An Investigation of College Students' Preferred Classroom Activities in an EFL Context

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Abstract

With the use of a questionnaire administered to 93 EFL students and 47 teachers, the present study investigates the perceptions of Omani college level EFL students towards their most preferred classroom activities and their teachers' perceptions of these preferences. Eight types of class activities were investigated with a total of 48 items. These were: reading, writing, listening, speaking, testing, feedback, participation and other activities. The study is also set to explore the effect of two main variables on students' classroom preferences, namely the effect of student gender and students' proficiency level. Results of the study showed a wide agreement between students and teachers where they differed significantly in only 14 classroom activities out of 48 activities. As for the effect of gender, the results revealed that the means scored by female students in all types of classroom activities were a little higher than means scored by male students, however, this difference was not a statistically significant one. There were also differences between advanced and beginning students in favor of advanced students in some types of class activities. The study makes a number of pedagogic recommendations.

Key words: classroom activities, preferences, Higher Colleges of Technology, EFL, gender, proficiency level, Oman

INTRODUCTION

The last few decades witnessed a critical shift in the mission and purpose of higher education, as more emphasis is placed on learners and their role in the learning process. This shift was even amplified with the introduction of learner-centered approaches where "learners are treated as co-creators in the learning process, as individuals with ideas and issues that deserve attention and consideration" McCombs and Whistler (1997), cited in Froyd and Simpson (2008). Indeed, in all humanistic views of education, a learner is viewed as one with an inner capacity to gain insights and make choices appropriate to his/her own learning process (Rardin, 1982).

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One major area where students are expected to have the ability to make both choices and decisions is the type of learning activities used in class. Nunan (1988), in his book on learner-centered curriculum believes that "no curriculum can claim to be truly learner-centered unless the learners' subjective needs and perceptions relating to the processes of learning are taken into account" (p.177). Moreover, most language courses that are based on needs analysis identify learners' wants "i.e. their views about what they think is useful for them" as one key type of needs, besides lacks and necessities (Hutshinson & Waters, 1987), and suggest that looking at their choice of activities is a good way to find about what they want in a language course.

Nunan (2000) suggests a five-stepped approach that would help promote learners' role in a learner-centered class. The five main steps are:

1) Awareness. Students here are made aware of their preferred learning tasks and they identify strategy implications of pedagogical tasks.
2) Involvement. Students make choices from a range of options.
3) Intervention. Students here modify or adapt tasks and activities.
4) Creation. Students in this step create their own tasks.
5) Transcendence. Students become teachers and researchers (p. 144).

In spite of this acknowledged importance of students' role, research often suggests that there is imbalance in terms of learners' and teachers' voice in the classroom, as activities chosen, designed and executed by the teacher tend to dominate.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The proliferation of research on students' preferred classroom activities is driven by its significant theoretical and pedagogical implications for EFL teaching/learning. One key factor that research has found to contribute to the type of students' and teachers' preferences of class activities is the socio-cultural as well as educational context where learning takes place. In their cross-country comparison, King (2006) found that the socio-political climate as well as the distinctive pedagogical traditions of each country they investigated in their study, are two key factors linked to students' and teachers' perceptions of classroom activities. Eslami and Valizadeh (2004) investigated both learners' and teachers' voice with regard to classroom activities in an EFL general English course in an Iranian university. They wanted to see if there were significant differences between students' preferences of the type of learning activities and teachers' perceptions of those preferences. The researchers categorized the list of activities investigated into communicative and non-communicative activities. They found that students' and teachers' preferences did not correspond. While students stated that learning vocabulary, speaking activities and speed reading were their top three preferred activities, teachers believed that watching training videos, using laboratory and learning vocabulary by realia were students' most preferred activities. Their results also showed that students had a high preference for communicative activities, contrary to the expectations of their teachers. Given the special nature of the Iranian EFL context, the researchers suggest that a locally developed version of a

communicative language teaching approach may be more appropriate and acceptable and recommend the use of both communicative and more traditional activities. In East Asian countries, most of the studies conducted to investigate the topic report that students generally still tend to value rote learning and more traditional approaches to learning and that they tend to carry these preferences with them to their university education (Qin, 2012). In the Omani context -where the present study is conducted, Al Rubkhi (2006) investigated the classroom activity preferences of grade 10 students in Omani public schools and reported that most students- both male and female_ tend to prefer non-communicative activities.

A similar study to Eslami and Valizadeh (2004) was conducted in a Turkish university by Bada and Okan (2000), but with relatively different kinds of results. Unlike Eslami and Valizadeh's (2004) study, most students' preferences have correlated with those of teachers. The researchers urge for more teacher student cooperation in designing syllabuses, doing weekly course planning and classroom management.

