

Learning Preferences of Saudi University Students

with Native English Speaking Teachers

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Abstract

Like many countries building up human and technological resources, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has embarked on the goal of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) to its citizens. One goal for the KSA Ministry of Education is increasing acceptance rates at teacher colleges for both genders specializing in English, in addition to Arabic, Math, Science and Computer Science (The Executive Summary of the Ministry of Education Ten-Year Plan, 2005). Virtually all government policies come with unexpected results. For example, Native English speaking teachers (NESTs) teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) often interact in ways that can be at odds with their host countries. Concerns involving pedagogy have been expressed in many countries with TEFL programs using NESTs (Degen & Absalom, 1998; Liu & Zhang, 2007; Madrid & Perez, 2004; Putintseva 2003; Xiao & Tiajin, 2006). Relatively little is known about Saudi university students' experiences with NESTs and their preferences for student centered learning. This exploratory study surveyed 310 Saudi female university students enrolled in university TEFL programs. The following research questions were investigated: (a) Do Saudi students prefer student centered learning; and (b) Are there cultural differences with Saudi students' and their NESTs' teaching style? The findings of this study showed that students are open to the student-centered learning approach, with certain activities within the student-centered learning approach being more favorably preferred. Implications from this study clearly display that teacher training programs should seriously examine and implement innovative ways of teaching English for their pre-service teachers.

The Learning Preferences of Saudi University Students
with Native English Speaking Teachers

The confluence of globalization and an increasingly technological world has created a strong demand for English language learning around the world. The current practice of US outsourcing telecommunication jobs, customer service centers, and many other jobs accelerate the speed for the demand of proficient English language speakers around the world. There is no sign of the TESOL tide ebbing, on the contrary, the English language remains strong as the world business lingua franca. Many developing countries believe that if their citizens are fluent in English, there will be expanded business and educational opportunities. If India and China, rising economic powerhouses, are any indication of future economic/business trends, this line of thinking might very well be valid.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is no exception to the global English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning phenomenon. The KSA Ministry of Education's current goals mention the need to increase the acceptance rate at teacher colleges for both genders specializing in English, in addition to Arabic, Math, Science and Computer Science (The executive summary of the Ministry of Education ten-year plan, 2005). The KSA Ministry of Education acknowledges that "the global economy's tendency towards free trade will result in the liberation of service worldwide" (The executive summary of the Ministry of Education ten-year plan, 2005, p. 5) which in reality is already occurring as we have seen in the US. At the same time the KSA Ministry of Education endeavors to create English language proficiency, it also recognizes a cultural invasion resulting from low cost access to mass media, (e.g. satellite television, video/DVD sales, the internet)

pose a threat to the national and religious identity of its citizens (The executive summary of the Ministry of Education ten-year plan).

Mass media poses a cultural invasion on the macro level. However, the on micro level, native English speaking teachers (NESTs) teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) may also pose cultural challenges to Saudi students. Often times, NESTs bring divergent ways of thinking and interacting that can be at odds with the host country. For example, Saito and Ebsworth's (2004) study explored the views of Japanese English as Foreign Language (EFL) students and Japanese English as Second Language (ESL) students with regards to their NESTs. The results revealed that while both groups of students viewed their NESTs positively, the EFL students in general were uncomfortable with active classroom participation demands, and appreciated native language support in the classroom. In addition, the NESTs' demands did not match the Japanese students' expectations about coursework and appropriate teaching methodology.

Differences in teaching and learning across cultures can result in cultural misunderstandings and cultural dissonance for both NESTs and students. Cultural dissonance or what some term as a "cultural mismatch" results when one is confronted with expectations or behaviors at odds with one's own culture (Derrington, & Kendall, 2004). Dengen and Absalom (1998) examined differences between Chinese and Western expectations of both teachers and students. They found that in Chinese culture, the teacher was viewed as being a repository of knowledge, and that the student was expected to become the vessel to which that knowledge was deposited by the teacher (Dengen & Absalom, 1998). This view subscribes to teacher-centered approach. This type of thinking diverges from current western educational practices which tend to focus

more on student knowledge and the development of student's critical thinking skills— student-centered approach. The dichotomy between eastern and western theories of learning and teaching has the potential to contribute to cultural dissonance in the TEFL classroom.

