

Learning Preferences of Saudi University Students with Native English Speaking Teachers

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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 outsourcing telecommunication jobs, customer service centers, and many other jobs accelerates the speed for the demand of proficient English language speakers around the world. There is no sign of the Teaching English as a Foreign Language education trend (TEFL) 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.

Saudi Arabia is no exception to the global English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning phenomenon. The Saudi 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 (Saudi Arabia, 2005). The Saudi Ministry of Education endeavors to create English language proficiency; it also recognizes that the cultural invasion resulting from low cost access to mass media (i.e., satellite television, video/DVD sales, the internet) poses a threat to the national and religious identity of its citizens (Saudi Arabia, 2005). Often, native English speaking teachers (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 a Foreign Language (EFL) students and Japanese English as a Second Language (ESL) students concerning 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 for both NESTs and their students. Cultural concerns, whether related to pedagogical behavior or cultural understanding, have been expressed in many countries that adopt TEFL programs using NESTs (Liu & Zhang, 2007; Putintseva, 2003; Xiao, 2006). Since the Saudi Ministry of Education has only mandated TEFL university programs within the past four 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 Saudi TEFL university programs, and if so to what degree, this study examines the learning preferences of Saudi preparatory year female students at one English language center in Saudi Arabia.

Studies on EFL/ESL Students' Learning Preferences

University EFL programs are relatively new in Saudi Arabia. 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 are specific to Asian TEFL programs in countries such as Japan and China (Liu & Zhang, 2007; Saito & Ebsworth, 2004; Xiao, 2006). A general language learning preference study with a focus on Turkish students is Bada and Okan's (2000). In general, these studies indicated that there was cultural dissonance present in most TEFL classrooms related to teacher/student expectations and behaviors. Bada and Okan used a 13-item questionnaire surveying 230 EFL students 18–25 years old and 23 instructors of EFL at the University of Cukurova in Turkey. The categories used to classify the results included learning, error correction, and assessment/evaluation. Results indicated that these students preferred to work independently or in pairs. Students believed that activities outside of the classroom would help increase their proficiency and would have preferred other teaching modalities apart from direct instruction. Receiving corrections from either the professor or their peers was not a concern. However, the study did not differentiate between the types of teachers these students had, non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) or NESTs, nor whether there were any cultural differences between the students' learning preferences and the professors'

teaching styles (Bada & Okan).

Saito and Ebsworth (2004) used a 49-item questionnaire to survey 50 ESL students in New York University and 50 EFL students in a private Tokyo university on their views of their NESTs and classroom activities. They also performed 50-minute qualitative interviews of three survey respondents from each group. The researchers 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. Japanese EFL students showed a preference for Japanese NNESTs as opposed to American NESTs mainly due to the fact that these teachers could explain certain concepts in Japanese when needed (Saito & Ebsworth, 2004). 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 and Ebsworth revealed that cultural differences in learning and teaching expectations have the potential to create friction between NESTs and their students.

Similarly, Liu and Zhang (2007) investigated Chinese university students' perceived differences between NESTs and NNESTs. In their study, they used a 20-item survey in Chinese to find the perceived differences between NESTs and NNESTs. Results showed that two-thirds of Chinese university students did not feel there were significant differences between NESTs and NNESTs (Liu & Zhang, 2007). Additionally, a majority of students felt that they were able to learn more with NNESTs. Students also believed that NNESTs did more preparation for class and tended to use more technology. In contrast, students reported that NESTs were more approachable and flexible in assessments. They used varied approaches in delivering instructional materials, but tended to rely on older technology. The authors concluded that both NESTs and NNESTs had positive attributes that would complement each other's work in the classroom (Liu & Zhang, 2007). 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 34-item questionnaires that incorporated a 5-point Likert scale. Results showed that Chinese students had ambivalent attitudes

towards the communicative approach to learning, and showed a preference for teacher-centered classes. The researcher concluded with suggestions for NESTs to be aware of the influence culture has on teaching and learning so they can better handle possible conflicts in the classroom (Xiao, 2006).

Cross-cultural differences were displayed in the selected studies, and resulted in cultural misunderstandings for both NESTs and EFL students. 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 be given consideration when NESTs teach in other cultural contexts. In the Saudi context, relatively little is known about Saudi female students' experiences with NESTs in the EFL classroom. Furthermore, no other study has investigated students' preferences towards student-centered learning in the Arabian Gulf region. Therefore, this study examines the following research questions:

Do Saudi female students prefer student-centered learning?

Are there cultural differences with Saudi female students' learning styles and their NESTs' teaching styles?

