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Classroom Activities Viewed from Different Perspectives: Learners' Voice and Teachers' Voice

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Zohreh Eslami-Rasekh
<zeslami@coe.tamu.edu>
Texas A&M University

Katayoon Valizadeh

<valizadeh@ofoghnet.com>

Abstract

The present study aimed at investigating learners' beliefs about different learning activities and the degree of discrepancy between learners' preferences and instructors' awareness of those preferences in foreign language learning. The study involved 603 EFL students majoring in different fields who responded to a questionnaire on their preferred activities in the "General English" course. In addition, 27 instructors who taught the "General English" course were asked about their perceptions of students' preferences in the same context. The questionnaire included 40 classroom activities. A comparison was made between these two participant groups' responses. The results indicate that, in communicative activities, there is a significant difference between students' preferences and instructors' perception of those preferences. Students' preferences for communicative activities were significantly higher than their instructors' beliefs. The results indicate that instructors are not highly aware of students' preferences in relation to communicative activities. The results have implications for syllabus and material design and classroom practice.

Introduction

Insights gained from nearly two decades of research in second and foreign language (L2) development in natural as well as formal settings have made us aware that language learning is primarily a learner-and learning-oriented activity (Brown, 2001; Nunan, 1988a; Wright, 1990). Consequently, in recent years there have been more emphases on the role of the learner in the language learning process. Learners' beliefs about language learning is one of the more recently discussed learner variables in the field. [-1-]

In curricula based on a learner-centered approach, learners have greater roles in teaching/learning processes, and this can result in the promotion of their interests and preferences toward language learning (Makarova, 1997). Moreover, Rifkin (2000) asserts that learners'

beliefs (including their preferences) about the learning process are "of critical importance to the success or failure of any student's efforts to master a foreign language" (p. 394). According to Nunan (1988a, p. 177), "no curriculum can claim to be truly learner-centered unless the learner's subjective needs and perceptions relating to the processes of learning are taken into account." Unfortunately, as Allwright (1984) says, "very many teachers seem to find it difficult to accept their learners as people with a positive contribution to make to the instructional process" (p. 167). Based on Bada and Okan (2000), many teachers acknowledge the need to understand learners' preferences, but they may not actually consult learners in conducting language activities. Teachers may believe that learners are not capable of expressing what they want or need to learn and how they want to learn. However researchers like Block (1994, 1996) claim that learners do have an awareness of what goes on in classes and that teachers should therefore make an attempt to align their task orientation to that of learners. Breen (cited in Block, 1996) showed that students were able to identify specific techniques adopted by the teacher that they preferred and believed that it helped them with understanding the new language. Nunan (1989) describes two Australian studies that show learners favor traditional learning activities over more communicative activity types.

It should be noted that curriculum developers, syllabus designers, and teachers should become aware of their students' preferences. Once they come to know them, they can, "if necessary," take into consideration those preferences and plan and implement alternative behaviors and activities in their classes (Barkhuizen, 1998). Even if learners' desires and those of teachers' are in contrast with each other (e.g., teachers emphasize communicative activities and learners tend toward traditional activities), they can shift to a negotiated syllabus procedure and come to reasonable agreements (Jordan, 1997).

Learners' preferences are one side of the coin. The other side of the coin is teachers' awareness of those preferences, which plays a considerable role in influencing their decision-making processes and classroom behaviors (Spratt, 1999). Some studies indicate that there are considerable discrepancies of opinions between learners and their teachers or syllabus experts. A divergence of opinions between these two groups has been noted in relation to what they prefer, what learners need, and the nature of language and language learning (Kern, 1995; Kumaravadivelu, 1991; Nunan, 1988a, 1988b). Block (1994, p. 473) found that "teachers and learners operate according to quite different systems for describing and attributing purpose to tasks." According to Kumaravadivelu (1991) both teachers and learners bring with them their own perceptions of what constitutes language teaching and learning. In other words, learners and teachers interpret classroom activities from their own perspectives, which may not always match. [-2-]

A prominent example of the divergence of opinion between learners' preferences and teachers' perception of those predispositions is the study performed by Spratt (1999) involving EFL learners in Hong Kong. The results of this study showed that "teachers were able to gauge their learners' preferences with accuracy for 54% of activities" (p. 141), which is a considerable degree of discrepancy. In another study by Barkhuizen (1998), ESL teachers in South Africa frequently became surprised when they found out their students' thoughts, feelings and indications.

