



English for Specific Purposes: Learners' Preferences and Attitudes

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Abstract

Language teachers face a task of making professional decisions to ensure effective language learning and rely to a great extent on learner-centeredness, learning-centeredness and communicative language teaching.

This paper addresses the issue of learners' preferences of the methodology of learning a foreign language and the importance of proficiency that is placed on various language skills.

The research aimed at gathering such data from the students at university and making informed decisions to improve the quality of language teaching and learning.

Introduction

Each language teacher has to make professional decisions to ensure effective language learning. Several key concepts that have an influence on effective language learning include learner-centeredness, learning-centeredness and communicative language teaching (Nunan & Lamb, 1996: 34).

Learner-centeredness means active involvement of learners in their learning processes. Learning-centeredness means that learners are able to decide what and how to learn. Communicative language teaching involves real communication - carrying out meaningful tasks and teaching meaningful (to the learner) language.

Teachers' decisions made during language instruction depend on various factors, among which the most important are the goals of a language course and the needs of the individual learner as well as learner methodological preferences and attitudes to the importance of various language skills.

This paper addresses the issue of learners' 'likes' and 'dislikes' of the methodology of learning a foreign language and the importance of proficiency that is placed on various language skills. The investigation aimed at gathering such data from the students at university and making informed decisions to ensure effective language learning.

Research Data

Preferences, likes and dislikes

The learners' methodological preferences for learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) were

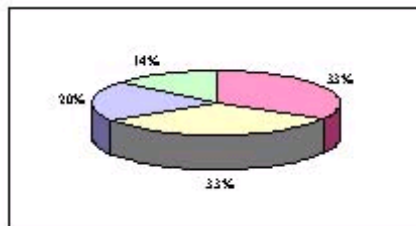
examined using a slightly modified questionnaire described in the reference (Nunan & Lamb, 1996: 36).

There were 43 respondents to this questionnaire who by the time of administering a questionnaire had had 100 hours of instruction in the ESP course, i.e. the questionnaire was administered in the middle of the ESP course.

The learners' responses to six questions on their learning attitudes are presented and discussed below. The questionnaire (after Nunan, Lamb, 1996) was modified in accordance with our settings.

1 How do you like learning?

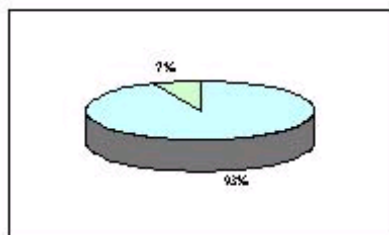
A - Individually	33%
B - In Pairs	33%
C - In Small Groups	20%
D - In One Large Group	14%



The replies to the first question 'How do you like learning?' vary and are depicted in a pie chart. The third of learners prefer learning individually, another third - in pairs. Work in small groups is a priority of the fifth of learners, and the remaining minority favors working in a large group. Thus, pair or small group work is supported by 53% of our learners, and 47% do not favor it. Pie chart demonstrates these findings. The data surprisingly contradict a learner-centered approach which has been widely advocated by a number of English language practitioners, who describe pair or small group work as indispensable. Lately pair work has been considered as the most effective way to develop communicative skills of interaction in the target language.

2 Do you want to do homework?

Yes	93%	No	7%
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If 'Yes', how much time a week do you spend on doing homework?

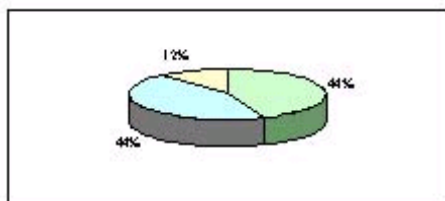
Hours	Percentage	Hours	Percentage
0.5	2%	4	9%
1	23%	6	7%
2	40%	7	2%
3	17%		

The responses to the second question on homework do not vary much: 93 per cent of learners support the idea of homework against 7 per cent who reject it (a pie chart above). It is noteworthy that basically the weakest students dislike the idea of doing homework. The amount of time spent on homework varies from meagre half an hour to extreme 7 hours a week. The percentage is presented under the pie chart and can be summarised as follows. Generally speaking, 80 per cent of learners spend between 1 and 3 hours a week doing their homework: 23 per cent - 1 hour, 40 per cent - 2 hours, and 17 per cent - 3 hours. Only two students, which makes just 2 per cent, need either 0.5 hour and 7 hours to do their homework. The individual analysis of data revealed the tendency of slow learners and under-achievers to spend fewer hours on homework while fast learners spend more time on it.

- 3 Do you like learning
- a) by memory? 9%
 - b) by problem solving? 37%
 - c) by getting information yourself? 65%
 - d) by listening to tapes / cassettes and taking notes? 65%
 - e) by reading and taking notes? 65%
 - f) by copying from the chalkboard or overhead projector? 2%
 - g) by repeating what you hear? 16%

The learning styles differ greatly for individual learners (question 3). Major priorities in the order of importance cover the following areas: 65 per cent prefer reading, taking notes and getting information themselves; 60 per cent favor listening and taking notes; 37 per cent like problem-solving tasks. Other learning styles, e.g. by memorizing (9 per cent) or by repeating what one hears (16 per cent) or by copying from the chalkboard / overhead projector (2 per cent) are in minority.

- 4 When you speak do you want to be corrected by your teacher / peer
- a) immediately, in front of everybody? 44%
 - b) later, at the end of the activity? 44%
 - c) later, in private? 12%



The issue of correction (question 4, a pie chart above) seems to bother learners. The same number of respondents prefer to be corrected immediately in front of their peers or later, at the end of the activity, which, all in all, makes 88 per cent. This fact contradicts the accepted among practitioners good practice of avoiding giving correction during or immediately after activities, basically to avoid learners' embarrassment. Only 12 per cent of respondents prefer to be corrected later but in private.