Cultural concerns, whether related to pedagogical behavior or cultural understanding, have been expressed in many countries who adopt TEFL programs using NESTs (Liu and Zhang, 2007; Madrid and Perez 2004; Putintseva, 2003; Xiao & Tiajin, 2006). Because the KSA Ministry of Education has only mandated TEFL university programs within the past 4 years, relatively little is known about Saudi students' experiences with NESTs in the TEFL classroom. In order to determine if there is cultural dissonance in the context of KSA TEFL university programs, and if so to what degree, this study will examine the following research questions:

1. Do Saudi students prefer student-centered learning?
2. Are there cultural differences with Saudi students' and their NESTs' teaching style?

Literature Review

University English as a foreign language (EFL) programs are relatively new in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). For this reason, there is a lack of research available on Saudi university students' perceptions of NESTs. The majority of studies, found on this topic were specific to Asian TEFL programs in countries like Japan and China. A general language learning preference study was found with the focus on Turkish students. In general, these studies indicated that there was cultural dissonance present in most TEFL classrooms related to teacher/student expectations and behaviors.

Okan and Bada (2000) used a 13-item questionnaire to survey 230 EFL students (18-25 years old) and 23 instructors of EFL at the University of Cukurova in Turkey. There were two versions to the questionnaire: one for the faculty members and one for the students. Three major categories were used to classify the results of the survey: learning, error correction, and assessment/ evaluation. Results indicated that overall, these students preferred to work independently or in pairs and it was perceived as such by their teachers (Okan & Bada, 2000). Likewise, teachers and students both seemed to agree as well that activities outside of the classroom would help increase their proficiency. Furthermore, students would have liked to have seen other teaching modalities apart from lecture and use of blackboard. Receiving corrections from either the professor or their peers was not a concern. However, the study did not differentiate in the type of teachers, NNESTs or NESTs, these students had and whether there were any cultural differences between the students and the professors' teaching style.

In a different study, Saito and Ebsworth (2004) used a 49-item questionnaire to survey fifty ESL students in New York University and fifty EFL students in a private Tokyo university on their views of their NESTs and classroom activities. They also elaborated on the questionnaire by doing 50-minute qualitative interviews of three survey respondents from each group (Saito & Ebsworth, 2004). Results found that Japanese ESL students had slightly higher English proficiency than Japanese EFL students, and Japanese ESL students expected teachers to be on time to class and utilize all class time allotted for instruction (Saito & Ebsworth).

However, Japanese EFL students expressed negativity towards homework, did not mind if instructors were late, and preferred to leave class early whenever possible. This

was attributed to the belief that the classes did not contribute to an increase in the ability to communicate in English (Saito & Ebsworth, 2004). Additionally, Japanese EFL students showed a preference for Japanese non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) as opposed to American NESTs mainly due to the fact that these teachers could explain certain concepts in Japanese when needed (Saito & Ebsworth). Both groups expressed positive regard for teachers that were open to other cultures, showed them respect, and exhibited a willingness to meet student needs by modifying classroom content (Saito & Ebsworth). Saito and Ebsworth (2004) revealed that cultural differences in learning and teaching expectations have the potential to create friction between NESTs and their students.

Similar to Saito and Ebsworth's (2004) study, Liu and Zhang (2007) investigated Chinese university students' perceived differences between NESTs and NNESTs. Their study was conducted using a 20-item survey in Chinese to find the perceived differences between NESTs and NNESTs (Liu & Zhang, 2007). Additionally, three students from low, middle, and high-level proficiencies were randomly selected to describe how they believed teachers could improve in the classroom (Liu & Zhang). Results showed that two-thirds of Chinese university students did not feel there were significant differences between NESTs and NNEST (Liu & Zhang). Additionally, a majority of students felt that they were able to learn more with NNESTs (Liu & Zhang). Students also believed that NNESTs did more preparation for class and tended to use more technology (Liu & Zhang). Contrasted to this, students reported that NESTs were more approachable, flexible in assessments, and used more varied approaches to delivering instructional materials, but tended to rely on older technology (Liu & Zhang). The authors concluded

that both NESTs and NNESTs have positive attributes that would complement each other's work in the classroom (Liu & Zhang). In general, there appears to be contrasting views on the teaching behaviors of NESTs in the context of the Chinese university setting, and cultural expectations play a central role in student perceptions of teacher performance.

