

THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT PERCEPTIONS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Özet

Bu çalışma öğretmen ve öğrencilerin İngiliz Dili Eğitimi öğretimi aktiviteleri hakkındaki algılamalarının kıyaslanmasını amaçlamaktadır. Özellikle öğrencilerin dinleme, konuşma, okuma ve yazma öğretimi için kullanılan aktiviteler hakkındaki düşünceleri üzerinde odaklanmaya çalışıldı.

Üç bayan öğretmenle 20 öğrenci bu çalışmaya katıldı. Barkhuizen tarafından hazırlanan ENLEAS-Q adlı sormaca Çukurova Üniversitesi İngiliz Dili Eğitimi bölümünden 20 hazırlık öğrencisine uygulandı.

Öğretmen ve öğrenci algılamaları arasında herhangi bir denklik olup olmadığı, öğrencilerin aktiviteleri dil öğrenimlerine uygun bulup bulmadıkları ve yapılan aktivitelerin memnuniyet derecesi incelendi.

Sormacadan elde edilen veriler SPSS istatistik programı yardımı ile Karl-Pearson chi-square testi uygulanarak çözümlendi.

Anahtar sözcükler: Algılama, Öğrenci merkezlilik, İletişimsel Dil Öğretimi

Summary of the Study

This study aims at comparing students' and their teachers' perceptions about English Language Teaching activities. We try to focus on the thoughts of the students about the activities used for listening, speaking, reading and writing in their language classrooms.

Three female instructors and 20 university students participated in this study. We used a questionnaire prepared by Barkhuizen (ENLEAS-Q) with 20 participants from the preparatory classes of the English Language Teaching Department of Çukurova University.

We investigate:

- whether the perceptions of the students match with those of their teachers
- whether the students find the activities relevant to their language learning
- whether the activities result in enjoyment

The data obtained from ENLEAS-Q were entered into SPSS statistical program. A Karl-Pearson chi-square test was used to test the significance.

Key Words: Perception, Learner centeredness, Communicative Language Teaching

Teaching is really hard work as it requires many skills, thinking, and decision making. It is like a work of art, not a job anybody can do. Teachers should bear in mind that learning is not a product or an outcome. In fact, it is an active process, which involves evaluating the learning experiences and receiving and constructing knowledge. It is the learners responsibility to learn; s/he can choose to learn, and what, when, why to learn. As Barkhuizen indicated:

They be encouraged to express their perceptions overtly, both for themselves and their teachers. Doing so would allow learners to consider why they are participating in certain activities, how these activities help them learn English, and what use they can make of them both for academic purposes and outside of the classroom. (in Bulut and Durak,2002, p. 2-3)

Teaching and/or learning a language as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) require many decisions. At this point, ESL/EFL teachers are at the heart of the teaching and learning processes. Freeman stated (1989) that “seeing teaching as choosing between options or making decisions is not by itself new or controversial” (p.37). According to Barkhuizen (1998), learners are ignored or seldomly involved during this decision making process. This means he is after their involvement. As Lewis and Hill stated:

It is almost invariably a good idea to begin a new course by discussing with students why they are studying English, what uses they see for the English they learn, and something of their expectations of what they expect to happen in the classroom. It also helps to discuss what students expect to enjoy, and not enjoy (1990, p.9).

We all know that decision making for a classroom activity is a painful process. We should always take who, what, where types of questions into consideration while we are deciding on the type of activities to use, for whom we will design an activity, and where we will use this activity.

McDonough put it quite clearly (1986) that “as language teachers, we need to understand as much as possible about the language teaching/language learning process”(p.161). It is doubtless that teachers have a powerful role in classroom atmosphere, and they play a critical role in L2 learning. This important role led to have teacher-centered classes, where teachers were dominant. However, in recent years the focus of the learning process has been shifted to language learners in new teaching approaches (e.g. student-centered approach).

In these approaches, students are at the centre of learning process. According to Bada (1997), student-centered approaches are those “where learners are no longer free from the responsibility of contributing to their language learning; rather, they are active participants in designing and evaluating their language learning process” (p.20). He also added that learner-centeredness has extra responsibilities both for teachers and students. Teachers should evaluate themselves in a critical way. Students, on the other hand, share the teachers’ burden. They are expected to produce something.

As teachers, we should accept the fact that without learners’ participation in the English class, there will not be an effective and enjoyable teaching. That is the very main reason for taking the perceptions of the learners in the classes into consideration.