Besides the socio-cultural and/or educational context, research suggests that students' language proficiency level is another important factor that could affect the type of preferences students have. Shortall and Garrett (2002) investigated the perceptions of EFL Brazilian students on the benefits of a range of teaching/learning activities. Some of these were teacher-fronted while others were student-centered. Students from three different proficiency levels (beginners, elementary, and intermediate) were asked to evaluate a group of grammar and fluency activities in terms of their learning value, enjoyment level and comfort level. Findings showed that beginners were more in favour of teacher-fronted activities because of its learning value. Intermediate students, on the other hand, preferred more student-centered activities because of their enjoyment and comfort values; neither of the groups saw any differences in the activities in terms of their learning outcomes.

As can be seen in the review above, most research on this area has compared students' views/beliefs on classroom activities with those of their teachers, and has mostly found differences. Each party brings into the classroom their own set of beliefs and interpretations of what constitutes good teaching and good learning. Barkhaizen (1998), in his study on high school students in South Africa found big differences between students' and teachers' views on teaching/learning activities. Similar results were also reported by several other studies (McCargar, 1993; Reid & Johnson, 2001). Peacock (2001) contends that when a mismatch is found between teaching and learning, this can cause learning failure, frustration and demotivation. He also notes that learning will be improved if students are made aware of a wider range of learning styles. When no harmony exists or if the gap is so big research suggests that a negotiated syllabus procedure or at least a partially negotiated one, can be put in place (Clarke, 1991).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the above observations, the present study was designed to investigate the perceptions of Omani college level EFL students towards their most preferred classroom activities and their teachers' perceptions of these preferences. The study is also set to explore the effect of two main variables on students' classroom preferences, namely the effect of student gender and students' proficiency level.

The following three research questions are addressed in the study:

1) Are there significant differences between Omani EFL teachers and students in their perceptions of students' preferred classroom activities?
2) Are there significant differences between male and female students in their perceptions of their preferred classroom activities?
3) Are there significant differences between students who have different English proficiency levels in their perceptions of their preferred classroom activities?

METHOD

Instrument

The data was collected through a questionnaire that was developed by Spratt (1999) and used in a number of related studies (e.g. Eslami-Rasekh & Valizadeh, 2004). The questionnaire consisted of 48 items of classroom activities divided into 8 dimensions/skills: reading, writing, listening, speaking, testing, participation, feedback and others. Both groups of participants (teachers and students) were given the same questionnaire. The teacher version of the questionnaire asked them to indicate the extent they thought their students liked the listed classroom activities using a five-point scale as follows:

- 5 means "My students always or almost always like this."
- 4 means "My students usually like this."
- 3 means "My students sometimes like this" (about 50% of the time)
- 2 means "My students like this only occasionally."
- 1 means "My students never or almost never like this."

The students' version of the questionnaire asked students to indicate the level of their own liking of the listed classroom activities using the same five-point scale explained above.

Participants

The sample consisted of 93 EFL post-secondary students (49 Males and 44 Females) and 47 teachers at Higher Education Technical Colleges. The students sample was drawn from different language levels: beginners 33, intermediate 32, and advanced 28.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' and teachers' perceptions of students' preferred classroom activities

Table 1. T-test results for differences between teachers and students in their perceptions of students' most preferred activities

	Group	Mean	SD	T	2(tail sig.)
Reading	Teachers	3.36	.71	.543	.589
	Students	3.29	.64		
Listening	Teachers	3.82	.60	1.15	.252
	Students	3.68	.48		
Speaking	Teachers	3.27	.70	2.22	.029
	Students	2.93	.73		
Feedback	Teachers	3.31	.56	2.70	.008
	Students	3.02	.49		
Testing	Teachers	3.52	.70	1.47	.143
	Students	3.34	.49		
Participation	Teachers	3.25	.61	1.77	.079
	Students	3.03	.57		
Others	Teachers	3.17	.61	2.76	.007
	Students	2.81	.62		
Writing	Teachers	3.69	.69	1.43	.156
	Students	3.48	.69		
Total	Teachers	3.41	.48	2.66	.009
	Students	3.16	.39		

The five point Likert scale questionnaire items were analyzed in terms of their mean range. The mean scores from 4.5-5 indicated very high liking of the classroom activity, 3.5-4.4 indicated a high liking, 2.5-3.4 indicated a moderate liking, 1.5-2.4 indicated a low liking and 1-1.4 meant a very low liking.

When comparing students' and teachers' overall perceptions of the types of class activities preferred by students (the total score), Table 1 shows that there were significant differences at the 0.5 level (P>.009) between the two groups. However, when examining the differences in the main skills/ dimensions, it becomes clear that the differences between the two groups were significant mainly in three areas: - speaking (P>0.29), feedback (P> 0.008) and others (P> 0.007). Both groups hold similar perceptions (no significant differences between them) with regard to reading, writing, testing, listening and participation activities.

Another observation based on the table is that the mean scores of teachers were higher than the means of students in all types of classroom activities investigated in the study. This might reflect a more conscious effort by teachers to guess what students liked to do best in class.

