning, Error Correction, and Assessment and/or Evaluation. The Learning class is divided into two subcategories: Course Content, and Non-course Content. While Course Content includes strategies for learning through the basic four skills, learning and expanding vocabulary, making use of audio-visual aids, and general L2 improvement, the Non-content subcategory looks to individual preferences in actualizing the

Course Content subcategory. Here we ask whether students benefit from working in groups, pairs, or individually, and if/how they allocate and utilize time for homework, inside and/or outside classroom.

Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using the SPSS statistical package. A chi-square frequency analysis was carried out in order to define significance of dispersion of the yes/no choices ($p < 0.05$). Additionally, a t-test was also conducted to observe if there was a correlation between teachers' and students' responses ($p > 0.05$).

Results concerning each item in the questionnaire will be presented in a tabular form. In the columns, Items stands for the numeric values of the questionnaire items; Opts, options for each item; Yes, positive responses elicited from either students or teachers; No, negative responses elicited from either students or teachers; and %, responses expressed as a percentage. [-3-]

Presented here are the results for each item, beginning with Item 1. In the students' version, we asked students if they were satisfied with their overall achievement in English, and in the teachers' version, whether they were pleased with their students' achievement in English.

Table 1: Satisfaction with Achievement

Item 1	Students					Teachers				
Options	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq
(1) Are you satisfied with your achievement in English?	66	28.7	164	71.3	0.00	7	30.4	16	69.6	0.06

As shown, 71.3% of the students replied negatively, and a similar result, 69.6%, was reported by the instructors. Thus, both students and teachers are aware of students' dissatisfaction with their achievement in English ($p=0.86$).

With Item 2, being one of the Non-course Content items, students were asked to express whether they preferred working individually, or in any other way, and whether their instructors were in fact aware of that. Results for this item are presented in the table below:

Table 2: Working Styles

Item 2	Students					Teachers				
Options	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq
(1) Individually	139	60.4	91	39.6	0.02	17	73.9	6	26.1	0.02
(2) In pairs	118	51.3	112	8.7	0.69	13	56.5	10	43.5	0.53

(3) In small groups	99	43.0	131	57.0	0.03	10	43.5	13	56.5	0.53
(4) In one large group	24	10.4	206	89.6	0.00	3	13.0	20	87.0	0.00
(5) Other	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.00	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.00

The results for this item suggest that students generally prefer to work either individually, 60.4%, or in pairs, 51.3%. Similarly, 73.9% of teachers believe that students prefer working individually (p=0.20), and 56.5% in pairs (p=0.63). This correlation indicates teacher awareness of students' preference regarding in-class learning. It is obvious that students do not like working in large groups, and their teachers are aware of that. This is a clear message to the teacher that students feel more comfortable, productive and relaxed by working individually or in pairs, where their voices would be heard, and views listened to and valued. For Item 3, Learners seem to be divided on the issue of homework. With Item 3, we asked learners if they wanted work assigned as an outside classroom activity. The results can be observed in the table below: [-4-

Table 3: Preference for Homework

Item 3	Students				
Options	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq
(1) Do you want homework?	75	32.6	155	67.4	0.00

As can be seen, only 32.6% of the learners believed that some sort of outside classroom activity would be helpful to their learning, while 67.4% did not hold this belief.

With Item 4, we try to see how students would like to utilize the time they allocate for homework. Their options are (1) preparing for the next class, (2) reviewing the day's work, and (3) other. The results received for this item are illustrated in the table below:

Table 4: Time Allocation for Homework

Item 4	Students				
Options	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq
(1) Preparing for the next class	131	57.0	99	43.0	0.03
(2) Reviewing the day's work	130	56.5	100	43.5	0.04
(3) Other	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.00

By 57.0%, students give priority to Option (1), that is, preparing for the next class session. 56.5% would like to utilize this time reviewing the day's work were. Learners may usually be inclined to finish a task in the classroom, and spend their outside-classroom time working on new topics. Assignments concerning future topics, with new insights and views added seem to appeal more to students.

Moreover, when this issue involves native speakers in the process, it becomes more attractive and appealing. A rather wide-spread belief among learners is that outside-classroom interaction and communication with other (native) speakers contribute greatly to their L2 competence and performance.