Xiao (2006) investigated the mismatch between NESTs teaching and cultural expectations and Chinese students' attitudes towards learning at two foreign language institutes in Ireland. The methodology included 48 questionnaires that incorporated a 5-point Likert scale, of which 34 were returned (Xiao). Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with eight Chinese students. Results showed that Chinese students had ambivalent attitudes towards the communicative approach to learning, and showed a preference for teacher-centered classes (Xiao). Students expressed a disinterest in classroom topics, and preferred heterogeneous classes to practice conversation as opposed to classes with predominantly Chinese students (Xiao). Lastly, students wanted more specific course outlines, and their lack of classroom participation was not a result of cultural traits, but rather due to language anxiety (Xiao). The author concludes with suggestions for NESTs related to the need to be aware of the influence culture has on teaching and learning so they can better handle possible conflicts in the classroom.

In another study of students' and teachers' perceptions of NNESTs versus NESTs, Madrid and Canado (2004) used a questionnaire to sample the opinions of 459 Andalusian students and 35 teachers in Andalusia working at different levels in the educational system. This study was useful to review because it described student perceptions of NESTs. The pedagogical behavior was found to be different between

NESTs and NNESTs (Madrid & Canado, 2004). In general, the NESTs were reported by Andalusian students to have a better command of the language, higher vocabulary, and more knowledge of spelling rules (Madrid & Canado). However, according to the Andalusian students, the disadvantages of NESTs were that they were unable to explain grammar rules in Spanish, and the NESTs themselves confessed that they were not well versed in grammar in general (Madrid & Canado). The qualitative results student opinions were mixed regarding their preferences for NESTs versus NNESTs (Madrid & Canado). Lastly, it is interesting to note that despite cultural differences, the older students expressed a preference for NESTs at the higher grades (Madrid & Canado) possibly because of the need for proficient communicative English at the higher levels of education. However, one study is not sufficient to make this claim and it would be interesting to find out if this view is held in other cultural contexts. Based on student feedback, both NESTs and NNESTs each have their own advantages in the EFL classroom. Clearly, culture plays an important role in student learning preferences and it should definitely be given consideration when NESTs teach in other cultural contexts.

Methods

Participants

This pilot study surveyed 310 female preparatory year students at a university in Medina, Saudi Arabia. Students were from the medical and computer science fields. They have studied English as a Foreign Language in schools for a period of 10 years prior to enrollment in this intensive English program. In this program, they received 20-hours per week of English language instruction.

Materials

The student questionnaire consisted of thirty 5-point Likert scale questions in Arabic (see Appendix A1). The questions in the survey were divided into the following six categories, with each category consisting of four questions: (a) category 1, general questions about student-centered approach; (b) category 2, a student-centered approach to teaching reading; (c) category 3, a student-centered approach to teaching reading writing; (d) category 4, student-centered teaching; (e) category 5, the student-centered teaching approach to teaching listening, and (f) category 6, cultural aspect of learning EFL in Saudi Arabia.

Procedures

In early February of 2009, at the end of the first semester of learning EFL in a prep-year program, students were given a survey to complete. Students took about 15-minutes to finish the survey. The data were then analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Results

General- All skills (Questions 1-4)

Results from the survey showed that most students generally wanted to take ownership of their learning and make decisions regarding with whom they worked and presented with during class. Approximately 88% surveyed agreed that having a say in the selection of class materials, having their opinions validated, and having freedom in the selection of groups were important to them; evidence of a preference for student centered learning (see Table 1).

Reading (Questions 5-8)

Pertaining to reading, approximately 53% of those surveyed felt that it was relatively important for the teacher to allow partners for oral practice. A preference for student classroom involvement versus teachers' lecturing, yet another trait of student centered learning. However, the same was not true in regards to acting out parts of what was read in class. Only 29% agreed that this was necessary and 27% had no opinion on this teaching modality (see Table 1). Validation of their prior knowledge on reading topics prior to reading was important to these students as 70% agreed (see Table 1). Realizing the value of self-contribution to knowledge as opposed to regurgitation of information, another student centered trait.

