

Learning English as a Foreign Language: Perspective of Secondary School Students in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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Abstract. The aim of this study is to make the process of learning English as a foreign language in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in line with the students' own preferences and to make teachers recognize their students' preferences in this regard. In order to look at the teaching process from students' perspective, a survey was conducted using a set of two questionnaires across various secondary schools in the southern region of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Through the first questionnaire, 288 students from different levels of the secondary schools were asked to express their preferences for learning English, and through the second one, 28 teachers responsible for teaching English to the same selection of students were asked to state their opinion about the interest of their students in the learning process. The data, thus acquired, pin point a number of areas in which there is a need for further agreement among the students and teachers. It also gives teachers the opportunity to reorganize their teaching strategies and reshape the classroom activities in accordance with the students' preferences.

Keywords: TEFL, learning, EFL, English. Saudi Arabia, secondary school, classroom, homework

1. Introduction

The grade of success achieved in learning any skill is directly proportional to the motivation among students for that skill. In this respect Ahmad states, "If the teacher succeeded in arousing class interest, he wins half of the battle. Hope of reward and fear of punishment are certainly good incentives to work but very poor stimuli as compared to genuine interest. If the teacher successfully arouses the interest of the pupil in language learning, he enables him to swallow the bitter pill with the sugar coating of interest."¹

Learner's motivation, which plays a vital role in the process of learning, can be better developed if a certain teaching strategy enjoys the support of the target students. According to Curtis and Bidwell "It is essential that the teacher plan to relate objectives to the pupils in order to stimulate learners so that they can learn what is needed to achieve a good education."² Nightingale and O'Neil write in this connection that often teachers focus entirely on their teaching content and method and forget to concentrate on the fact whether the students have learnt what they intended.³

In the past, the teacher used to play a pivotal role in the classroom and he alone was the person who possessed decision making authority. However, there has been a gradual shift of focus in the offing from teacher to students recently. The involvement of students in the overall process of learning is, therefore, the first and foremost responsibility of the teachers. Biggs observes, 'The teacher must know how to get students actively engaged in appropriate learning activities', but as Shuell says: 'what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learnt than what the teacher does.'⁴

It may, however, be kept in view that engaging the students shall correspond to the choice of students and not something imposed on them forcibly. In the words of Brown, 'They feel less like puppets on a string if you can involve them in looking at their needs and self diagnosing to some extent, of planning lessons and objectives, of deciding which direction a lesson might go in, and of evaluation of their learning.'⁵ Al-Zaid states in this connection, 'Besides, attention ought to be paid to the methods of teaching and evaluating students, which have to be marked by flexibility and adoptability to the various situations and circumstances influencing the teaching process.'⁶

Teaching process may, at the same time, be effective qualitatively, as well as interesting for the students. According to Alkhuli "Effective teaching is often accompanied not only with good learning, but with happy learning too, because effective teaching involves motivation, variation, aids, social warmth, and similar factors that make learning a pleasant experience to students."⁷

Widdowson states, “the children themselves are making systems of their own in their contact with the language, and they must be allowed and encouraged to do this, even if at times their system have to be modified by their teacher.”⁸ It is, therefore, the matter of utmost importance for the teachers to strike a balance between the demands of general education and the basic needs of the students. In short, the argument in hand may easily be put in words of Nightingale and O’Neil, ‘Teachers should consciously use students’ experiences as a valuable learning resource.’⁹ It is, therefore, an agreed fact that a teaching strategy which is designed in the light of students’ preferences will bring about a positive change in the conventional atmosphere of the classroom.

Willing collected the response of 517 adult ESL learners in Australia through a 30-item questionnaire. The results of such studies brought to the front this important fact that perceptions of teachers and students are not similar in many areas.¹⁰ Bada & Okan, with the help of a 13-item questionnaire, tried to get the response of 230 ELT students and 23 instructors at the ELT Department of University of Cukurova. They concluded their study with these words: ‘The results obtained here call for a step forward towards a teacher-student cooperation in designing syllabuses, doing weekly course planning, and classroom management.’¹¹

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, English is taught as a foreign language in all intermediate and secondary schools as a compulsory subject. All possible efforts are being made, on governmental level, to ensure the interest of the students in learning English.

2. The Study

In order to benefit from students’ experiences, a research study was carried out across various secondary schools in the southern region of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to look at the process of learning English as a foreign language from students’ perspective.