Table 5: Learning Inside/Outside Classroom

Item 5	Students					Teachers				
Options	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq
(1) Spend all your learning time in the classroom	40	17.4	190	82.6	0.00	8	34.8	15	65.2	0.14
(2) Spend some time in the classroom and some time practicing your English with people outside	197	85.7	33	14.3	0.00	15	65.2	8	34.8	0.14
(3) other	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.00	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.00

[-5-]

Students, by 85.0%, expressed their attitude towards a non-classroom-centered learning. The results received by teachers (65.2) display a significant correlation with those of students, although the t-test value indicates a statistically insignificant result: p=0.01. Teachers' awareness of learner preference is heartening, since now they can work on ways that would enable learners to utilize outside-class time most efficiently.

With Item 6, we asked whether students liked learning by (1) listening, (2) reading, (3) repeating what they hear, (4) listening and taking notes, (5) copying from the board, and (6) making summaries. The results for this item are presented in the table below:

Table 6: Ways of Learning

Item 6	Students					Teachers				
Options	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq
(1) Listening	125	54.3	105	45.7	0.18	15	65.2	8	34.8	0.14
(2) Reading	131	57.0	99	43.0	0.03	8	34.8	15	65.2	0.14
(3) Copying from the board	74	32.2	156	67.8	0.00	12	52.2	11	47.8	0.83
(4) Listening and taking notes	174	75.7	56	24.3	0.00	12	52.2	11	47.8	0.83
(5) Reading and making notes	131	57.0	99	43.0	0.03	9	39.1	14	60.9	0.29
(6) Repeating what you hear	82	35.7	148	64.3	0.00	6	26.1	17	73.9	0.02
(7) Making summaries	102	44.3	128	55.7	0.08	2	8.7	21	91.3	0.00

| (8) Other | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 0.00 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 0.00 |

75.7% of students prefer learning by listening and taking notes. This preference is known by 52.2% of their teachers (p=0.01). The result shows that learners do 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'. Low percentages received for two other activities, 'copying from the board' (35.7%) and 'repeating what they hear' (32.2%) support students' reluctance to be viewed as passive learners. Making summaries was preferred by 44.3% of students. Teachers' response to this was only 8.7%, however. One-directional instruction, i.e., from teacher to student is not the preferred mode for students.

Vocabulary learning is a complicated task, though many may perceive it as simple. The learner has to perform several tasks when learning a new word: spelling, pronunciation, stress, grammatical class, semantic category, in combination with other semantic and grammatical elements in the sentence, and possible contextual occurrence in various situations. Thus, a language learner, attempting to learn a word, may overlook these characteristics of the word, and remain content with one or two. With Item 7, we wanted to find out as to how learners would like to learn new vocabulary. The options are: "by using the word in a sentence," "thinking of relationship between known and new," "saying or writing the word several times," "guessing the unknown," and "reading with no dictionary help." Results received for this item can be observed below: [-6-]

Table 7: Vocabulary Learning

Item 7	Students					Teachers				
Options	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq
(1) Using new words in a sentence	102	44.3	128	55.7	0.00	13	56.5	10	43.5	0.53
(2) Thinking of relationships between known and new	155	67.4	75	32.6	0.00	13	56.5	10	43.5	0.53
(3) Saying or writing words several times	58	25.2	172	74.8	0.00	3	13.0	20	87.0	0.00
(4) Avoiding verbatim translation	64	27.8	166	72.2	0.00	5	21.7	18	78.3	0.00
(5) Guessing the unknown	140	60.9	90	39.1	0.00	14	60.9	9	39.1	0.00
(6) Reading without looking up words	77	33.5	153	66.5	0.00	5	21.7	18	78.3	0.00
(7) Other	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.00	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.00

Establishing a semantic relation with other words received the highest percentage, 67.4%. Teachers' responses for this option, 56.5%, show close correlation to those of students' (p=0.29).

"Guessing the unknown" is another option which received rather high percentages from both students and teachers: 60.9% for both (p=1.0). A mini protocol conducted with teachers on this topic revealed that "guessing the unknown" is the most emphasized vocabulary learning strategy in the classroom. Thus, a plausible explanation might be that teachers continuously motivate students to infer meaning from context rather than heavily rely on dictionary use.