Writing (Questions 9-12)

Over 77% of the students surveyed felt that being allowed to plan their writing, whether through a small group discussion or concept mapping using a graphical organizer was an integral part of their writing. The need to discuss their ideas and thoughts before writing, however, did not necessarily transfer to the editing or writing of the papers. Approximately 49% of the students did not feel that peer editing their work was relevant to helping improve their own writing (see Table 1). More so, 32% of those surveyed felt indifferent to writing their papers with a partner (see Table 1). Sharing their writing is a relatively new idea; students are apprehensive about their peers looking at their written work. Peer editing is a learnt skill and students need to be made comfortable with the idea of sharing their work prior to using the strategy. Factors that might influence such behavior are lack of self-confidence, low proficiency skills, shyness, and not wanting to appear foolish in front of peers.

Speaking (Questions 13-16)

As compared to the reading and writing responses, speaking was not necessarily viewed as a welcomed activity. Only 46% of those surveyed felt that practicing speech when role-playing was a fun method of learning (see Table 1). An even smaller percentage (47%) enjoyed presenting their work orally to the class (see Table 1). However, 56% felt that interviewing another student on the chapter was a good way of practicing their speaking skills and 54% felt that participating in dramatic parts in class was helpful (see Table 1).

More than half accepted cooperative learning, which is a student centered learning approach. There is an even split of how students view varying activities within the student centered learning approach—a matter of preference clearly indicating a desire for less intimidating activities such as interviewing; whereas activities that focus on center staging students, such as role-playing and individual work presentations are non-favorites. This could be attributed to the cultural value of placing the group over the individual, and not drawing unnecessary attention to one's self.

Listening (Questions 17-20)

When asked about their preference on making and asking questions after a role-playing assignment, 58% felt that it was a good activity (see Table 1). Of those surveyed, 53% found it enjoyable and important when the teacher allowed them to present as others took notes (see Table 1). However, only 42% wanted to bring their own recorded conversations to class for listening activities (see Table 1). This is an indication of apprehension towards non-traditional tasks; they appear to be more comfortable with

pencil and paper tasks. Creating student centered activities in listening classes might require more exposure and training on other methods of demonstrating learning.

Cultural Education Questions (Questions 21-30)

According to students, 61% felt that when the teacher allowed them to choose and plan their activities learning became more enjoyable (see Table 1). However, 81% of those surveyed felt that they should be dependent on their teachers for information (see Table 1). Additionally, 60% believed that there was too much work given in class demonstrating that the students are being asked to take more charge of their own learning (see Table 1). Nevertheless this is a more challenging task and thus perceived as more work for students.

More than half of students, 65% preferred if their English teacher used Arabic language to teach them English (see Table 1). This concurs with the findings of Saito & Ebsworth (2004) where the Japanese students preferred to have someone who could explain concepts to them in their native language. Additionally, up to 60% of students expressed a preference for having a set of structured classroom activities (see Table 1). Under half of students surveyed, 40% found it acceptable to talk while the teacher is speaking and 29% have no opinion on the matter (see Table 1). Surprisingly only 28% felt that there needed to be more emphasis on memorization activities (see Table 1). This is another piece of evidence that Saudi students might be moving away from teacher-centered learning.

Upwards of 56% of those surveyed felt that the teacher should embarrass students who were misbehaving (see Table 1). This indicates a cultural element on the concept of class discipline. Only 27% of the students surveyed said they had a higher respect for

teachers that belonged to their own religion or tribe, so they appear to be open to learning from NESTs (see Table 1). Approximately 30% of those surveyed had no opinion on questioning their teachers during a class lecture and 21% stated that teachers should not be questioned during the lecture (see Table 1). Half of the populace of study still subscribe to the teacher-centered learning value when it comes to viewing teachers as depository of knowledge—they are the authority figure and should not be questioned.

Conclusions

The findings of this study showed that students are open to the student-centered learning approach, with certain activities within the student centered learning approach being more favorably preferred. For instance, while they welcome and enjoy partner and group activities, they are reluctant to participate in certain activities that would put them on center stage. In writing activities for example, students found the verbalization of ideas through collective brainstorm activities beneficial. However, they were not ready to share or display their individual work with peers. This could be a result of the influences of a tribal culture, where the group is more highly valued than the individual.

Saudi culture has an important influence in the learning of EFL as shown in this study. The belief that teachers have autonomous knowledge is clearly visible as more than 80% of students surveyed said that they should be dependent on their teachers for information. The preference for learning English through using Arabic can be attributed to students' experience of learning English in schools in Saudi Arabia. The majority of EFL teachers in schools teach English by using the Arabic language. Dependency on native language EFL learning appears to make students uncomfortable when they are asked to communicate in English in their classes with NESTs.

