Matching the Students' Learning Preferences with Teacher's Teaching Methods: The Case of International EFL Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

Due to the paramount significance of English as a lingua franca, TESOL has attracted the attention of researchers globally which necessitates the suitable usage of the best methods for achieving the learners' goals. This study examined the students' learning preferences and their teachers' methods and strategies used in specific classrooms. The sample of the study was 20 international EFL male and female learners and one English professor from the National University of Malaysia. The data were elicited from the samples using three instruments: an adapted from Oxford (1990) questionnaire, classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that the teacher's techniques to some extent support the students' tendencies and styles toward learning the English language. It was shown that students are strongly motivated and have the ability to use all the possible strategies during their learning process. Moreover, the teacher confirmed that she supports the students' self-confidence despite the existence of some barriers between the students and their teacher. It is recommended that teachers pay more attention to their students' style preferences during the learning process.

Keywords: students' style preferences, TESOL, the National University of Malaysia, Oxford (1990) questionnaire, classroom observation, teaching strategies, lingua franca, international EFL learners.

1.0 Introduction

Teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) has been improving rapidly due to the importance of the English language as an international language and the medium of communication among the non-native speakers worldwide. Various strategies are used by English instructors to describe specific types of methods used by English teachers to provide suitable language instructions. One of the methods used to observe the strategies applied by teachers and following their teaching process is classroom observation.

The study focuses on different factors that affect learners of the second language such as the teachers' methods and strategies used in the classroom as well as students' preferred styles, strengths and weaknesses toward learning English. This is done in order to see if the strategies used by teachers meet with the students' language learning strategies (LLSs) and styles in language leaning because when the teacher is aware of her students' strengths, this could help in building successful strategies for making successful learners (Alkahtani, 2016; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Furthermore, Al-Khaza'leh (2019), explained that ''language teachers and instructors can play a major role by helping their students to recognize the power of using LLSs for making the learning processes quicker, easier, and more effective.'' (p.69). According to Toohey (2000), teaching strategy is all of the activities

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and resources that a teacher plans in order to enable students to learn. Teaching strategies not only cover teacher activities, but rather they are a plan for teaching / learning. This learning includes information presentation, students' assignments and activities, in addition to all materials that could be used to achieve progress in learning the language (Slavin, 2019; Tavoosy, & Jelveh, 2019). However, the contemporary approaches give additional meaning to this concept broadening its contents, namely, planning of educational activities and their implementations, assessment and control of the process and its results. EFL teachers should be able to apply the useful and appropriate strategies in order to deliver the lessons to the students and they must be equipped with the suitable methods, such as planning and preparing the curriculum and designing the useful teaching aids. Further, teachers must monitor the progress of their students, that is, if the teacher does not feel that there is any progress in teaching the student in this way, teaching strategies should be shifted to another way in order to achieve the intended goals (Nambiar, 2007; Poulisse, 2019).

One of the factors that influence learners' self-efficacy is the teacher who has the authority in the classroom either to support or to weaken his/her students' attitudes and motivation toward language learning. Hence, teacher personality, behavior and methods have a great impact on students' abilities to achieve a good and successful understanding of the target language (Nisbet & Shucksmith, 2017; Wang, Wang, Wang & Huang, 2006). Bandura and Walters (1997) affirm the importance of self-efficacy to students in acquiring the second language successfully. Self-efficacy was defined as the beliefs in ones' capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce a given attainment. Bandura and Walters (ibid) postulated that if the students believe that they do not have the power to produce results, they will not attempt to progress in their learning process.

Shyness is considered as the major problem that learners of other languages face. They try not to speak or use the foreign language because they will feel embarrassed if they make any errors. This phenomenon is called the effective filter by Krashen (1985), who postulates that the feeling of shyness and fear from interaction and using the new language make a barrier between students and the knowledge leading to weakness and failure in the acquisition process as a whole. This is another challenge to teachers to consider and try to decrease the failure emotions in their students and to encourage them to participate and interact in the classroom more and more by using the suitable for them strategies.

