

Learners' Preferences in English Language Learning: A Cross Sectional Study at Hormozgan University of Medical Sciences

Hamid Mahmoodi¹, Mehry Haddad Narafshan^{*1}, Hassan Shahabi¹

¹ Department of Foreign Languages, Kerman Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran

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***Corresponding author:**

Department of Foreign Languages, Kerman Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran.

E-mail: mnarafshan@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Background: Learning a language has become more highlighted for medical students because it works as an approach for expressing and exchanging thoughts and feelings.

Objectives: The present study was conducted to investigate the preferences of English as an international language among Iranian medical students.

Methods: This cross-sectional survey was carried out on three different cohorts of language learners from Hormozgan University of Medical Sciences. Four hundred students aged 18 to 46 were selected using the convenience sampling method. Exclusion of the upper-intermediate ones yielded 372 intermediate participants. The English Language Preferences Questionnaire was used to identify the factors on English language learning preferences. Frequency, and Pearson's correlation coefficient were used to analyze the data using SPSS.

Results: Speaking (42.8%) was the most preferred skill. Among participants, 83.1% preferred an English class of different activities, such as group work and projects. Also, 26.5% of students preferred to repeat what they heard, and 4.2% chose to copy from the board. Media and watching movies received a high percentage (81.2%). In addition, 47.8% of the participants preferred an immediate reflection on their errors in front of everyone, 56.5% showed interest in using both the native and English. Moreover, there was a statistically positive relationship between learning activities and task preferences among the participants ($r = .39, p < .01$).

Conclusion: Educational scholars and syllabus designers should focus on incorporating learners' preferences into academic settings to revolutionize the traditional curriculums. These findings have substantial implications for the design of academic English courses for medical students.

Keywords: Language learning, Learner Preferences, Students of Medical Sciences

Background

In the era of modern communication, the expression of thoughts brings about raised universal interactions. Language learning has become more highlighted because it acts as an approach for the expression and exchange of a variety of thoughts (1). Both educational scholars and syllabus designers have sharpened the focus on incorporating learners' preferences and engagement in academic settings worldwide to initiate the basis for traditional curriculums and syllabuses, which were increasingly found to be ineffective. There are many individual differences since the way through which the individuals' learning is less or much different from the others (2). Therefore, for example, an auditory learner can learn better through hearing, and in contrast, the

other one learns by seeing; that is called visual learner. (3) Given the growing significance of learner-centered pedagogy, English for academic or specific purposes (EAP/ESP) research has suggested the involvement of students' voices in a great number of studies. ESP is a learner-centered approach to teaching English as an additional language, focusing on developing competent communicative teaching a specific discipline, such as academics, medicine, accounting, business, IT, teaching, engineering, etc. ESP commonly refers to teaching the English language to university students or employed people looking into the particular vocabulary and skills they need to be upgraded in their field of activities. ESP programs are designed based on students' needs to improve their English in a certain professional field of study and

are generally taught at the university. EAP merely focuses on university students, while ESP courses focus on the language, skills, and genres appropriate to the specific activities the learners need to carry out in English either in academic settings or within the community. Generally, to elaborate on the differences between ESP and EAP, it could be said that EAP is just like general English; it adapts to almost all fields or areas, while ESP is adaptable only to particular fields or areas.

These courses provide language instruction for academic study in universities. Language skills addressed include listening comprehension, fluency development, oral intelligibility, reading, grammar, writing, and vocabulary development. To address why medical students are required to learn the English language, it would be said that medical terminology allows all medical professionals to understand each other and communicate effectively. When everyone understands what a condition, medicine, or procedure is, they can fulfill their roles accordingly, whether that is delivering medicine or billing for medicine. On the other hand, English is essential to doctors worldwide since much medical and scientific literature is written in English. In addition, it is common for international meetings to hold their conferences in English. Medical students and professional doctors require English to read and understand documents, write articles, and participate in international conferences, where English is the most dominant medium of interaction. Moreover, students must be updated with the most recent scientific progression; therefore, learning English in its academic form can contribute to this critical issue.