In considering learners' views towards instructional activities, sociocultural norms of different societies may also play an important role. In some societies with a top-down curriculum, 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. The traditional learning styles and habits of the learners may influence learners' perceived self-confidence and their knowledge base to make informed choices in relation to instructional activities. In these contexts promoting learners' participation in the educational process needs to be done with care and sensitivity. As Cortazzi and Jin (1999) assert, the culture of learning that students and teachers bring to classroom becomes an invisible yardstick for judgments about how to teach or learn, about whether and how to ask questions, and about the role of the textbooks in the curriculum. They illustrate through examples that mismatches in cultures of learning can affect participants' interpretation of one another and sometimes lead to misunderstandings. Using multimethod qualitative research procedures, Rao (2002) discovered that Chinese students' perceived difficulties with Communicative Language Teaching had their source in the differences between the underlying educational theories of China and those of Western countries. Based on the results, Rao suggests that, to update English teaching methods, EFL countries like China need to modernize, not westernize, English teaching.

As Cray and Currie (1996) suggest, the important point is that teachers do not have to act on behalf of their learners but with their learners. Attention needs to be given to students' ways of learning and their preferences and unless teachers are aware of those preferences they cannot consider them in their teaching activities and classroom practices.

This study was conducted in order to broaden the scope of studies done in the area of students' and instructors' perceptions of instructional activities, and to include learners of a different profile and in a different sociocultural context from previous studies. The context of English language teaching in Iran, with its anti-Western sentiments after the Islamic revolution, the limited amount of exposure to English language and relative lack of native English speaking tourists and visitors in the country, is different from the EFL teaching contexts

reported in other studies (e.g., Bada & Okan, 2000; Nunan, 1989; Rao, 2002; Spratt, 1999). Therefore, it will be insightful to see if similar findings will be reached. This study will give information regarding this particular group of learners' perceptions of different activity types and different areas of language learning, as well as a profile of students' subjective needs. Moreover, the findings will clarify the areas of mismatch between learners' and their teaches' perception of different language learning activities. [-3-]

It should be noted that the terms *likes* or *Preferences*, following Spratt (1999), has been used in its simplest form. Thus, when students prefer an activity, it means that they either enjoy it or find it useful.

The Study

Research questions

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. Is there a significant difference between students' preferences and instructors' perceptions of those preferences in language learning?

2. Is the type of activity (communicative vs. non-communicative) significantly related to the degree of discrepancy between students' preferences and instructors' perception of those preferences in language learning?

3. Is the area of activity (speech-based vs. text-based) significantly related to the degree of discrepancy between students' preferences and instructors' perception of those preferences in language learning?

Context

English is formally taught as a foreign language to Iranian students from the second year in junior high school. The students have about three hours of formal instruction in English every week. Teachers use a combination of grammar-translation method and audiolingual method in most schools. At the university level, students mostly study English for academic purposes (EAP) and therefore, reading is the most emphasized skill. The first course university students have to take is "General English" and then they take more specialized English courses related to their field of study. The curriculum in high schools is a top-down curriculum; the Ministry of Education dictates all the decisions regarding the textbook selection and the exams. However, not much control is exerted on teaching methodology. The culture of teaching is basically a teacher-centered one in Iran. Contrary to secondary education, at the university level, instructors have the freedom to choose the textbooks and activities for their classes. Compared to EFL learners in other contexts, Iranian EFL students do not have much exposure to English outside the classroom. Very few English programs are broadcasted on TV or radio. Of course, through advancements in technology and the more frequent use of the Internet, satellite, and rapid growth of private language institutes in Iran, the opportunities for English language learning have greatly improved (Talebinezhad & Aliakbari, 2002).

Participants

Students

Because of practical limitations, the researchers used nonprobability sample designs (Cohen and Manion, 1994) to select the student population for this study. More specifically, "quota sampling," which is the nonprobability equivalent of stratified sampling (Nachmias & Nachmias, 1981) was used. In order to ensure representativeness of the sample in relation to the population student's field of study was used as an important criterion for sampling.