As in any other field, errors in language teaching, learning, perception and production are inescapable. What is important though is coping with them in such a way that they do not frustrate, inhibit and/or discourage language learners. With Item 8, we asked learners as to how they would prefer to be corrected by their instructors. Results concerning this item are cited in the table below:

Table 8: Error Correction

Item 8	Students					Teachers				
Options	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq
(1) Immediately, in front of everyone	68	29.6	162	70.4	0.00	3	13.0	20	87.0	0.00
(2) Later, at the end of the activity, in front of everyone	68	29.6	162	70.4	0.00	6	26.1	17	73.9	0.02
(3) Later, in private	113	49.1	117	50.9	0.79	12	52.2	11	47.8	0.83
(4) Other	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.00	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.00

As is shown, 49.1% of students would like to be corrected by their instructors in private. And teachers, by 52.2%, are aware of this preference (p=0.78). However, 59.2% of students do not mind having their instructors correct them publicly. Our belief is that error correction, made immediately, or later, does not have much impact on learners' L2 competence and performance, as do manner, approach and attitude of the teacher during the error correction process. To reiterate, the approach of the teacher is of crucial value here.

Item 9 is also related to error correction. Here, students were asked whether (1) they would mind if corrected by other students, or (2) asked to correct themselves. In the table below, we cite the results about this item: [-7-]

Table 9: Peer Correction

Item 9	Students					Teachers				
Options	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq
(1) Do you mind if other students sometimes correct your written work	81	35.2	149	64.8	0.00	8	34.8	15	65.2	0.14
(2) Do you mind if the teacher sometimes asks you to correct your own	103	44.8	127	55.2	0.11	1	4.3	22	95.7	0.00

work												

As can be observed here, a significant number of students would not mind having their written work corrected by other students (64.8%). Teachers also, by 65.2%, render a correlational percentage here (p=0.96). Regarding correcting their own work, students, by 55.2%, indicated that they would gladly correct themselves with no external intervention, and teachers, by a rather high percentage (95.7%), shared this view with their students.

With Item 10, we asked learners whether they like learning from (1) television/video/films, (2) radio, (3) tapes/cassettes, (4) written material, (5) the blackboard, or (6) pictures/posters. The results received for this item are given in the table below:

Table 10: Media Preference

Item 10	Students					Teachers				
Options	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq
(1) Television/video/films	193	83.9	37	16.1	0.00	19	82.6	4	17.4	0.00
(2) Radio	106	46.1	124	53.9	0.23	9	39.1	14	60.9	0.29
(3) Tapes/cassettes	120	52.2	110	47.8	0.51	14	60.9	9	39.1	0.29
(4) Written material	178	77.4	52	22.6	0.00	15	65.2	8	34.8	0.14
(5) The blackboard	125	54.3	105	45.7	0.18	15	65.2	8	34.8	0.14
(6) Pictures/posters	103	44.8	127	55.2	0.11	7	30.4	16	69.6	0.06
(7) Other	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.00	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.00

Television and video, being powerful media, receive a high percentage of preference (83.9% from students, and 82.6% from teachers). The striking resemblance of percentages is well supported by the statistical t-test value: p=0.87. We can observe that Option 4, 'learning from written material', also received relatively similar percentage of preference: 77.4% from students, and 65.2% from teachers (p=0.19).

Item 11 delves into what learners find very useful in the classroom: (1) role play (2) language games, (3) songs, (4) talking with and listening to other students, (5) memorizing conversations/dialogues, (6) getting information from guest speakers, (7) getting information from planned visits, (8) writing a learning diary, and (9) learning about culture. Pertaining results are illustrated in the table below: [-8-]

Table 11: Learning Activities

Item 11	Students					Teachers				
Options	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq

	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq
(1) Role play	92	40.0	138	60.0	0.00	12	52.2	11	47.8	0.83
(2) Language games	45	19.6	185	80.4	0.00	12	52.2	11	47.8	0.83
(3) Songs	69	30.0	161	70.0	0.00	10	43.5	13	56.5	0.53
(4) Talking with and listening to other students	187	81.3	43	18.7	0.00	18	78.3	5	21.7	0.00
(5) Memorizing conversations/dialogues	43	18.7	187	81.3	0.00	3	13.0	20	87.0	0.00
(6) Getting information from guest speakers;	58	25.2	172	74.8	0.00	6	26.1	17	73.9	0.02
(7) Getting information from planned visits	41	17.8	189	82.2	0.00	2	8.7	21	91.3	0.00
(8) Writing a learning diary	41	17.8	189	82.2	0.00	8	34.8	15	65.2	0.14
(9) Learning about culture	117	50.9	113	49.1	0.79	17	73.9	6	26.1	0.02

The striking point about these results is that students believe that student-to-student interaction is most beneficial among the options cited here. Students express this belief by 81.3%. Teachers, by 78.3%, are aware of such a preference, and provide situations, which lead to student-student activities. The correlation between the two groups is strongly supported by the carried out t-test analysis: p=0.72.