The main focus of this study is to examine teacher's strategies in the classroom learning. The study will investigate the instructional methods such as teacher strategies to encourage the risk-taking by students, lowering students' anxiety and availing them a comfortable setting to help them interact more and be more active in classroom. The study will investigate and shed light on teacher methods and plans to enhance and improve the level of student motivation, either intrinsic or extrinsic. The study will try to find out students' learning methods and preferred styles, as well as their strengths in learning English and see whether or not these approaches are considered as successful approaches. In addition, the study will try to find the compatibility level between teacher strategies in classroom and students' approaches toward language learning.

2.0. Statement of The Problem

At the time the study was conducted the majority of international students in the National University of Malaysia (UKM) were postgraduate students doing their PhD and MA/MSc programs at different faculties, such as the Faculty of Engineering, Social Sciences and Humanities and Information Technology. Most of these students were considered as low-proficiency learners in the English language and faced problems and challenges when trying to accommodate themselves to the new educational environment in Malaysia. This is because English is the medium of instruction at the faculties where the students were studying.

There were many demands on the international postgraduate students which they must cope with in order to progress in their studies, but most of these students lack language skills that might help them to meet these demands to be able to pursue their studies smoothly. These demands are highly significant for improving students' academic achievements. As postgraduate students they must have the ability to do academic writing because they are required to produce specific academic writing such as research papers, summaries, critical reviews and essays. Speaking skills are also very important, as it is needed to enable students to convey their ideas and communicate properly with their professors and during their daily life.

Reading and listening skills have important effects in developing students' efforts to use the target language. Reading properly increases students' academic success because when the students are good readers, they can understand the contents of papers and books successfully. The international students in this study were characterized as English low-proficient students and they lacked these important skills. Thus, unless they develop all of these skills, it is difficult for them to pursue their academic studies.

The international students in the study faced problems in using the English language to communicate either orally or in written. They needed various kinds of language learning strategies that would enable them to solve their English language problems. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the students' learning preferences and their teachers' methods and strategies used in specific classrooms.

3.0. Research Design

3.1. Participants

The sample of this study consists of 20 male and female international students at the National University of Malaysia UKM. The participants were studying different fields, mainly from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. They were obliged to take an English course as a compulsory course since they did not pass the English Proficiency Placement Test (EPPT) designed by English language instructors in UKM University. The ages of the students ranged between 25 to 40 years old. The sample also includes one lecturer who was teaching those students the English courses.

3.2. Research instruments

Three instruments ware used in this research to achieve the objectives and collect the needed data. These instruments are: The adapted Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Oxford, 1990), classroom observation and interview.

3.2.1. Questionnaire

The adapted SILL questionnaire (Oxford, 1990) was used in this study to discover the learners' strategies, strengths and weaknesses during their learning process. This questionnaire highlights the styles and the methods that the students prefer to use in order to learn English language. The items of this study are adapted from this questionnaire based on the objectives of the study.

3.1.3 Classroom observation

The observation was conducted for the period of two weeks at the National University of Malaysia, Malaysia during the second semester session of 2009-2010. The researcher observed the teacher's methods and strategies used for enhancing the students' learning process toward learning the second language. Before observation started, there were specific blueprints and questions to be investigated.

The classroom observation focused on different methods and strategies the teacher used in the classroom. The questions in this part tried to investigate whether or not the teacher's strategies in the classroom with the students support and enhance the learning process of the students. The issues that were investigated carefully include: the teacher's strategies for lowering inhibition for the student, the ways how the teacher can encourage risk-taking in the students, the types of the feedback and error correction by the teacher. Also the article investigated the teacher's methods and strategies to promote cooperative learning such as group work, teacher's methods to support the students' motivation (intrinsic and extrinsic), the ways how the teacher encouraged the students' creativity in the classroom and gave the students the freedom to share their ideas in classroom community. Another issue is the nature of the relations between the teacher and the students and whether or not it provides comfortable environment.

3.2.3. Interview

The third procedure that was used in this research was an interview with the teacher who taught the students the English courses as designed by the National University of Malaysia, held in order to ask her about her techniques and strategies that she uses with the students in the classroom in order to enhance their capabilities toward learning the English language. The interview lasted thirty minutes and MP3 tape recorder was used to record the teacher's answers and responses. In this part of the research, the researcher focused on the teacher's strategies and methods that she used in her classroom by asking questions about her ability to encourage risk-taking by the students and her methods for lowering the students' anxiety and support the students' self-confidence. Also she was asked about her techniques of developing students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The aim of this interview was to see whether or not the teacher's strategies in teaching are compatible with the students' methods in learning.