Teaching and/or learning an L2 is hard work, and teachers have more responsibilities. They should make this learning process fun for their students. Learners should not see learning as a burden, nor should they have the feeling of being obliged to learn. Instead, by involving them into our activities and by creating an enjoyable atmosphere, we can make them learn the L2 in an enjoyable way.

Now that we have seen the significance of teacher and learner in language teaching and learning processes, we can come to the conclusion that we should be aware of our students and their perceptions so that we can bring suitable activities for developing their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in the classroom.

The purpose of this descriptive study is to learn about the learners' perceptions about different language skill activities in the classroom. So, we formed three research questions:

1. Are the perceptions of the students different from those of the instructors?
2. Do the learners find the activities relevant to their language learning?
3. Do the activities result in enjoyment?

Methodology

Participants

Three female instructors and 20 university students participated in this study. We utilized cluster random sampling technique while selecting the sample. The students with the mean age of 18 were at the preparatory program of the English Language Teaching (ELT) Department at Çukurova University, Adana. The instructors' mean of teaching experience was six years.

Instrumentation

We utilized three tasks to gather the data: the ENLEAS-Q, free compositions titled "What I like and dislike about English classes at school", and interviews with the instructors about the syllabi, students' needs, and the activities they brought to the classes. In the ENLEAS-Q, there was a list of 30 classroom activities. Each activity was divided into three actions, which learners rated on a four-ranked ordinal scale (definitely, quite a bit, just a little, not at all). The three actions were:

1. EN (Enjoyment): Students were expected to express a feeling, a reflection: "Do you enjoy doing this activity in class?" The answer would yield the expression of a favorable or unfavorable feeling or attitude towards the activity.
2. LE (Learn English): The students were asked to judge: "Do you think this activity helps you to learn more English?" Students evaluated the activity by relating it to their own progress in learning and then make a judgement about its effectiveness.

3. AS (After School): The students predicted whether the activity would be beneficial for their lives after graduation: “Do you think that doing this activity in class will be useful to you one day when you have finished school?” (Barkhuizen, 1998)

These abbreviations named the task itself ENLEAS-Q. There were four sections: Section A contained personal questions about students’ age, sex, and grade; Section B and Section C had questions about the activities done in a language classrooms and Section D contained an open-ended question about students’ personal thoughts. We included an extract from the ENLEAS-Q in the appendix.

For the composition task, the title was written on whiteboards during the class sessions, and the students were asked to write one or two paragraphs either in Turkish or English which would be about their feelings in their English lessons. It was a take-home task, and they were told that they did not have to write down their names on their response sheet.

Then we had interviews with the instructors. There were ten questions, and the answers were recorded to a tape recorder. The questions included the activities in the ENLEAS-Q, and we asked them to indicate to rate each activity from the most to the least preferred.

Procedure

Before administering the questionnaire, we first observed the class for two or three class hours to see which activities and wordings utilized in order to adapt Barkhuizen’s questionnaire. Based on our observations, we made a couple of modifications to the questionnaire. For example, instead of “reading set books”, we used “reading short stories” since that was the terminology used in the reading class. After adapting the questionnaire and forming the questions for the interviews, we administered the questionnaire.

We distributed the questionnaire to 20 preparatory students at the ELT Department of Çukurova University. All the explanations were in Turkish in order to create a relaxed atmosphere and to enable students to understand the instructions easily. The participants were not asked to write down their names on the questionnaire. They completed the questionnaire in 45 minutes. Each question also had a comment part for the students to write their further explanations. After completing the questionnaire, we asked the participants to write a composition about “What I like and dislike about English classes at school” (Barkhuizen, 1998). They wrote the compositions at home and in Turkish. This task enabled us to learn about their feelings and perceptions about their language classes, which they could not emphasize in the questionnaire. We, then, interviewed their instructors. We recorded their comments on their thoughts about their language classes, activities done in a classroom, and their students’ perceptions.

Then, we entered the data obtained from the ENLEAS-Q into SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences), read the compositions and categorized the

likes and dislikes of all the student participants and transcribed the recordings of the teacher participants comments.