With regards to speaking activities, teachers scored a significantly higher mean (3.27) than students. In fact, as far as students are concerned, speaking was the second lowest

area after others. This result is a little surprising but can be explained in light of the speaking activities included in this section, which mainly focused on giving oral presentations. Perhaps this is an activity that students feel reluctant to do given the anxiety that is often associated with speaking in public.

The rest of this section will examine the students' and teachers' perceptions with regard to the individual items in each type of classroom activities.

Reading activities

Table 2. T-test results for differences between teachers and students in their perceptions of students' most preferred reading activities

Reading activities	Group	Mean	SD	T	2(tail sig.)
Reading texts for language analysis (e.g., tenses, connectives)	Teachers Students	3.8 2.7	1.19 1.09	1.891	.062
Reading teacher-produced reference materials silently	Teachers Students	3.3 3.5	1.26 1.09	.839	.001
Reading aloud in class	Teachers Students	3.3 3.7	1.22 1.10	1.916	.016
Reading silently in class for information (e.g., newspapers, journal articles)	Teachers Students	3.6 3.1	1.10 1.18	3.508	.060

As can be seen in Table 2, students' and teachers' perceptions with regard to the preferred reading activities were significantly different in two out of four reading activities. These were "reading teacher-produced materials silently" and "reading aloud in class". In fact, students showed a stronger preference for both activities than their teachers expected. Reading aloud in class received the highest mean by students among the reading activities. From our point of view, this could be interpreted from two different angels: The first is that EFL students in our context have a tendency to associate the whole process of reading with letter decoding rather than with comprehension and critical thinking (Al Seyabi & Tuzlukova, 2015). The second is that students enjoy the small opportunities they get to read aloud in class perhaps because of the sense of confidence that reading aloud creates. Students might feel more engaged with a text when reading it aloud and it might be a rewarding strategy to deal with more difficult texts. It is also possible that students enjoy reading aloud because it is an activity they practiced more often at school and brought with them to the college level. Overall, the read-aloud technique at the college level is an area that merits further investigation.

Writing activities

Table 3. T-test results for differences between teachers and students in their perceptions of students' most preferred writing activities

Writing activities	Group	Mean	SD	T	2(tail sig.)
Writing short passages (i.e., less than a page) in class in small groups	Teachers	3.52	1.13	2.31	.023
	Students	2.95	1.21		
Writing assignments outside class (e.g., letters, memos, summaries, reports)	Teachers	3.65	1.09	-1.66	.374
	Students	4.06	1.27		
Writing short passages (i.e., less than a page) individually in class	Teachers	3.71	.981	-2.4	.286
	Students	3.14	1.17		
Checking my own writing	Teachers	3.02	1.27	.83	.406
	Students	3.70	1.17		
Checking other students' writing	Teachers	3.45	1.16	-2.01	.001
	Students	2.31	1.19		
Doing writing exercises (e.g., filling gaps, sentence correction)	Teachers	3.84	1.05	3.35	.202
	Students	3.74	.89		

According to the data presented in Table 3 above, students and teachers differed significantly in their perceptions of the writing activity "writing short passages (i.e., less than a page) in class in small groups". While students felt this was among the least preferred writing activities compared to the others investigated through the questionnaire, teachers gave it a higher weight. The most preferred writing activity for students as expressed by them was to do their writing assignments outside class. This is a very interesting result, which indicates that students would like to get more opportunities to write outside the boundaries of the English class perhaps because they feel there are fewer restrictions on their writing or because of the availability of outside support. Qin (2012) has also found that writing essays in class was the least favored activity because it is often a source of stress for students.

Another activity where there was significant disagreement was "checking other students' writing", also in favor of teachers. Students do not seem to enjoy doing peer assessment for their classmates' work perhaps because they do not feel confident to do it adequately and objectively or because they feel it is the teachers' job to do so. This result is similar to the findings of Zhang (1995) and Carlson and Nelson (1996) who reported that Asian EFL students were reluctant to provide peer feedback on their classmates' writing because they were not confident in their language ability or they wished to stay in harmony with their classmates. On the contrary, Cornelius and Kinghorn (2014) and Peng (2008) revealed different results and found that their EFL students have positive attitudes about peer assessment in their classes. For example, in their study that investigated Japanese university students' attitudes towards self- and peer assessment in an EFL class, Cornelius and Kinghorn (2014) argue that alternative forms of assessment should feature strongly in a student-centered classroom and that student and teacher should both play an active role in assessment.