4.0. Results and Analysis

4.1. Questionnaire results

As mentioned earlier, Oxford's (1990) (SILL) was adapted for the study as it had been considered to be more comprehensive in accounting for strategies used by the learners. It had also been extensively field-tested for reliability and validity. The items utilized in this study were selected by the researcher based on the objectives of this study. To ensure the validity of these items, they were checked by two English language professors in Shaqra University, Saudi Arabia and found to be clear and able to achieve the required objectives. A 5-point Likert scale was used to rate the students' responses:

Table 1 below illustrates the responses of the students concerning their preferred learning methods.

Table 1: Students' learning preferences and methods

ITEMS	strongly agree (4)	agree (3)	do not know (0)	disagree (2)	strongly disagree (1)
I don't mind if people laugh at me when I speak	16	1	0	2	1

I like to try out new words and structures that I'm not completely sure of	12	1	0	0	6
I feel very confident in my abilities to succeed in learning this language	14	3	0	2	1
I want to learn this language because of what I can personally gain from it	15	2	0	1	2
I really enjoy working with other people in the group	16	1	0	2	1
I like to absorb the language and get the general gist of what is said or written	4	2	6	1	7
If there is abundance of language to master, I just try to take things one step at a time	10	6	0	1	3
I'm not overtly conscious of myself when I speak	2	1	1	1	15
When I make mistakes, I try to use them to learn something about the language	18	0	0	2	0
I find ways to continue learning language outside of the classroom	17	1	0	2	0

Adapted from Oxford (1990)

Table 1 shows that the students used different styles and operations in order to achieve accuracy and good learning in the English language. The majority of the students (80%) do not mind if other people laugh at them when they make errors, since the most important thing for them is the learning, even if they make some errors in the beginning, but they still want to learn the language and this is considered as one of the strong methods in learning the language. Meanwhile, about 60% of the students like and want to try new words even if they are not sure about their validity, so the students were testing their hypothesis by using new words, which is one of the functions of the output hypothesis by Swain (1985). 70 % of the students feel that they have the confidence in their abilities to succeed in learning the English language, 75% like to learn English not just to pass the courses, but also they believe that they can take advantages from the language in their daily lives, so they have intrinsic motivation to learn English language. Another salient style used by the students was that they enjoyed working together in groups (collaborative learning). About 75% of the students liked this method and this let them share their knowledge and do more discussion about the topic. 35% of the students like or prefer to analyze the details of the language that they learn, either spoken or written, in order to understand better, but they do not like to get a general gist about the topic. 50% of the students liked to learn the language step by step, which gives them a better chance to think about what they learn, so they memorize it very well.

75% of the total number of the respondents used the style of monitoring themselves when they spoke English. About 90% of the students try to take advantages and learn from their errors, and they do not feel upset if they make mistakes, instead, they plan to learn more in the next time to avoid the mistakes. Selinker (1972) views learners' errors as evidence of positive efforts by the students to learn the new language, whereas Corder (1975) explains that the errors made by the learners indicate a development of underlying linguistic competence and reflect the learners' attempts to organize their linguistic input.

In addition, 85% of the students depend on their teachers or on classroom activities to learn the language, as well as on finding out new ways and channels to learn the English language outside the classroom. Hence, they set their personal goals in order to develop their language competency.

4.2. Observation results

In the observation part of the study it was found that the teacher's techniques to some extent supported the students' tendencies and styles toward learning the English language. The observation starts with the types of feedback that were used by the teacher in the classroom. It was found that the predominant feedback used is the recast implicit type of corrective feedback, in which the teacher reacted to the wrong answers given by the students positively by telling her students that they may mean this or that instead of saying directly this is wrong.