2.1. Aims and Objectives of the Study

- To develop interest of the students in learning English as a foreign language
- To make the teaching-learning process in line with the students’ own preferences
- To make teachers recognize students’ preferences in the learning process and reorganize themselves accordingly

2.2. Subjects

The subjects who participated in this research are 96 students from intermediate and secondary schools and 26 teachers, teaching English to the same selection of students.

2.3. Research Methodology

A survey was conducted across various intermediate and secondary schools through a set of two questionnaires adapted from Bada & Okan¹² who in turn adapted it from Brindley¹³.

The first 13-item questionnaire was put forward to 288 students from different grades. Through this questionnaire, they were asked to express their preferences for learning of English as a foreign language. The second questionnaire, having the same range of questions, was used to get the response of 28 teachers, who were responsible for teaching English to the same selection of students. They were asked to state their opinion about the interest of their students in the learning process.

3. Analysis of the Data

The collected data is, thus, tabulated, having separate table for each of the 13 items of the study. With item 1, students were asked if they were satisfied with their achievement in English, and in teachers’ version it was asked whether they were satisfied with the achievement of their students in English.

Table 1: Satisfaction with Achievement

Item 1 Options	Students				Teachers			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
Are you satisfied with your achievement in English?	214	74.3	74	25.7	11	39.3	17	60.7

There is a big gap between the response of students and teachers. Almost three fourth of the students are satisfied with their achievement but only 38.5% of their teachers think in such terms.

With item 2, it was tried to see if students would prefer working individually or collectively in different ways, and the teachers were asked if they were aware of their students' choices in this connection.

Table 2: Working Styles

Item 2 Options	Students				Teachers			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
1. Individually	89	30.9	199	69.1	18	64.3	10	35.7
2. In pairs	202	70.1	86	29.9	22	78.6	6	21.4
3. In small groups	157	54.5	131	45.5	22	78.6	6	21.4
4. In one large group	184	63.9	104	36.1	18	64.3	10	35.7

It is evident from the result that here also the response of students is not in line with that of the teachers; for individual work, it is 30.9% and 64.3%, and for work in a small groups it is 54.5% and 78.6% for students and teachers respectively. The teachers are not fully aware of the fact that their students do not like individual work and working in small groups. In case of preference for pair work and lockstep (one large group), there is, however, unanimity between the response of students and teachers.

With item 3, students were asked to express whether they wanted homework.

Table 3: Preference for Homework

Item 3 Options	Students			
	Yes	%	No	%
1. Do you want homework?	274	95.1	14	4.9

As shown, 95% students think that homework is a useful activity, which provides them the opportunity to continue the learning process outside the classroom.

With item 4, it was tried to find out the way the students prefer to utilize time allocated for homework.

Table 4: Time Allocation for Homework

Item 4 Options	Students			
	Yes	%	No	%
1. Preparation for the next class	201	69.8	87	30.2
2. Reviewing the day's work	254	88.2	34	11.8

About 70% of the students give preference to the preparation for the next class while about 88% of them prefer to revise the day's work.

Item 5 focuses on the choice of the learning process either inside or outside the classroom.

Table 5: Learning Inside/Outside Classroom

Item 5 Options	Students				Teachers			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
1. Spend all learning time in the classroom	208	72.2	80	27.8	20	71.4	8	28.6
2. Spend some time in the classroom & some time practicing your English with people outside	153	53.1	135	46.9	15	53.6	13	46.4

As can be seen, for spending all the time inside the classroom, there is a greater correlation between the response of students and teachers. By 72.2% students and 71.4% teachers favoured the 'yes' option for the above-mentioned point. For the second part of this item, again, both learners (53.1%) and their teachers (53.6%) are thinking positively along the same lines.

With item 6, students were asked to pinpoint the way they would like to adopt for learning English.