Speaking activities

Table 4. T-test results for differences between teachers and students in their perceptions of students' most preferred speaking activities

Speaking activities	Group	Mean	SD	T	2(tail sig.)
Giving individual oral presentations	Teachers	2.86	1.29	2.477	.015
	Students	1.19	1.34		
Giving group oral presentations	Teachers	3.00	1.21	-2.676	.390
	Students	2.72	1.24		
Taking part in role-plays	Teachers	3.30	1.07	1.021	.374
	Students	2.42	1.39		
Taking part in oral exercises (e.g., grammar/ pronunciation drills)	Teachers	3.32	1.90	.864	.390
	Students	3.04	1.17		
Taking part in discussions	Teachers	3.6	1.17	.357	.722
	Students	3.6	.94		
Interacting in English with classmates in class	Teachers	3.3	1.20	1.855	.009
	Students	3.6			
Talking to classmates in English in class	Teachers	3.6	1.14	-.020	.984
	Students	3.6	1.13		

It was strange to find that students participating in the present study were in favor of more controlled speaking activities such as grammar and pronunciation drills compared with more communicative activities such as role-plays. Another observation is that students do not seem to like giving oral presentations, especially individual presentations, which received a low score (1.19). Teachers, on the other hand, seemed to think that students had a moderate preference for individual presentations. This was the only area where there was a significant difference between the two groups. This result is similar to what Eslami and Valizadeh (2004) found in the Iranian context where their students thought of individual oral presentations among the least favored activities. Similarly, Qin (2012) found that "giving oral presentations individually" received more approval from teachers than learners, though the distinction was not so noteworthy. Xiaoyu and Xinyue (2016) in their investigation of teachers' and students' perceptions of classroom activities commonly used in English speaking classes in China have also reported that teachers in general tend to give higher ranks to classroom activities.

Listening activities

Table 5. T-test results for differences between teachers and students in their perceptions of students' most preferred listening activities

Listening activities	Group	Mean	SD	T	2(tail sig.)
Watching and listening to language learning videos/CDs/DVDs	Teachers	3.5652	1.22297	2.403	.018
	Students	2.9149	1.38045		
Listening to others using English in class	Teachers	4.0000	.98883	1.184	.239
	Students	3.7234	1.24590		
Listening to classmates giving oral	Teachers	3.4444	1.17851	2.226	.403

presentations	Students	2.8511	1.36698		
Listening to the teacher giving explanations about skills (e.g., how to write a report)	Teachers	3.9348	.87945	-2.915	.612
	Students	4.4894	.95262		
Classroom listening activities	Teachers	3.7609	1.13890	4.631	
	Students	4.1702	1.00691		.030
Listening to audio recordings	Teachers	4.0217	.93069	-1.905	
	Students	3.8085	1.07619		.013
Listening to the teacher giving explanations about language (e.g., use of active/passive voice)	Teachers	3.9348	.95224	2.208	
	Students	3.8298	.98509		.310
Watching myself on a video recording (e.g., presentations, meetings)	Teachers	2.8043	1.60027	.864	
	Students	2.1915	1.48380		.612

As far as listening activities are concerned, the results displayed above showed significant differences between teachers and students in three types of activities. The first one was watching and listening to language learning videos, CDs or DVDs. While teachers thought students liked this type of listening activity, students gave it a very low rank. This might indicate that extensive listening is not practiced enough or that there is no room for it in the English syllabus. In fact, students seemed to prefer listening activities they do in class under the supervision of their teacher. They have considered this the second preferred listening activity after listening to the teacher giving explanations, which received the highest mean for students. Another area that showed a significant difference between teachers and students is listening to audio recordings, in favor of teachers. Again, teachers seemed to overestimate their students' preferences, giving them a higher weight than students did.

Participation modes

Table 6. T-test results for differences between teachers and students in their perceptions of students' most preferred participation activities

Participation modes	Group	Mean	SD	T	2(tail sig.)
Working in small groups (maximum 5 students)	Teachers	3.6	1.25	2.461	.016
	Students	2.8	1.59		
Working on my own in class	Teachers	3.3	1.07	.627	.532
	Students	3.1	.99		
Working in pairs	Teachers	3.7	1.13	.509	.067
	Students	4.2	.87		
Learning in a class of 21 to 30 students	Teachers	3.6	1.33	-3.145	.002
	Students	4.4	1.01		
Learning in a class of 15 to 20 students	Teachers	2.5	1.51	.894	.000
	Students	2.3	1.56		
Working in a group of 6 to 10 classmates	Teachers	2.4	1.34	.522	.001
	Students	2.0	1.28		
Learning in a class of 31 + students	Teachers	1.9	1.34	3.401	.403
	Students	1.7	1.08		

The questionnaire has also sought to investigate students' preferences with regard to the way they liked to work, whether individually or with other people and teachers' perceptions of these preferences. As can be seen from the table, students' most preferred working mode is to work with pairs, which they gave a high score (M=4.2), followed by working on their own, which they gave a moderate score (M=3.1). Students participating in the present study did not like to work in groups, especially if it were a large group that had 6 to 10 classmates (M= 2.00). This result regarding students' preferred study mode resonates with the findings of both Bada and Okan (2000) and Qasaimeh and Gasaymeh (2016). Similarly, in their investigation of the multiple intelligences profile of grade 12 students in the Omani EFL context, Al Seyabi and A'Zaabi (2015) found that the intrapersonal intelligence was the highest of the list of intelligences investigated in their study while the interpersonal was among the last. The researchers comment that students seem to prefer to work individually and reflect on their own rather than to work cooperatively in groups. Although teachers of the present study seemed to be aware of their students' preferences of pair work, they were not aware of students dislike for group work as they gave it a relatively high score (M=3.6).