Findings and discussion

We analyzed the data obtained from the ENLEAS-Q as positive perception percentage (PPP). A Karl-Pearson chi-square test was used to test the significance of our ordinal data and ranked the most favorite activities for enjoyment, learning English, after school categories. Then we compared the results with the data from the compositions and from the transcriptions of the interviews to see whether there is a match between the perceptions of the instructors and the students. We would like to discuss the findings of each action (Enjoyment, Learn English and After School) in detail, investigating their most favorable skills and activities used in the class while developing these skills. In Table 1, we illustrated the positive perceptions of the students towards these three actions.

First of all, when we look at Table 1 for the enjoyment action, we see that the most enjoyable skills were **listening and speaking** such as listening to pop songs (Activity 29; rank 1), listening to tapes or watching videos (Activity 27; rank 2), listening to tapes and watching videos (Activity 27; rank: 2). For speaking activities, doing orals like speeches (Activity 16; rank: 2) and practice speaking class whenever possible (Activity 25; rank: 2) were their favorites. However, based on our interviews with the instructors, the instructors did not seem to be aware of students' ideas about speaking activities. They claimed that their students wanted to speak neither in front of class nor with their friends because they had the fear of making mistakes and hated producing and hearing speeches full of mistakes. They believed that while they were lecturing, their students preferred sitting at their desks and taking notes to being active in class. However, as we see in Activity 20, the students did not enjoy listening to their teacher while sitting in class passively as much as the instructors had expected (rank 6). In other words, the students, unlike what the instructors perceived, were in favor of being active; they did not want to sit at their desks and get the input from their teachers. For the listening activities, their perceptions were in line with those of the students since they knew that the students enjoyed these activities. In their compositions, the students confirmed the findings of ENLEAS-Q. Thirteen students out of twenty wrote in their compositions that they like the activities related to the speaking and listening skills.

Reading was found to be the second most favored language skill. The students mostly enjoyed reading short stories at home (Activity 9 with the rank of 2) than in class (Activity 10, with the rank of 8). Reading aloud in class (Activity 19) was chosen as the least favored activity for the reading skill with rank of 9. However, as we observed, the reading instructor did not seem to be aware of the negative perceptions towards activities 10 and 19. The texts were long and the subjects were boring for students at this age. The qualitative data obtained from the compositions were in line with the quantitative data of the questionnaire. For example, one student wrote that he did not like reading long passages. Similarly, two others indicated that

the texts they were reading were very boring. These comments were shared by most of the students. Their dislikes might be due to the fact that they read aloud in class and were asked to look up into a dictionary while reading, which they hated (Act. 12; range 11). If teachers made such preference of learners, the reading activities would be more enjoyable.

Among the grammar and mechanical skills activities, only Activity 14 with the rank of 2 (learning correct spelling) and Activity 13 with the rank of 3 (learning about parts of speech) were placed on top of their favorite activities. In the compositions three students wrote that they “hated” grammar because of the way the instructor taught. During our interviews with the grammar instructor, she claimed that though the students hated grammar, she had to teach the rules. She was not aware of the fact that the students placed grammar among their top three favorites. Another mismatching point was the technique of introducing grammar. Students did not enjoy the technique in which grammar rules were presented before practice (deductive technique). However, this was what their instructor used in class and thought as the most appropriate technique.

Table 1. The Percentage of Positive Perceptions and Their Ranges

PPPs						
N=20	EN		LE		AS	
	R	%	R	%	R	%
4. Writing composition	8	55	3	90	5	80
5. Writing friendly letters	4	75	5	80	7	60
6. Writing business letters	12	30	3	90	3	90
7. Writing summaries	8	55	2	95	2	95
8. Writing diaries	4	75	6	75	8	50
9. Reading short stories at home	2	90	2	95	3	90
10. Reading short stories in the classroom	8	55	3	90	6	75
11. Doing comprehension	5	70	1	100	5	80
12. Using a dictionary	11	35	1	100	2	95

13. Learning about nouns, verbs, adjectives and etc.	3	85	1	100	3	90
14. Learning correct English spelling	2	90	2	95	3	90
15. Learning about the English tenses, like past and present	10	40	2	95	2	95
16. Doing orals like speeches	2	90	1	100	1	100
17. Having class discussions	4	75	4	85	5	80
18. Writing paragraphs	7	60	3	90	4	85
19. Reading aloud in class	9	45	9	45	8	50
20. Listening to the teacher teach the whole class	6	65	1	100		
21. Working in a pair; that is, with one other student	4	75	5	80		
22. Working in small groups	7	60	7	70		
23. Working on your own	4	75	4	85		
24. Doing English homework	12	30	3	90		
25. Practice speaking English in class whenever possible	2	90	1	100		
26. Reading English newspapers and magazines in class	7	60	4	85		
27. Listening to tapes or watching videos in class	2	90	3	90		
28. Performing plays in class	4	75	8	65		
29. Listening to English songs	1	95	6	75		
30. Watching English channels in class(news, talk shows, etc)	4	75	4	85		
31. Taking English tests during the year	10	40	4	85		
32. Learning about the grammar rules before practicing it	6	65	3	90		
33. Preparing projects in English	5	70	3	90		