Table 6: Ways of Learning

Item 6 Options	Students				Teachers			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
1. Listening	192	66.7	96	33.3	25	89.3	3	10.7
2. Reading	199	69.1	89	30.1	20	71.4	8	28.6
3. Copying from board	55	19.1	233	80.1	24	85.7	4	14.3
4. Listening and taking notes	201	69.8	87	30.2	19	67.9	9	32.1
5. Reading and making notes	202	70.1	86	29.9	19	67.9	9	32.1
6. Repeating what you hear	223	77.4	65	22.6	24	85.7	4	14.3
7. Making summaries	227	78.8	61	21.2	12	42.9	16	57.1

The majority of teachers (85.7%) think that their students prefer learning by copying from the blackboard but in reality only 19.1% of the students like this option for learning English. On the other hand not less than 78.8% students want to learn by making summaries but this preference is known to only 42.9 % teachers. Both students and teachers hold the same opinion about learning by repeating what the students hear, learning just by listening, learning by reading, and learning by listening/reading and taking notes.

Item 7 is related to the learning of vocabulary.

Table 7: Vocabulary Learning

Item 7 Options	Students				Teachers			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
1. Using new words in sentences	248	86.1	40	13.9	23	82.1	5	17.9
2. Thinking of relationship between know and new	160	55.6	128	44.4	18	64.3	10	35.7
3. Saying or writing words several times	213	74	75	26	22	78.6	6	21.4
4. Avoiding verbatim translation	134	46.5	154	53.5	8	28.6	20	71.4
5. Guessing the unknown	155	53.8	133	46.2	21	75	7	25
6. Reading without looking up words	96	33.3	192	66.7	10	35.7	18	64.3

For vocabulary learning 'using new words in sentences' and 'Saying or writing words several times' received the highest percentage both from students, 86.1%, and 74% and teachers, 82.1% and 78.6% respectively. About 33.3% students and 35.7%, teachers hold the opinion that students prefer inferring the meaning of new words by 'reading without looking up words'. Again, 46.5% learners do not like learning the meaning of new words by verbatim translation; the percentage of teachers for this option is 28.6%.

With item 8, the learners were asked as to how they would like to be corrected by their teachers.

Table 8: Error Correction

Item 8 Options	Students				Teachers			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
1. Immediately in front of everyone	205	71.2	83	28.8	16	57.1	12	42.
2. Later, at the end of activity, in front of everyone	137	47.6	151	52.4	17	60.7	11	39.
3. Later, in private	150	52.1	138	47.9	18	64.3	10	35.

Most of the students, 71.2%, think that their errors may be corrected immediately in front of the students. This view is supported by 57.1% of the teachers. Nearly 50% of students as well as teachers selected 'correction latter at the end of activity, in front of everyone' and 'correction latter in private' as their choice.

With item 9, the learners were asked about the way they would like their mistakes to be corrected.

Table 9: Peer Correction

Item 9 Options	Students				Teachers			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
1. Do you mind if other students correct your written	231	80.2	57	19.8	15	53.6	13	46.4
2. Do you mind if teacher sometimes ask you to correct your own work?	227	78.8	61	21.2	12	42.9	16	57.1

Learners, at 78.8%, feel that they do not like to correct their own mistakes, but only 42.9% teachers think that their students mind self-corrections. Likewise, it is observed that 80.2% students do not like corrections

made by other students, but again this view is supported by 53.6% teachers. Students are, reluctant to the corrections made by their colleagues. Also, they do not hold the view that they may be asked to correct their own mistakes. But in both the cases the response of the teachers is different from their students.

Item 10 asks about the preferences for the use of various types of media for learning English.

Table 10: Media Preferences

Item 10 Options	Students				Teachers			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
1. Television/Video/Film	197	68.4	91	31.6	23	82.1	5	17.9
2. Radio	90	31.3	198	68.7	12	42.9	16	57.1
3. Tapes/ cassettes	162	56.3	126	43.7	24	85.7	4	14.3
4. Written material	187	64.9	101	35.1	22	78.6	6	21.4
5. The blackboard	189	65.6	99	34.4	25	89.3	3	10.7
6. Pictures! posters	203	70.5	85	29.5	24	89.3	3	10.7

In media preferences 'pictures ad posters' received the highest percentage both from students (70.5%) and teachers (89.3%). All other options, viz. the use of 'TV/video/film', 'written material' and 'blackboard' are preferred by above 60% students and around 80% teachers. A simple majority of the students 56.3% where as a greater number of their teachers 85.7% opted for the use of tape recorder. The use of radio for learning English is chosen by 31.3% of students and only 42.9% teachers.

Item 11 tries to find out the response of students and teachers about different activities in the classroom.