Although the present paper highlights the importance of taking students' preferences into account, it is important that this is done in the right perspective. It is quite possible that students do not like to work in groups because they do not know the value of it or because they are not taught how to do so. Group work has several well-acknowledged benefits such as its effectiveness as a learning method, its promotion of teamwork skills that employers require and value and its promotion of lifelong learning (White, LIoyd & Goldfried, 2007). White et al. (2007) mention a few factors that can affect the success of group work. Some of these can be cognitive and psychological factors such as students' attitudes towards group work, but other equally important factors can be the lack of appropriate student skills and the quality of the group work method.

There were also a few items that investigated students' preferences with regard to the size of the class they learnt in. According to the students' mean scores, the most preferable class size is "Learning in a class of 21 to 30 students", (M= 4.4). Strange enough, students preferred this size more than small size classes that have 6-10 or 15-20 students. This can partially be explained in view of the class size that students are used to. In fact, in most classes of the Higher Colleges of Technology as well as other higher education institutions in Oman, classes that have 20-30 students are becoming the norm. The results have also showed significant differences between teachers and students with regard to students' most preferred class size in terms of three items but it was still interesting to note that –based on their mean scores- they have given the same order of preference to these items.

Testing activities

Table 7. T-test results for differences between teachers and students in their perceptions of students' most preferred testing activities

Testing activities	Group	Mean	SD	T	2(tail sig.)
Practicing writing exam answers within a time limit	Teachers	3.7174	.80727	-1.031	
	Students	3.8936	.84014		.305
Planning exam answers (e.g., analyzing questions and organizing answers)	Teachers	3.2391	1.15825	-1.915	
	Students	3.6809	1.06539		.059
Being tested on my learning	Teachers	3.6957	.98589		
	Students	2.9574	1.04168		
Doing formal, assessed tests	Teachers	3.5435	1.22396	4.683	.406
	Students	2.2766	1.37844		
Doing informal, un-assessed tests	Teachers	3.4130	1.25744	-1.074	
	Students	3.8723	.92353		.281

As can be seen in Table 7, there was no major discrepancy between teachers and students' views with regard to the testing activities that students liked. It is still important to point at the very low score that students gave to "Doing formal, assessed tests" which seemed to receive a very low mean compared to "Doing informal, un-assessed tests" from students' point of view. Students seem to have negative feelings about formal tests perhaps because of the stress and anxiety that are often associated with exam taking.

Feedback activities

Table 8. T-test results for differences between teachers and students in their perceptions of students' most preferred feedback activities

Feedback activities	Group	Mean	SD	T	2(tail sig.)
The teacher giving oral/written feedback to the whole class	Teachers	3.6522	.92418	-1.107	
	Students	3.8723	.99164		.271
Classmates giving me oral/written feedback in class	Teachers	3.1087	1.01605	-.179	.013
	Students	3.1489	1.14168		
The teacher giving oral/written feedback to small groups	Teachers	3.5870	.95629	-1.837	
	Students	2.7234	1.47002		.603
The teacher giving oral/written feedback to individuals	Teachers	3.5652	1.10860	1.284	
	Students	3.1702	.93992		.404

In terms of feedback activities, the results show that students generally seem to value feedback, especially if it is directed to the whole class. This is in fact a mode they prefer over group feedback or even individual feedback, which students gave a low score. This result is partially in line with the results of some previous research that reported that students had clear preferences for verbal feedback when generic and provided to the group as a whole (Rowe & Wood, 2008).

Other activities

Table 9. T-test results for differences between teachers and students in their perceptions of students' preferences in a range of other activities

Other activities	Group	Mean	SD	T	2(tail sig.)
Doing teacher-directed library research	Teachers	3.0	1.34	3.183	.002
	Students	2.2	1.30		
Taking part in language games	Teachers	3.7	1.22	6.222	.000
	Students	2.0	1.39		
Studying grammatical rules	Teachers	3.5	.83	1.553	.124
	Students	3.2	1.40		
Finding out information on my own	Teachers	3.2	1.32	-.923	.358
	Students	3.5	1.03		
Using the language / multimedia laboratory	Teachers	3.4	1.02	1.442	.153
	Students	3.1	1.02		
Doing project work	Teachers	3.5	1.31	3.741	.016
	Students	2.3	1.55		
Doing practical tasks (e.g., surveys, oral presentations)	Teachers	2.7	1.28	2.524	.047
	Students	2.5	1.19		

Perhaps one of the most surprising results presented in the table above is that students had a very low preference for taking part in language games, contrary to their teachers' expectations. In fact, this particular item received one of the lowest means across all 48 items of the questionnaire. This result supports Al Rubkhei's findings regarding Omani high school students' preferences of non-communicative activities over communicative ones. Students' lack of interest in language games as a class activity can be caused by their unfamiliarity with it or because they think class time should be spent doing more serious work such as accuracy-focused activities.