One percent of the total population of the students accepted to all the public universities in each of the four fields of study in the 2000 university entrance exam was selected as our sample. These figures are provided below in Table 1. [-4-]

Table 1. Total Number and Percent of Students in the Four Fields: Population and Sample

	Natural Sciences (N.S.)	Science & Technology (S.T.)	Humanities (H.)	Art (A.)	Total

Population	26,849	22,359	10,221	1,038	60,467
Sample (percent in the whole sample)	268 (44.4 %)	223 (37 %)	102 (16.9 %)	10 (1.7 %)	603 (100 %)

There were 376 females and 227 males in the sample. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25 years old and they were all undergraduates.

Instructors

Along with the students, the present study involved a number of instructors who were invited to participate in the project. The convenience or availability sampling procedure (Nachmias & Nachmias, 1981; Cohen & Manion, 1994). was used for selecting the instructors

This group of participants included 27 instructors or professors experienced in teaching the General English course. Their age was between 25 and 55 years old and their experience in teaching English at university level ranged between 3 to 19 years. All the instructors were from Iran. They taught English in a range of departments. All of these instructors were teaching the very students who participated in this study. In other words, first the 1% of students in each field of study was calculated and based on this number questionnaires were given to the students and instructors who were available. This procedure is called "quota Sampling" which is the nonprobability equivalent of stratified sampling. *[-5-]*

Instruments

Following Spratt (1999), two types of questionnaires were developed for this study. Based on the researchers' experience of working with English learners and the curriculum requirements in Iran, Spratt's (1999) instrument was amended (some items omitted and some added) and prepared for the pilot study.

To ensure the appropriateness and comprehensibility of the questionnaire items, four instructors were consulted, a general discussion was held in a General English class, and students' books and syllabi were considered. To make sure that students understand the items in the questionnaire, students' native language (Persian) was used. The questionnaire was piloted in a General English class with 31 students. Based on the results, students' comments as well as the comments given by five translators about the fluency of the items, the questionnaire was modified and finalized for the large-scale data collection.

Both instruments included 40 questions with responses ranked on a Likert Scale ranging from 1 (strongly dislike) to 5 (strongly like). These 40 items dealt with classroom activities that learners could be asked by their instructors to carry out either in or outside the classroom. They ranged across the areas of listening, speaking, reading, writing, testing, and participation types (Appendix I). These 40 items could act as a good reflection of activities which now exist or have the potentiality to be included, in the syllabus of "General English" course in the Iranian universities.

The main difference between students' and instructors' questionnaires was in the stem. In the students' version the instrument asked about students' preferences for different activities, whereas in the instructors' version, it asked about instructors' perception of students' preferences for different activities. In both questionnaires, the words "General English" were underlined and made bold to prevent any confusion on the part of either students or instructors about the context under consideration (Ferris, 1998).

Dividing the instruments into subscales

Based on our research questions, both communicative vs. noncommunicative and speech-based vs. text-based activities were addressed in the questionnaires. Items from these different categories were randomly distributed in the questionnaires, but were categorized into two sets of subscales for analysis.

First of all, the items were divided into communicative (13 items) and non-communicative activities (19 items). For the term *communicative*, different definitions have been proposed. In this study, the definition given by Spratt (1999) has been considered as the basis. He defines communicative activities "as those that involve learners in using the language for communicative rather than display purposes, that focus on fluency rather than accuracy and which involve learners in pair or group work as a setting for that communication" (p. 148). This definition corresponds with Quinn's (1984) "characteristics of communicative approaches" and with the "weak version of communicative teaching" outlined by Howatt (1984). The few items that, based on the context, could be exploited both as communicative

and non-communicative were excluded from the analysis. These were the items that could either be communicative or non-communicative when operationalized and had no explicit tasks assigned to them (e.g., "finding information on my own"). [-6-]

Then, items were divided into two categories of speech-based and text-based activities. *Speech-based activities* are those which involve listening and speaking skills. *Text-based activities* are those which involve reading and writing skills. Items that could be related to all the four skills simultaneously were excluded from this part of the analysis.