- 5 Which activities do you find useful?
- a) role-play 9%
 - b) language games 26%
 - c) projects 47%
 - d) songs 12%
 - e) talking with and listening to other students 65%
 - f) memorizing dialogues/conversations 9%
 - g) writing summaries 35%
 - h) dictation 9%
 - i) writing grammar exercises for peers 35%
 - j) any other (specify) 15%

The learners' preferred and marked as the most useful activities (question 5) are ranked below in order of importance: speaking to or listening to peers - 65%; preparing and presenting projects - 47%; writing summaries and designing grammar exercises for peers - 35%; language games - 26%.

The least liked activities include songs (12%), role-plays (9%), and dictation (9%).

The question on testing has not been included in this list, so the raising this issue in the section k) 'specify' by students has come as a surprise: 15% of students expressed a wish to write grammar tests once a week! As a matter of fact, students are tested twice during a semester on ESP vocabulary only.

- 6 Do you get a sense of satisfaction from
- a) having you work graded? None
 - b) being told that you have made progress? 51%
 - c) feeling more confident when using English? 42%

None of our students get a sense of satisfaction from having their work graded (question 6). However, half of them feel happy being told they have made progress, and 42% feel more confident when using English. 7% failed to tick either b) or c) answers.

Attitudes to Proficiency

The importance of proficiency in different aspects of language was examined by administering a questionnaire similar to the one described in (Kenning, 2001) and suitably modified to our settings. Three ranking preferences - unimportant, important and essential - were offered as assessment of proficiency significance. The learner responses are presented in percentage in the Table 1. Percentage is considered as a more tangible way of presenting statistical data.

Table 1: Importance of Proficiency in Different Aspects of Language (after Kenning, 2001)

	Unimportant	Important	Essential
Reading			
ESP Texts	-	16%	84%
Newspapers	13%	84%	3%
Magazines	47%	50%	3%
Books	44%	37%	19%
Speaking			
Presentations	6%	28%	66%
Formal Conversations	6%	47%	47%
Informal Conversations	-	72%	28%
Writing			
Summaries	6%	25%	69%
Formal Letters	16%	66%	18%
Emails	50%	44%	6%
Listening To			
Lectures	8%	61%	31%
TV/Radio	2%	61%	37%
English Speakers	7%	56%	37%

Translating			
From English	3%	44%	53%
Into English	-	31%	69%
Other Usage			
For Telephoning	47%	53%	-
For Studies	6%	41%	53%
For Traveling	15%	44%	41%
Grammar	3%	41%	56%
For Exams	-	12%	88%

To simplify comprehension of data given in the Table 1, the summary of prevailing preferences is provided in the Table 2. Learners' responses have been ranked in the order of chosen priorities and by adding 'important' and 'essential' scores.

Table 2: Ranking Learners' Preferences

Language Usage	Important + Essential
Reading ESP Texts	100%
For Exams	100%
Speaking Informally	100%
Translating into English	100%
Translating from English	97%
Making Presentations	94%
Writing Summaries	94%
Speaking Formally	94%
Listening to Lectures	92%

The data in Table 2 is very straightforward. Learners know exactly what they want to learn by the end of the course.

As it has already mentioned, we had a comparatively small sample of respondents, who were doing a two-year ESP course at university. By the end of the course, learners are expected to sit their final examination. Therefore, the learners' responses are not open to a wide range of interpretations, i.e. what students want to achieve in different aspects of language. Learners' responses are substantiated by their short-term objectives of passing tests and exams. Although exam-oriented items in the questionnaire are scattered over all language skills, these items scored the highest ranking: reading ESP texts, writing summaries, making presentations got the maximum response. Quite understandably, the items of no immediate use like writing e-mails, listening to radio, watching TV, listening to lectures in English, speaking to native speakers of English, telephoning, reading newspapers and books, writing formal letters received lower rating.

It is noteworthy that learners' positive attitude to the issue of translating has been overwhelming. Translating from/into English received the highest ranking although translation skills are not tested. Need in translation is felt by learners as major difficulty in language acquisition (Januleviciene, Kavaliauskiene, 2002).

The research findings show that students have a short-term approach to studying a foreign language. In our settings, learners are more concerned with immediate relevance to their current circumstances. Moreover, students are more concerned about getting good marks than developing language skills. The school mentality for accountability prevails: learners do not seek to improve their knowledge, skills or competence. A major objective seems to be to pass a test or exam as well as possible and not to bother about prospective needs.

This attitude is partly substantiated by the fact of being away from the target language community. It explains why nearly half of learners are less concerned with a communicative approach to language learning and communicative tasks. Moreover, they are rarely motivated to carry out autonomous

activities such as listening to the BBC news on the radio, watching English channels on TV or reading authentic English newspapers, journals or books for professional purposes.

Conclusions

Three main conclusions can be drawn from this research. First, slightly more than half of the learners favor a communicative approach to perfecting their language skills by working in pairs / small groups, taking part in projects and practicing English by talking to their peers.

Second, given assignments 65% of learners prefer getting information themselves, listening to recordings in class and taking notes.

Third, a short-term approach to studying a foreign language prevails: learners seek passing their exams and getting good marks, and are not concerned with improving language skills and competence for the future usage.

The implications of this research for language teachers is to find the ways of motivating learners to lifelong learning, to negotiate with learners on their priorities for various activities in class, and to incorporate activities that learners prefer.

About the Author

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