Differences in students' preferred classroom activities attributed to gender

This section presents the results of the second research question of the study: Are there significant differences between male and female students in their perceptions of their preferred classroom activities? T-test was calculated for this purpose.

Table 10. T-test results for differences between male and female students in their perceptions of students' most preferred classroom activities

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Reading	Male	49	3.14	.59	1.384	.173
	Female	44	3.40	.67		
Listening	Male	49	3.59	.46	1.085	.284
	Female	44	3.75	.49		
Speaking	Male	49	2.96	.73	.295	.769
	Female	44	2.90	.74		
Feedback	Male	49	3.01	.51	.058	.954
	Female	44	3.02	.47		
Testing	Male	49	3.20	.49	1.736	.089

	Female	44	3.44	.47		
Participation	Male	49	2.86	.56	1.807	.077
	Female	44	3.16	.54		
Others	Male	49	2.79	.63	.190	.850
	Female	44	2.82	.63		
Writing	Male	49	3.23	.74	2.236	.030
	Female	44	3.67	.59		
Total	Male	49	3.08	.43	1.249	.218
	Female	44	3.22	.35		

According to the results displayed in Table 10, the means scored by female students in all types of classroom activities investigated in the study were a little higher than means scored by male students, however, this difference was not a statistically significant one. The only area where there were significant differences between male and female students at the 0.05 level (P=.218) was "writing", which came in favor of female students who seem to prefer writing activities more than male students do. This can be partially attributed to what some previous studies on gender differences reported about female students' tendency to be more retrospective (Hugar, 2008).

Finding no significant differences in terms of what students liked to do in class based on gender seems to be contradictory to the findings of several other studies (Griva, Alevriadou & Semoglou, 2010). In fact, some studies examining gender difference and its influence on learning noted that while differences between male and female students tend to be more noticeable while at the primary and middle stages of their education, these differences can become more subtle and might even diminish in adolescence (Wagemaker, 1996, cited in Tatarintseva, 2002). Bernat and LIoyd (2007) also suggest that the inconsistent findings reported by various studies with regard to gender difference can also relate to context specificity, more specifically, the institutional context where studies are conducted. It is quite possible that male and female students develop similar preferences because they study in the same classroom environment and develop familiarity, and hence, liking to similar sets of classroom activities.

Differences in students' preferred classroom activities attributed to English proficiency level

In addition to investigating whether there were gender differences in the type of classroom activities liked by students, the present study has also looked at whether students from different proficiency levels prefer different sets of activities. As indicated earlier, students responding to the questionnaire came from three different proficiency levels in the foundation program: 33 beginning level students, 32 intermediate level students and 28 advanced level students. Tables 11 and 12 below present the results concerning this issue.

Table 11. ANOVA test for students' differences according to their language level

		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Reading	Between Groups	1.895	2	.947	2.094	.129
	Within Groups	40.704	90	.452		
	Total	42.598	92			
Listening	Between Groups	.750	2	.375	1.245	.293
	Within Groups	26.816	89	.301		
	Total	27.566	91			
Speaking	Between Groups	8.607	2	4.304	9.413	.000
	Within Groups	40.234	88	.457		
	Total	48.841	90			
Feedback	Between Groups	2.520	2	1.260	4.590	.013
	Within Groups	24.703	90	.274		
	Total	27.222	92			
Testing	Between Groups	1.263	2	.632	1.726	.184
	Within Groups	32.944	90	.366		
	Total	34.207	92			
Participation	Between Groups	6.363	2	3.181	10.795	.000
	Within Groups	26.523	90	.295		
	Total	32.886	92			
Writing	Between Groups	1.550	2	.775	1.609	.206
	Within Groups	43.345	90	.482		
	Total	44.895	92			
Others	Between Groups	9.264	2	4.632	14.457	.000
	Within Groups	28.836	90	.320		
	Total	38.100	92			
Total	Between Groups	2.832	2	1.416	7.903	.001
	Within Groups	16.128	90	.179		
	Total	18.960	92			