Reliability of the instruments

The reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) of instruments and each subscale were estimated as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Reliability Coefficient (α)
of Both instruments and Each Subscale

Instruments and their subscales	No. of cases	No. of items	Reliability coefficient
Both questionnaires as a whole	630	40	0.9221
Students' questionnaire	603	40	0.9232
Instructors' questionnaire	27	40	0.8771
Communicative subscale of both questionnaires	630	13	0.8413
Noncommunicative subscale of both questionnaires	630	19	0.8593
Speech-based subscale of both questionnaires	630	15	0.8561
Text-based subscale of both questionnaires	630	18	0.8593

All of the reliability coefficients were high enough (higher than 0.80) to enable the researchers to conduct statistical analysis of the entire questionnaires and their subscales.

Results

The descriptive analyses of the data for students and instructors (Appendix II), show that items 37, 32, and 35 (learning vocabulary, speaking activities, and speed reading) have the highest means in students' likes. But items 3, 18, 40, and 37 (watching training videos, using laboratory, learning vocabulary by realia, and learning vocabulary) possess the highest means in instructors' perception. Items 7 (reading texts for language analysis), 4 (giving individual oral presentations), 8 (studying grammatical rules), and 24 (checking other students' writings) have the lowest means by students. Whereas teachers' data show items 12 (writing short passages individually), 2 (doing instructor-directed library research), 11 (writing short passages in small groups), and 7 (reading texts for language analysis) to be the least liked activities by students (Appendix II). These two sets of ranking do not match each other except in two items. Therefore, simply stated, students' preferences and instructors' perceptions of those preferences do not correspond. [-7-]

Analyses for research question 1

The first question asked was "Is there any significant difference between students' preferences and instructors' perceptions of those preferences in language learning?" A general comparison between the teachers' and the learners' results can be seen in Table 3. As it is shown in the table, the learners gave higher scores than the teachers for 28 out of 40 items (65%). The largest difference between the two groups appears in items 35, 11, 17, 12, 2, 32, 19, 37, 14, 4, 15, and 31 respectively. As can be seen in the table at the individual item level, there is a considerable difference between what learners preferred and how teachers perceived learners' preferences. To see which one of the differences were statistically significant and due to the nature of our data which is ordinal, the Mann-Whitney U test, which is the nonparametric equivalent of independent sample t-test, was used. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Mann-Whitney U Tests for Each Item Regarding

Research

Question 1

Item	M. R. Students	M.R. Instructors	U	Z	2-tailed P	Sig
1	310	318	8062.5	-0.0893	0.9289	NS
2	324	226	5740.0	-2.6753	0.0075	S
3	312	311	8044.0	-0.1106	0.9119	NS
4	310	327	7804.0	-0.3737	0.7087	NS
5	318	253	6460.0	-1.8815	0.0599	NS
6	315	326	7856.0	-0.3215	0.7479	NS
7	315	313	8096.5	-0.0489	0.9610	NS
8	314	331	7712.5	-0.4764	0.6338	NS
9	314	332	7688.5	-0.5091	0.6107	NS
10	313	349	7219.0	-1.0467	0.2952	NS
11	330	204	5148.0	-3.3610	0.0008	S
12	326	232	5909.0	-2.4850	0.0130	S
13	305	319	8041.0	-0.1112	0.9115	NS
14	318	252	6444.5	-1.9344	0.0531	NS
15	318	258	6606.5	-1.7618	0.0781	NS
16	313	359	6942.0	-1.3448	0.1787	NS
17	330	209	5277.5	-3.2264	0.0013	S
18	304	326	7833.0	-0.3498	0.7265	NS
19	324	244	5670.0	-2.7514	0.0059	S
20	310	307	7923.5	-0.2417	0.8090	NS
21	300	290	7475.5	-0.7566	0.4493	NS
22	315	320	7996.5	-0.1647	0.8692	NS
23	317	269	6885	-1.4365	0.1509	NS
24	299	352	7141.5	-1.1199	0.2628	NS
25	316	302	7778	-0.4154	0.6778	NS
26	317	268	6866.5	-1.4548	0.1457	NS
27	316	297	7652.5	-0.5511	0.5815	NS
28	316	298	7689.0	-0.5146	0.6068	NS