Writing seems to be at the bottom of students' favorable skills. They did not like writing business letters (rank 12) or summaries (rank 8) (Activities 6 & 7); however, they liked writing friendly letters (rank 4). One student in her composition indicated that writing in class was the waste of the class hour. But during our interview the writing instructor said that they had to write in class, being unaware of the negative implications. They thought that writing diaries would be the most preferred activity as it was an important way to gather information about students' thoughts. They valued the reflections of the students; whereas, their students hated writing diaries.

For the learning English action (LE) and after school (AS) action, as illustrated in Table 1, we see different skills placed in different ranks except for the listening and speaking skill. That is to say, the most beneficial skills that enhance their learning and that they can use in their future life were found to be speaking and listening, as it was the case for the EN action. For the other skills, the ranks differed. For example, while writing was at the bottom of the ranging for the EN action, it was placed on the upper levels in actions LE and AS. We can infer from this finding that they are aware of the benefits of developing writing; however, this needs to be done for communicatively so that they can enjoy it.

For the assessment, activities 24, 31, and 33 were included in ENLEAS-Q. Generally, students do not like taking tests and being tested. Our participants were no exception. Only 40% (with the rank of 10) enjoyed being tested; however, more students were aware of the necessity of exam taking for their learning English (85% with the rank of 4). Most of them preferred take-home tests such as preparing projects to sit-down tests. Students also did not enjoy doing homework (Activity 24) although they believed that it would be helpful for their learning English (rank 3). These negative perceptions were reflected in their compositions as much. However, they placed these activities at the third range for the action LE. The instructors were aware of this dislike but they indicated that they also had to assess whether or not the students had learned in classes. According to them, exams, projects, and homework were the only ways to find out how much they learned, which is in line with the ideas of the students.

In Table 2, we tried to summarize the top three activities that the students rated. The bold activities in the table indicate that they were chosen more than once. For enjoyment, the top two activities were related to either speaking or listening activities. In fact, these two skills received the highest frequency among the positive perceptions of the learners for all the actions (EN, LE, and AS).

Table 2. The ranks of the top three activities

Rank	1	2	3
EN	Listening: 29	Listening: 27 Speaking: 16; 25 Reading: 9 Grammar: 14	Grammar: 13
LE	Listening: 20 Speaking: 25; 16 Reading: 11; 12 Grammar: 13	Reading: 9 Grammar: 14 ; 15 Writing: 7	Listening: 27 Reading: 10 Grammar: 32 Writing: 4; 6; 18
AS	Speaking: 16	Reading: 12 Grammar: 15 Writing: 7	Reading: 9 Writing: 6 Grammar: 13 ; 14

In the first range, grammar and reading were placed for LE and AS. This may indicate that the students believed that studying grammar would develop their English and be beneficial for their lives after school though they did not enjoy studying it. Writing is ranged at the bottom of our list indicating as the least enjoyed and the least beneficial skill to be developed.

The analyses of the tape transcriptions revealed that the instructors were aware of the students' perceptions. However, we observed some mismatches as well. The most important matching point was the methodology applied in the classes. The students wanted to be active in the class and communicate with their mates, and the teachers most of the time applied Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in class. During our interviews with them and during our observations, CLT was favored in the class. At the university level, the match between the perceptions of both the students and the instructors seems to be almost perfect with the exception of assessment.

Conclusion

The findings of this study are in line with the findings of Barkhuizen. The perceptions of the instructors did not always match with those of the students. For example, grammar was ranked higher than the teachers' expected. Just like the subjects of Barkhuizen, our instructors were surprised when they learned the high positive perceptions towards grammar. When we shared our findings with them, they claimed

that they would stop reading aloud in class and try to speak less, bring cassettes into the classes more often and allot more time for communicative activities.

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