Table 12. Students' differences according to their language level

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig
Reading	Beginning	33	3.1	.70	2.094	.129
	Intermediate	32	3.4	.69		
	Advanced	28	3.4	.60		
	Total	93	3.3	.68	1.245	.293
Listening	Beginning	32	3.6	.57		
	Intermediate	32	3.8	.51		
	Advanced	28	3.8	.55	9.413	.000
	Total	92	3.7	.55		
Speaking	Beginning	31	**2.9**	.59		
	Intermediate	32	**2.8**	.85	4.590	.013
	Advanced	28	3.5	.50		
	Total	91	3.0	.73		
Feedback	Beginning	33	3.2	.56	1.726	.184
	Intermediate	32	**2.9**	.52		
	Advanced	28	3.3	.46		
	Total	93	3.1	.54	10.795	.000
Testing	Beginning	33	3.3	.69		
	Intermediate	32	3.4	.55		
	Advanced	28	3.5	.54	1.609	.206
	Total	93	3.4	.60		
Participation	Beginning	33	**3.0**	.51		
	Intermediate	32	**2.9**	.68	14.457	.000
	Advanced	28	3.5	.35		
	Total	93	3.1	.59		
Writing	Beginning	33	3.5	.71	7.903	.001
	Intermediate	32	3.4	.66		
	Advanced	28	3.7	.70		
	Total	93	3.5	.69	2.094	.129
Others	Beginning	33	**2.9**	.58		
	Intermediate	32	**2.6**	.65		
	Advanced	28	3.4	.42	1.245	.293
	Total	93	2.9	.64		
Total	Beginning	33	**3.2**	.41		
	Intermediate	32	**3.1**	.49	9.413	.000
	Advanced	28	**3.5**	.33		
	Total	93	3.2	.45		

The two tables show the overall significant differences among the students at the 0.05 level attributed to their language level. As can be seen in Table 12, the difference was observed between advanced and beginning students in favor of advanced students and between advanced with intermediate students in favor of the advanced students but no overall significant differences between beginning and intermediate students were recorded. With regard to the different types of skills/dimensions, Table 11 shows that there were no significant differences among the students of the different levels with regard to reading, listening, writing, feedback and testing activities. However, as far as speaking activities were concerned, there were significant differences between

advanced level students and both beginning level and intermediate level students in favor of the advanced students. There was no significant difference between beginning level students and intermediate students in their preferences of speaking activities. Similarly, there were significant differences between advanced level students and the beginning level students as well as the intermediate students in favor of the advanced level students with regard to the participation skills but no significant differences between beginning level students and intermediate students. Generally in all the groups of skills, the differences were mainly found to exist between advanced and beginning students and also advanced and intermediate students in favor of the advanced students. The advanced students' preferences for both speaking and participation activities might actually reflect their higher proficiency level in speaking as well as their confidence in their ability to express themselves verbally and participate in speaking activities. This might also suggest that the advanced students are more aware of the value of speaking activities in general. Another possible interpretation is that the activities where differences were found in favor of the advanced level students are more appropriate to the advanced students than to the lower level students. Finding no significant differences between the three proficiency levels in terms of reading, writing, listening and feedback activities may suggest that these skills are equally satisfactory to all the students as the means are of a satisfactory level.

CONCLUSION

This paper has reported a study conducted in the Omani college level context to investigate students' perceptions of their most preferred classroom activities and teachers' perceptions of these preferences. Overall, based on the results of the study, a wide agreement seems to exist between students and teachers where they differed significantly in only 14 out of 48 classroom activities, a figure that is smaller than the 26 significantly different items in Spratt's original study. This suggests that teachers have an adequate level of understanding of their students' preferences. The results have also revealed that teachers generally tended to express their students' preferences in stronger terms than students did as the means of their scores tended to be higher in most items.

The low scores that students gave to some activities that have well acknowledged benefits and are considered an integral part of the English syllabus such as group work and individual oral presentations requires further scrutiny. This indeed indicates that while teachers are aware of the purpose of the class activities they ask their students to do, students are not. Some changes and innovations in the design of these activities are perhaps needed to arouse students' interest in them and raise their awareness of both their communicative and practical values. This might involve explaining the rationale of these activities and teaching students how to execute them or best practices in doing them. It is also important to make students see the long-term benefits of these activities especially if they are career-related. Training and faculty development sessions arranged in colleges can address all of these issues, especially how to make teaching more learner-centered and how to involve students in different phases of the process.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Learner Preferences of the English Language Classroom Activities

Teachers' questionnaire

Name of Institution:

Level of English: _____ **Gender: M   F** ⬭ ⬭

Directions: Listed below are classroom activities in an English language course.

Five numbers follow each statement (5, 4, 3, 2, 1), and each number means the following:

• **5** means "My students **always or almost always** like this."

• **4** means "My students **usually** like this."

• **3** means "My students **sometimes** like this" (about 50% of the time)

• **2** means "My students like this **only occasionally**."

• **1** means "My students **never or almost never** like this."

After reading each statement, ***put a cross (X) below the number*** (5, 4, 3, 2, or 1) that applies to you using the scale provided. Please note that there is no right or wrong choice for the activities in this list.