29	316	289	7427.0	-0.7930	0.4277	NS
30	317	265	6796.5	-1.5271	0.1267	NS
31	318	258	6603.5	-1.7149	0.0864	NS
32	323	242	6179.0	-2.2813	0.0225	S
33	315	317	8099.0	-0.0480	0.9617	NS
34	314	331	7719.0	-0.4715	0.6373	NS
35	337	178	4430.0	-4.2742	0.0000	S
36	317	273	7014.5	-1.2816	0.2000	NS
37	332	250	6383.5	-2.0671	0.0387	S
38	316	302	7796.0	-0.3898	0.6967	NS
39	317	265	6798.0	-1.5080	0.1316	NS
40	316	301	7750.0	-0.4453	0.6561	NS

M.R. = Mean Rank; S = Significant; NS = Non significant; $\alpha \leq .05$ [-8-]

Table 4. Mann-Whitney U Test for "Total"

The results showed that in 8 out of 40 items, that is, in 20% of the items, there is a significant difference between students' likes and instructors' perception of those likes.

Another Mann-Whitney U test was performed for the variable "total" which is shown in Table 4.

Item	M. R. Students	M.R. Instructors	U	Z	2-tailed P	Sig
Total	318	254	6505.0	-1.7679	0.0771	NS

M.R. = Mean Rank; NS = Nonsignificant; $\alpha \leq .05$

Although there is some difference between the mean rank of students (318) and instructors (254), since the P-value is slightly higher than the level of significance, we can't claim a significant overall difference between students' likes and instructors' perception of those likes. It should be noted, however, that for most of the items (65%), the students' ranking of the items was higher than that of teachers.

Analyses for research question 2

The second research question was related to students' preferences of type of activity (communicative vs. non-communicative) and teachers' perceptions of those preferences. To answer this question, first the items were categorized into the two areas of communicative (13 items) and non-communicative (19 items) based on the operational definitions given before. The items in each area were then compared across the two groups to see whether they contained significant differences. As can be seen in Table 5 there are differences between students' and instructors' mean rank of communicative and non-communicative activities.

Table 5. Mann-Whitney U Test for "Communicative" and "Non-communicative" Subscales

Item	M. R.	M.R.	U	Z	2-tailed	Sig

	Students	Instructors			P	
Com.	318	245	6249.5	-2.0452	0.0408	S
Non-com.	310	270	6918.5	-1.3214	0.1864	NS

M.R. = Mean Rank; S = Significant; NS = Nonsignificant; $\alpha \leq .05$

Table 5 shows that for the communicative subscale, there is a statistically significant difference between students' likes and teachers' perceptions of those likes. It conveys that students prefer communicative activities significantly more than their instructors believe, and that the instructors are not aware of their students' preferences in this regard. There is no significant difference between students and teachers for non-communicative activities which implies that, in contrast with communicative activities, in non-communicative activities, the instructors are more aware of their students' preferences. [-9-]

Analyses for research question 3

The third research question was "Is the area of activity (speech-based vs. text-based) significantly related to the degree of discrepancy between students' preferences and instructors' perceptions of those preferences in language learning?" For testing this question, the items were categorized into the two areas of speech-based (15 items) and text-based (9 items) learning activities and the items in each area were then compared across the two groups to see whether they contained statistically significant differences. As shown, students liked both text-based and speech-based activities similarly. The results in Table 6 show that the differences were not statistically significant.

Table 6. Mann-Whitney U Test for "Speech" and "Text"

Subscales

Item	M. R. Students	M.R. Instructors	U	Z	2-tailed P	Sig
Speech	298	254	6500	-1.7742	0.0760	NS
Text	310	256	6538	-1.7329	0.0831	NS

M.R. = Mean Rank; NS = Nonsignificantant; $\alpha \leq .05$

Conclusions and Discussion

Teachers, curriculum designers, material developers, and others who want to be sensitive to the needs of the students they serve, cannot always rely on their unaided intuitions (Rudduck, 1991). The findings of this study have illuminated students' preferences in instructional activities, teachers' awareness of students' preferences, and the degree of discrepancy between them. The findings show a discrepancy between activities favored by students and teachers' perceptions of favored activities. However, the results indicate that although there is some discrepancy between students' preferences and instructors' awareness of those preferences in language learning, this difference is not statistically significant in all areas and types of language learning activities.