This kind of feedback supports the level of students' participation, whereby the students might feel comfortable even if they were mistaken. This feedback could improve the students' risk-taking and make them more active members in the classroom. Further, another major type of feedback was noticed during the observation, which is the metalinguistic feedback in which the teacher provided comments, information, and questions related to the students' utterances. For example, when a student answered wrongly to the given question, the teacher started to give more information about the topic to help the student understand better. The second observed strategy in the classroom was collaborative learning by asking the students share their knowledge in small groups and discuss it with each other. Both strategies met with the students' preferred styles and approaches in the learning process.

Other significant strategies employed by the teacher include: asking a lot of questions to the students to make them involve more in class participation and collaborative learning. Moreover, the teacher used different ways for explaining to the students, such as repetition, speaking slowly, using the board to explain about the subject and give more information. However, and despite the aforementioned useful strategies utilized by the teacher, it was noticed that there were some barriers between

the teacher and her students. That is, she did not try to share with the students other than those discussed in classroom which might affect the classroom environment.

4.3 Interview results

In the interview, the researcher asked the teacher some questions to figure out her teaching strategies used in the classroom with the students. The impetus behind these questions is to figure out whether or not her strategies are fully valid and compatible with the students' styles and methods. The first question was about her strategies in encouraging risk taking by the students, she explained that, she supported the students' interaction by giving them problem solving tasks and asking questions. Furthermore, she confirmed that she used the recast feedback by correcting the students indirectly instead of directly disagree with them. This strategy supports the students' self-confidence because they feel safe if they make mistakes. Using this strategy by the teacher is compatible with the students' approach toward risk taking, since most of the students explain that they are ready to take risks for the sake of learning

Another strategy was used by the teacher when she was asked about supporting the collaborative learning in the classroom. She explained that she uses group work strategy by asking her students to work together. This group work could improve students' communication skills and promote their thinking and decision making in addition to sharing information. About the strategies used by the teacher to improve and encourage the students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, she explained that she motivates them through using such motivating words as 'you are good students' and 'you can easily pass the course but you have to study and believe in your abilities'. As for extrinsic motivation, the teacher used to emphasize the importance of learning English and that the students would benefit from it in everyday life, such as while looking for jobs and communicating with colleagues.

When the teacher was asked about the strategies she used in the classroom to make her speech understood and to help the students understand better, she explained that she used different methods, such as repeating, using the board for explanations, rephrasing and giving examples.

5.0. Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined the students' learning preferences and their teachers' methods and strategies used in specific classrooms. The findings of this study have many implications concerning teaching the English language. Based on the analysis, it has been noticed that the students improved their English, since they applied successful approaches toward learning English under teacher's guidance. Most of them showed multiple methods. They preferred using various strategies to achieve their goals in learning the English language. The students showed a great maturity toward learning process in which they were able to take any expected risks just to help them better understand what they heard / read. The results showed that the respondents were highly motivated toward learning the English language, and they believe in the importance of the English language not only for passing courses but also for their future lives, thus, they believe in rewards of learning English. Moreover, the students explained that they are very confident with their abilities to succeed in learning and using English inside and outside the classroom.

The role of the teacher in this case is crucial because applying effective teaching strategies in the classroom yields students' higher academic achievements. Teachers should encourage the beneficial tendencies for the students and should be aware of their learning methods in order to help them choose the suitable strategies that fit with their learning proffered styles and support their abilities toward learning. Also it is the responsibility of the teacher to build a conductive learning environment in the classroom and teach students how to learn in a better way.

Upon the analysis of the observation and interview findings it is inferred that the teacher to some extent used effective strategies to support the students' learning process. These strategies were used to highlight and achieve different purposes, such as encouraging the risk-taking by the students and lowering their inhibitions, building their self-confidence by praising them and giving them a suitable feedback as well as engaging in real conversation. Yet there is still a barrier between the teacher and her students and this definitely has a negative impact on the classroom environment.

The implications for teaching are that language teachers need to find out what learning strategies students are already using for the different tasks they fulfil in the language classroom. An open discussion of reasons why students use the strategies they identified can help teachers understand cultural and contextual factors that may be influencing their students. This can lead to clarification of the tasks' demands where there is a mismatch with students' current learning strategies. By understanding the task more clearly, students will likely be more motivated to try new strategies. Furthermore, effective language learning can be achieved when teachers are aware of their students' preference styles.

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