English Language Classroom Activities	**5**	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**
1. Taking part in discussions					
2. Doing teacher-directed library research					
3. Watching and listening to language learning videos/CDs/DVDs					
4. Giving individual oral presentations					
5. Taking part in language games					
6. Reading texts for language analysis (e.g., tenses, connectives)					
7. Studying grammatical rules					
8. Finding out information on my own					
9. The teacher giving oral/written feedback to the whole class					
10. Working in small groups (maximum 5 students)					
11. Writing short passages (i.e., less than a page) in class in small groups					
12. Practising writing exam answers within a time limit					
13. Listening to others using English in class					
14. Learning in a class of 21 to 30 students					
15. Working on my own in class					

English Language Classroom Activities	5	4	3	2	1
16. Planning exam answers (e.g., analyzing questions and organizing answers)					
17. Talking to classmates in English in class					
18. Using the language / multimedia laboratory					
19. Doing formal, assessed tests					
20. Listening to classmates giving oral presentations					
21. Writing assignments outside class (e.g., letters, memos, summaries, reports)					
22. Classmates giving me oral/written feedback in class					
23. Doing project work					
24. Listening to the teacher giving explanations about skills (e.g., how to write a report)					
25. Reading teacher-produced reference materials silently					
26. Learning in a class of 15 to 20 students					
27. Doing practical tasks (e.g., surveys, oral presentations)					
28. Writing short passages (i.e., less than a page) individually in class					
29. Working in pairs					
30. Doing writing exercises (e.g., filling gaps, sentence correction)					
31. The teacher giving oral/written feedback to small groups					
32. Listening activities					
33. Checking other students' writing					
34. Doing informal, unassessed tests					
35. Interacting in English with classmates in class					
36. The teacher giving oral/written feedback to individuals					
37. Working in a group of 6 to 10 classmates					
38. Listening to the teacher giving explanations about language (e.g., use of active/passive voice)					
39. Reading silently in class for information (e.g., newspapers, journal articles)					
40. Being tested on my learning					
41. Giving group oral presentations					
42. Checking my own writing					
43. Learning in a class of 31 + students					
44. Taking part in role-plays					
45. Listening to audio recordings					
46. Reading aloud in class					
47. Watching myself on a video recording (e.g., presentations, meetings)					
48. Taking part in oral exercises (e.g., grammar/ pronunciation drills)					

Appendix B

Students' questionnaire

Learner Preferences of the English Language Classroom Activities

Name of Institution:

Level of English: _____ **Gender: M   F**   ◯   ◯

Directions: Listed below are classroom activities in an English language course.

Five numbers follow each statement (5, 4, 3, 2, 1), and each number means the following:

• **5** means "I **always or almost always** like this."

• **4** means "I **usually** like this."

• **3** means "I **sometimes** like this" (about 50% of the time)

• **2** means "I like this **only occasionally**."

• **1** means "I **never or almost never** like this."

After reading each statement, *put a cross (X) below the number* (5, 4, 3, 2, or 1) that applies to you using the scale provided. Please note that there is no right or wrong choice for the activities in this list.

English Language Classroom Activities	5	4	3	2	1
1. Taking part in discussions					
2. Doing teacher-directed library research					
3. Watching and listening to language learning videos/CDs/DVDs					
4. Giving individual oral presentations					
5. Taking part in language games					
6. Reading texts for language analysis (e.g., tenses, connectives)					
7. Studying grammatical rules					
8. Finding out information on my own					
9. The teacher giving oral/written feedback to the whole class					
10. Working in small groups (maximum 5 students)					
11. Writing short passages (i.e., less than a page) in class in small groups					
12. Practising writing exam answers within a time limit					
13. Listening to others using English in class					
14. Learning in a class of 21 to 30 students					
15. Working on my own in class					
16. Planning exam answers (e.g., analyzing questions and organizing answers)					

English Language Classroom Activities	5	4	3	2	1
17. Talking to classmates in English in class					
18. Using the language / multimedia laboratory					
19. Doing formal, assessed tests					
20. Listening to classmates giving oral presentations					
21. Writing assignments outside class (e.g., letters, memos, summaries, reports)					
22. Classmates giving me oral/written feedback in class					
23. Doing project work					
24. Listening to the teacher giving explanations about skills (e.g., how to write a report)					
25. Reading teacher-produced reference materials silently					
26. Learning in a class of 15 to 20 students					
27. Doing practical tasks (e.g., surveys, oral presentations)					
28. Writing short passages (i.e., less than a page) individually in class					
29. Working in pairs					
30. Doing writing exercises (e.g., filling gaps, sentence correction)					
31. The teacher giving oral/written feedback to small groups					
32. Listening activities					
33. Checking other students' writing					
34. Doing informal, unassessed tests					
35. Interacting in English with classmates in class					
36. The teacher giving oral/written feedback to individuals					
37. Working in a group of 6 to 10 classmates					
38. Listening to the teacher giving explanations about language (e.g., use of active/passive voice)					
39. Reading silently in class for information (e.g., newspapers, journal articles)					
40. Being tested on my learning					
41. Giving group oral presentations					
42. Checking my own writing					
43. Learning in a class of 31 + students					
44. Taking part in role-plays					
45. Listening to audio recordings					
46. Reading aloud in class					
47. Watching myself on a video recording (e.g., presentations, meetings)					
48. Taking part in oral exercises (e.g., grammar/ pronunciation drills)					