This study demonstrated that while most Saudi educational settings often use a teacher centered approach and memorization methodology, there is the possibility of using other pedagogical means such as discovery and problem-based learning. Although Saudi society is often perceived as closed and conservative, student willingness to participate in a western model of learning, such as student centered learning is gradually being accepted. While most students are accustomed to traditional ways of learning English in schools, they acknowledge that other ways of learning English can be fun and effective.

Implications from this study clearly display that teacher training programs should seriously examine and implement innovative ways of teaching English for their pre-service teachers. For example, frequent professional development workshops on topics of language teaching methodology should be given to TEFL teachers. However, it should be noted that Saudi students may prefer not to work in groups, and may be uncomfortable with work that identifies them as individuals, like presentations. Finally, students in schools and in the Intensive English programs at the universities should gain exposure and familiarity and be trained in using strategies of student-centered approaches to learning English, such as discovery, problem-based and task based methods.

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APPENDIX

Results of English version of Saudi University Student Questionnaire

Survey Questions	S.A.	A.	N.	D.	S.D.	Cumulative Percentages of S.A. and A.
1. I like to be involved in decision-making about selection of materials.	56%	30%	7%	2%	3%	86%
2. I like my teacher to consider my opinion about lessons during our discussions.	51%	36%	9%	1%	2%	87%
3. I like my teacher to let me make my own choices for group-work.	68%	18%	8%	2%	3%	86%
4. I like my teacher to allow to me to share or display my work for others in class.	23%	41%	26%	5%	2%	64%
5. I think it's important for teachers to let us read passages with a partner	17%	34%	28%	15%	2%	51%
6. I like to act out parts of what I have read in class.	10%	18%	27%	27%	15%	28%
7. I believe that teachers should let students share the knowledge they have on various reading topics before we read.	26%	42%	21%	7%	2%	68%
8. It is good when teachers let students choose other students to read classroom passages out loud.	45%	31%	15%	5%	3%	76%
9. I think that teachers should let us brainstorm topics in small groups before we write.	38%	39%	14%	4%	1%	77%
10. I like it when we use graphic organizers, or concept maps in pairs or groups before we write.	23%	25%	24%	21%	5%	48%
11. It is good when I can read my partner's writing and give them feedback.	16%	27%	32%	18%	5%	43%
12. I like it when we get to write research projects with other students.	17%	28%	20%	25%	8%	45%
13. Speaking class is fun when we can do role-plays with partners.	22% 6%	32%	21%	15%		54%
14. It is fun to interview other students about topics in the chapter.	17%	29%	27%	19%	5%	46%
15. I like it when students get the chance to make	14%	38%	26%	14%	4%	54%

their own presentations for the class.						
16. I think students learn more when they can participate in dramas on topics in class.	25%	30%	23%	12%	6%	55%
17. I like to make and ask questions to other students after completing a role-play.	13%	28%	31%	21%	5%	41%
18. I would like my teacher to let me bring in my own recorded conversations for listening activities in class.	18%	32%	30%	12%	3%	50%
19. I like it when my teacher allows me to give a presentation, and others take notes.	19%	31%	25%	13%	7%	50%
20. I think it's important for students to present and others to listen to their conversations while identifying main ideas or specific details in pairs.	21%	39%	21%	11%	5%	60%
21. I think that my teacher makes learning fun by letting us choose and plan our own activities.	48%	30%	12%	4%	2%	78%
22. I believe that students should be dependent on their teachers for information.	21%	34%	22%	16%	5%	55%
23. I think my teacher wants me to do too much work.	39%	23%	17%	11%	5%	62%
24. I like my teacher to teach English using the Arabic language.	11%	9%	15%	25%	35%	20%
25. I prefer classroom activities that are unplanned.	13%	26%	29%	18%	9%	39%
26. I think it is acceptable for me to talk with others while my teacher is talking.	13%	14%	22%	29%	17%	27%
27. I think there needs to be more emphasis on memorization in class.	28%	27%	22%	16%	4%	55%
28. I believe teachers should embarrass misbehaving students to get them to follow directions.	12%	14%	23%	26%	23%	26%
29. I have a higher respect from teachers that come from my own region or tribe.	12%	9%	31%	24%	22%	22%
30. I believe that students should not question their teachers during class lectures.	8%	9%	17%	34%	30%	17%