'Learning about culture' also received high percentages from both students and teachers (50.9% and 73.9% respectively). Although the statistical analysis renders an insignificant correlation between the two groups (p=0.03), still slightly more than half of the students and a great majority of the teachers believe that culture and language are embedded, and should be dealt with as such.

With Item 12, we asked about assessments: how would learners like to develop an idea about their language competence and performance. Their choices were: (1) through written tasks set by the teacher, or (2) ability to use the language they have learnt in real-life situations. Results are presented in the table below:

Table 12: Assessment of Language Performance

Item 12	Students					Teachers				
Options	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq
(1) Written tasks set by the teacher	98	42.6	132	57.4	0.02	12	52.2	11	47.8	0.83
(2) Using the language you have learnt in real-life situations	212	92.2	18	7.8	0.00	20	87.0	3	13.0	0.00
(3) Other	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.00	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.00

An overwhelming majority (92.2%) states that they are capable of telling whether they are doing well or badly in authentic communications, and a significant number of teachers 87.0% believe that their students usually assess themselves based on their L2 performance in such situations. Responses of the two groups display a statistically significant result: p=0.38. [-9-] Teachers can and should indeed occasionally refer to students' opinion about their performance, and ask for recommendations in order to create better learning situations. Such 'non-grading' reference to students' views may yield some outstanding results guiding teachers in many ways: material development, presentation, teacher-student interaction, etc.

The satisfaction learners get from their L2 performance varies from student to student. Some are after high marks; some after command of L2; and some after both. With Item 13, we asked learners if they get a sense of satisfaction from (1) having their work graded, (2) being told that they have made progress, or (3) feeling more confident in situations which they found difficult before. The results received are given in the table below:

Table 13: Expression of Satisfaction in Progress

Item 13	Students					Teachers				
Options	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq	Yes	%	No	%	Chi-sq
(1) Having your work graded;	128	55.7	102	44.3	0.08	13	56.5	10	43.5	0.53
(2) Being told that you have made progress	145	63.0	85	37.0	0.00	21	91.3	2	8.7	0.00
(3) Feeling more confident in situations that you found difficult before	190	82.6	40	17.4	0.00	20	87.0	3	13.0	0.00
(4) Other	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.00	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.00

Students, at 82.6%, feel satisfied in seeing themselves performing confidently in situations where they would feel less confident before. Thus, high grades fall short in giving learners genuine satisfaction. Teachers, by 87.0%, share this view with their students (p=0.59). However, by 91.3%, the same teachers feel that learners would like to be told they have made good progress. However, students' responses to this particular option (63.0%) are far lower than the teachers'. The difference in both views is illustrated by the t-test result: p=0.00.

Findings and Conclusions

The findings obtained from this research provide some significant value, suggesting that:

- Students' tendency toward working individually and/or in pairs is well perceived by teachers.
- A significant number of students expressed their views in favour of more outside-classroom activities that would help them gain proficiency in English; teachers' responses seem to correlate with these views.

- Types of learning that focus merely on receptive skills do not appeal to students; there is a significant tendency among learners towards class content that observes both receptive and productive skills emphasized equally.
- Vocabulary learning for students is not a writing activity. The most significant way of mastering new words is in fact 'thinking of relationships between known and new' and 'guessing the unknown from context'.
- Being corrected by either the teacher or other students does not seem to bother students.
- In classroom sessions, students would like to see more instructive television programmes shown to them, rather than extensive use of blackboard or tape recorders.
- Finally, students expressed views that they would only feel satisfied with their language proficiency level when they see themselves involved and actively functioning in English. External judgment regarding their FL competence and performance does not seem to be that realistic and appealing to them. [-10-]

Effective language teaching and learning can only be achieved when teachers are aware of their learners' needs, capabilities, potentials, and preferences in meeting these needs. In this study, we have only dealt with the preferences. Here, we have observed that students' preferences do indeed correlate with those of teachers in many instances. The results obtained here call for a step forward towards a teacher-student co-operation in designing syllabuses, doing weekly course planning, and classroom management.

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