Table 11: Learning Activities

Item 11 Options	Students				Teachers			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
1. Role play	199	69.1	89	30.9	22	78.6	6	21.4
2. Language games	125	43.4	163	56.6	20	71.4	8	28.6
3. Talking with and listening to other people	174	60.4	114	39.6	26	92.9	2	7.1
4. Memorizing conversations/ dialogues	145	50.3	143	49.7	26	92.9	2	7.1
5. Getting information from guest speakers	215	74.7	73	25.3	17	60.7	11	39.3
6. Writing a learning diary	161	55.9	127	44.1	15	53.6	13	46.4

Among the students 74.7% expressed their interest in talking to the guest speaker and 60.7% of their teachers are aware of this fact. Role-play is preferred by 69.1% learners and 78.6 % of teachers. 'Talking with and listening to other students' is preferred by 60.4% students, but an overwhelming majority of teachers (92.9%) support this option. Again, there is a noticeable difference between the responses of teachers and students regarding 'language games' and 'learning by memorizing conversations/dialogues': it is 71.4 % and 92.9% in the case of teachers whereas, 43.3 % and 50.3% related to students respectively.

With item 12, it was tried to assess as to how learners would prefer to assess their performance.

Table 12: Assessment of Language Performance

Item 12 Options	Students				Teachers			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
1. Written task set by the teacher	208	72.2	80	27.8	24	85.7	4	14.3
2. Using the language you have learnt in real life situations	216	75	72	25	20	71.4	8	28.6

Among the students, 75% think that they are able to assess their performance in English through practical use of the language in real life situations. This view is supported by 71.4% teachers. To the option of 'assessing the performance of language through written tasks set by the teacher' 72.2% students responded positively and still a greater number of teachers, 85.7%, support this response of students.

Item 13 is related to expression of satisfaction in progress among students.

Table 13: Expression of Satisfaction in Progress

Item 13 Options	Students				Teachers			
	Yes	%	No	%	Yes	%	No	%
1. having their work graded	202	70.1	86	29.9	27	96.4	1	3.6
2. being told that they have made progress	233	80.9	55	19.1	26	92.9	2	7.1
3. feeling more confident in situations that they found difficult before	187	64.9	101	35.1	24	85.7	4	14.3

As shown, 80.9 % students get sense of satisfaction when they are told that they had made progress whereas 92.9% of teachers support this view for their students. Majority of teachers, 95.4%, think that their students would be satisfied if their work is graded, however, only 70.1% of students preferred this option.

4. Lessons Learnt/ Suggestions

1. There is a gap between the actual level of learners and its perception by the teachers vis-à-vis satisfaction of the students with achievement.
2. The teachers are not fully aware of the fact that their students do not like individual work. However, students' tendency towards working in pairs is well perceived by the teachers.
3. As English is a foreign language in Saudi Arabia and there are no opportunities for communication outside the classroom, it is natural for students to give preference to pair and group work over individual work, in order to make good this deficiency.
- 3 & 4. The students do not think that classroom activities are sufficient and they want to give more time to the topics they have studied in the class.
5. As there are limited opportunities outside the classroom, students want to have maximum use of the classroom time for learning English.
6. Teachers should provide opportunities for making summaries. They should not depend all the time on blackboard as learners are not interested in learning by copying from the blackboard.
7. In area of vocabulary learning, students believe in usage of new words in sentences and repeating new words several times.
8. Most of the students prefer on-spot correction by the teacher in front of others.
9. The students however do not like either to correct their own mistakes or to let other colleagues correct their mistakes.
10. In classroom, the students prefer the use of posters and pictures. They also like the use of. Video/ film/ TV for learning English. The use of tape recorder by the teachers is not effective, that's why the students are not thinking of it as an effective teaching aid.
11. Majority of the students are interested in talking to the guest speaker but their teachers think that they like talking to or listening to other students. It seems that the students are not exposed to a wide variety of games that is why they are not aware of their significance.
12. As the students are able to assess their English language competence through its practical use in daily life, they may be asked occasionally to give their opinion about their performance. In this way the learning process may better be kept closer to the needs and preferences of students.
13. Greater number of students needs encouragement and they are not satisfied with only active involvement in practical situations.

As mentioned, this study brings to the front a number of areas in which there is a room for harmonization among the students, learning English as a foreign language, and their teachers. Furthermore, the findings of the research also help both students and teachers in channelling the learning-teaching process on pragmatic lines.

5. References

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