Participants

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

Data Collection

The student questionnaire consisted of 30 five-point Likert scale questions in Arabic (see Table 1). The questions in the survey were divided into the following six categories, with each category consisting of a minimum of four questions: (a) general questions about a student-centered approach; (b) a student-centered approach to teaching reading; (c) a student-centered approach to teaching writing; (d) a student-centered approach to teaching speaking; (e) a student-centered approach to teaching listening; and (f) cultural aspects of learning EFL in Saudi Arabia. In early February of 2009 at the end of the first semester of learning EFL in a preparatory year program, students were given about 15-minutes to finish the survey.

Table 1

Results of English Version of Saudi Female University Student Questionnaire

Survey Questions	SA %	A %	N %	D %	SD %	Cumulative Percentages of SA and A
1. I like to be involved in decision-making about selection of materials.	58	31	7	2	3	89
2. I like my teacher to consider my opinion about lessons during our discussions.	52	37	9	1	2	89
3. I like my teacher to let me make my own choices for group-work.	70	18	8	2	3	88
4. I like my teacher to allow me to share or display my work for others in class.	24	42	27	5	2	66
5. I think it's important for teachers to let us read passages with a partner.	18	35	30	15	2	53
6. I like to act out parts of what I have read in class.	11	19	28	28	15	30
7. I believe that teachers should let students share the knowledge they have on various reading topics before we read.	26	44	22	7	2	70
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.	46	31	15	5	3	77

Survey Questions	SA %	A %	N %	D %	SD %	Cumulative Percentages of SA and A
10. I like it when we use graphic organizers, or concept maps in pairs or groups before we write.	39	40	14	5	1	80
11. It is good when I can read my partners' writing and give them feedback.	23	26	25	21	6	49
12. I like it when we get to write research projects with other students.	16	28	33	19	5	44
13. Speaking class is fun when we can do role-plays with partners.	17	28	21	26	8	46
14. It is fun to interview other students about topics in the chapter.	23	33	22	16	7	56
15. I like it when students get the chance to make their own presentations for the class.	18	30	28	19	5	48
16. I think students learn more when they can participate in dramas on topics in class.	15	39	27	14	5	54
17. I like to make and ask questions to other students after completing a role-play.	26	32	24	12	6	58
18. I would like my teacher to let me bring in my own recorded conversations for listening activities in class.	14	28	32	22	5	42
19. I like it when my teacher allows me to give a presentation, and others take notes.	19	34	31	12	3	53
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.	20	33	26	14	8	52
21. I think that my teacher makes learning fun by letting us choose and plan our own activities.	21	40	22	12	5	61
22. I believe that students should be dependent on their teachers for information.	50	31	12	4	2	81
23. I think my teacher wants me to do too much work.	21	35	23	16	5	56
24. I like my teacher to teach English using the Arabic language.	42	24	18	11	5	66
25. I prefer classroom activities that are unplanned.	12	9	16	27	37	21
26. I think it is acceptable for me to talk with others while my teacher is talking.	14	27	30	19	10	41
27. I think there needs to be more emphasis on memorization in class.	13	15	23	31	18	28
28. I believe teachers should embarrass misbehaving students to get them to follow directions.	29	28	22	17	5	57
29. I have a higher respect for teachers that come from my own region or tribe.	12	15	23	27	23	27
30. I believe that students should not question their teachers during class lectures.	12	9	31	25	22	21

Note: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N = Neutral, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

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 an average of 83% 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.

Reading (Questions 5-8)

Pertaining to reading, a mean of approximately 57% 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 was 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 30% agreed or somewhat agreed that this was necessary and 28% had no opinion on this teaching modality. Validation of their prior knowledge on topics before reading about them was important to these students as 70% agreed.

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 graphic organizer was an integral part of their writing. However, the need to discuss their ideas and thoughts before writing did not necessarily transfer to the editing or writing of the papers. Approximately 49% of the students felt that peer editing their work was relevant to helping improve their own writing. Moreover, 33% of those surveyed felt indifferent to writing their papers with a partner.

Speaking (Questions 13-16)

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. About an equal percentage enjoyed presenting their work orally to the class. 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.

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. Of those surveyed, 53% found it enjoyable and important when the teacher allowed them to present as others took notes. However, only 42% wanted to bring their own recorded conversations to class for listening activities.

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. However, 81% of those surveyed felt that they should be dependent on their teachers for information. Additionally, 56% believed that there was too much work given in class demonstrating that the students are being asked to be more involved in their own learning process. Nevertheless, this is a more challenging task and thus perceived as more work for students.

More than half of the students, 66%, preferred that their English teacher use the Arabic language to teach them English. Additionally, approximately 60% of students expressed a preference for having a set of structured classroom activities. Under half of the students surveyed, 41%, found it acceptable to talk while the teacher is speaking and 30% have no opinion on the matter. Surprisingly, only 28% felt that there needed to be more emphasis on memorization activities.