Our findings show that students have high preference for communicative activities but their instructors are not aware of this preference. In other words, there is a significant mismatch between students and teachers in this area. This is different from Barkhuisen's (1998), and Nunan's (1988a) studies that found learners' preferences for more traditional classroom work and resistance to participating in communicative-type activities. Our findings in relation to research question 2 are also different from Spratt's (1999). Contrary to our findings, Spratt found no significant difference between students' likes and instructors' awareness of those likes in communicative activities. Our findings are similar to Spratt's (1999) and Rao's (2002) studies in relation to students' preference for both communicative and non-communicative activities. This may imply that a combination of both types of activities in Iranian EFL context may yield better learning outcomes. Therefore, a locally developed version of a communicative language teaching approach (Thompson, 1996, p.36) may be

more appropriate and acceptable for some EFL contexts. Obviously, adapting a communicative teaching approach for EFL contexts like Iran, requires time, a well-structured teacher training, and a transition period. Most importantly, the students' needs and the sociocultural context of English in the Iranian EFL setting should be considered. [-10-]

Most of the studies done in the area of students' and teachers' perceptions of instructional activities and goals and the teacher's perception of those have shown a general lack of correspondence between the two (see for example, Barkhuisen, 1998; Kumaravadivelu, 1991; Spratt, 1999). Therefore the results we have obtained in this study are similar to the findings of other studies. What is different in our findings compared to other studies is that other studies generally indicate that teachers prefer communicative activities more than learners do. In this study, the learners rated communicative activities significantly higher than their teachers. This may signify a change in attitude towards language learning among Iranian EFL learners. Iranian learners may have realized that the traditional methods of language instruction cannot help much to develop their communicative competence and that they need English not only for academic purposes but also for communications.

On the whole, besides the conclusions mentioned above, the present study gives a comprehensive picture of the students' subjective needs in Iranian university contexts. This subjective needs analysis is of importance since needs analysis is, by nature, context specific (Ferris, 1998). The findings of this study make a contribution to the importance of having learner-centered approaches in Teaching English as a Foreign Language.

While the present study focused on EFL learners in Iran, it has implications for other EFL contexts as well. Information from this kind of survey is crucial for teachers to develop teaching methods "appropriate to their learners, their colleagues, and their societies" (Edge, 1996, p. 18). Effective language teaching and learning can only be achieved when teachers are aware of their learners' needs, capabilities, potentials, and preferences.

According to Kumaravadivelu (1991, p. 107) "the more we know about the learner's personal approaches and personal concepts, the better and more productive our interactions will be." We as teachers should be aware of our students' perceptions and beliefs about language learning in order to facilitate desired learning outcomes in the classroom. As suggested by Bada and Okan (2000), there is a need for closer cooperation between students and teachers. It is important to remember that learners already critically evaluate what they do (Breen, 1989). Teachers can use different strategies to build learners choices into their lessons. Teachers and students can have a dialogue and negotiate alternatives, which would definitely lead to more learner involvement and could, therefore, lead to more positive attitudes towards language learning. As teachers, at every single moment, we should observe our students' reactions and consider their attitudes and preferences in order to promote a more inclusive climate that will enhance learning. [-11-]

About the Authors

Zohreh Eslami Rasekh is an Assistant Professor of ESL at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas. Dr. Eslami-Rasekh has more than 10 years experience in ESL/EFL teacher education both in the USA and overseas. She has publications in the area of ESL teacher education, cross-cultural pragmatics, pragmatics and language teaching and intercultural communication.

Katayoon Valizadeh was formerly an MA student at Iran University of Science and Technology. She works as an adjunct professor at Payam-Noor University teaching English conversation classes and TEFL courses. Her research interests include student centered instruction, students' attitude, and e-learning.

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Appendices

To Appendix I
To Appendix II
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Editor's Note: Dashed numbers in square brackets indicate the end of each page for purposes of citation..