Upwards of 57% of those surveyed felt that the teacher should embarrass students who were misbehaving. Only 27% of the students surveyed said they had a higher respect for teachers that belonged to their own religion or tribe. Approximately 31% 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. Half of the respondents in the study still subscribe to the teacher-centered learning model when it comes to viewing teachers as depositories of knowledge—they are the authority figure and should not be questioned.

Discussion

In the General Skills category, students' responses displayed several significant points. These included the use of native language, preference for structured teacher-centered instruction, and the importance of memorization, and classroom etiquette. The findings of the study indicated that Saudi female students prefer to have someone who can explain concepts to

them in their native language. This concurred with the findings of Saito and Ebsworth (2004) who found that Japanese students also preferred explanations in their native language. Students expressed a preference for having a set of structured classroom activities as also evidenced in Xiao's (2006) study with Chinese students. Typically, students in a teacher-centered classroom adhere to the mindset that the teacher is the dispenser of knowledge. Although Saudi female students welcomed the student-centered activities, they still believe that memorization is an effective learning tool when learning English. It is not surprising to find that students believe that memorization is critical in their learning process since it is a predominant method used in most of their schooling experience at elementary and secondary levels change to (United Nations, 2003).

In the reading category, students' responses indicated their preferences towards a student-centered approach. Students acknowledged the value of self-contribution in regards to knowledge acquisition during reading activities. Although relevant research in adult settings is limited with regards to a student-centered approach for reading, the results of this study corroborate current evidence-based practices for ESL and TEFL students (Peyton, Moore, & Young, 2007). Giving students opportunities to read in student-centered activities could improve their skills and seems to be preferred by TEFL students.

Student responses about writing were not consistent. For example, students stated that they were comfortable brainstorming writing ideas together while being uncomfortable with peer editing. This could be due to the fact that brainstorming is a non-threatening social activity while peer editing requires critical analysis of another student's work. Considering that Saudi society values the group over the individual, activities like peer editing singles a person out. Students are apprehensive about their peers looking at their written work. Peer editing is a learnt skill and students need time to adjust to this type of strategy and to learn how to give and receive appropriate feedback (Hansen & Liu, 2005). 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. These factors can be reduced by proper implementation of peer editing from the teacher (Hansen & Liu, 2005).

Similar to the responses in the writing category, student responses in speaking illustrated a clear

preference for social group activities in lieu of individual performance activities that place students in the center stage. A preference was shown for interviewing and role-playing over individual class presentations. A similar result to a lesser extent was present in Reid's (1987) study with ESL students from Arab backgrounds. Reid found that there was a slight preference towards group work, although the major learning style was visual. For the listening category, students' responses indicated an indifference towards non-traditional tasks. They appeared to be more comfortable with pencil and paper tasks than bringing in their own tape-recorded conversations. From a previous study with learning styles, it was found that students from Arab backgrounds preferred visual over auditory learning (Reid). Additionally, roughly half the students were amenable to giving oral presentations while others took notes. This was a surprising result since in writing and speaking the students preferred non-threatening social activities. However, in listening activities they do not mind giving individual oral presentations. While this appears to be a contradiction requiring further study, it could be that in this scenario the student would be in a leadership role similar to that of the teacher, possibly making it more appealing.

One key conclusion drawn from the cultural category in the survey is that Saudi female students have an inclination towards Arabic speaking English teachers. This correlates to previous studies that also state that students like having NNESTs (Liu & Zhang, 2007; Saito & Ebsworth, 2004). However, only a small percentage of students indicated that they would have a higher regard for NNESTs from their own region or tribe. NESTs and NNESTs should be aware that tribalism is a cultural factor that is present in Saudi TEFL academic settings as it could possibly influence the student/teacher relationship in TEFL classes there.

Conclusion

The findings of this study show that while Saudi students showed acceptance toward the student-centered learning approach, not all student-centered activities are well-liked. There are certain activities within the student centered learning approach that are not chosen as preferred activities, such as individually recording speech at home for listening to in class. 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 teacher-centered approach is thriving. The belief that teachers have absolute knowledge of their respective subject area is clear as more than 80% of students surveyed said that they should be dependent on their teachers for information. The preference for learning English through the use of Arabic can be attributed to the students' experience of learning English in schools in Saudi Arabia, where the majority of EFL teachers 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 indicate that the new generation of Saudi students are willing to experience a non-traditional teaching style. They find learning both from NESTs and NNESTs beneficial. English Language Centers in Saudi Arabia should employ NESTs as well as NNESTs who have experience in the use of a student-centered approach. Teacher-training programs should also examine and implement innovative ways of teaching English for their pre-service teachers by exposing them to a student-centered approach. The key lesson is that teachers have to be selective in their choice of student-centered activities taking into consideration their students' cultural background and learning preferences.

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