To illustrate the logic behind such numerical studies, for instance, Hutchinson and Waters (4) asserted that what leads to the rise of ESP is how it meets and treats the learners' specific needs, demands, and requests in terms of the situations in which they are placed. Stevrens considered two principles in the recent developments in teaching English (5). He believed that those principles draw on the learner's specific needs and attempt to increase the learner's communicative ability to function in authentic discourse situations. Hence, instruction in a field like ESP roots in these two basic principles in academic contexts. Likewise, the concept of preferences in a higher education context is considered a fundamental aspect of an organization's texture where it grounds the borderline of philosophies, epistemologies, and consequently, the differences. It has been stated that tailoring learners' wants and preferences in outlining a learner-centered curriculum are significantly essential (6). Understanding the growing needs and demands of language learners is both observable and unobservable within their learning attempts. What should be attended to in such exploration shapes learners' needs and preferences (7)? As English has become an everyday subject of learning; initiations have emerged to embrace students' needs from various backgrounds with a deepened focus on individual preferences. Considering the learners' autonomy through independent learning or out-of-class activities could be a key response to learners'

diversities (8, 9).

Therefore, a shift of focus in research has occurred to investigate the matter of usefulness and importance in terms of preferred activities and tasks in the learning process from the students' points of view. In a study by Falout et al. suggested that Japanese students preferred communicative over traditional grammar-based activities (10). Sullivan found that learners seek opportunities to communicate and build a circle of connections with their peers and their English teachers (11). Kang et al. assessed the perceptions and preferences for English language teaching among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in schools, colleges, and universities worldwide in non-English-speaking countries and the teaching method of pre-service teachers and learning activities in the classroom (12). They showed that teachers resort to their teaching methods by selecting such activities as one-on-one conversation, taking up language games, and pronunciation practices as the most preferred ones and think that those methods are superior to the out of date activities, such as translation and grammar exercises as the least preferred ones.

Lau and Gardner indicated that given the different disciplinary features of academic English learning, the students had specific distinct preferences (13). Some students favored the solitary mode of learning, while others were inclined to collaborative learning. Moreover, the first group showed their strongest belief in learner autonomy. These differences strongly indicate the need to develop an academic English curriculum and courses to fill the existing gap. Therefore, learning a language or a portion of it as ESP in academic settings requires an intimate focus on students' differences and preferences on fulfilling their tasks. It is worth noting that integrated curricula following a comprehensive teaching approach have focused on knowledge acquisition of foreign languages (14-18). The attempt at learning a language at the academic level calls for taking up the highly favored strategies, appropriately fit the curriculum. Therefore, a shift has occurred to contribute learners' preferences into all educational and academic systems dimensions.

Bada and Okan, for instance, argued that those teachers who exert effort to analyze their students' needs to unfold their capabilities, potentials, and preferences are among successful instructors with effective language teaching styles (19). Al Hummaira indicated that students care about opportunities given by their teachers to fully engage them in discussions or problem-solving activities in the classroom (20). Moreover, he uncovered that students expect their teachers to keep them active by assigning group tasks as out-of-class activities. In other words, the expectations of students and the teaching situation can be built if English language learning meets students' needs effectively, especially the four language skills (speaking, reading, listening, and writing). Khan et al found visual learning the most preferred model and revealed that high-achieving college students are among those who rely on their visual sense in learning preferences rather than the

auditory sense (21).

To discover the influential factors, Fatemi et al. demonstrated that individual differences and specific personality characteristics are influential factors that affect the mentality of EFL students; therefore, they can shape their willingness and tendency toward learning language and other academic activities (22). Likewise, the aspect of sex was discovered effectively on individuals' preferences; it was revealed that female students preferred kinesthetic style, whereas male students were inclined to benefit from a variety of learning techniques. (23, 24).

Objectives

Every individual follows distinct alternatives of how to obtain, retain, and recall information, which are intrinsically dependent upon unique features and traits that are not often perceived or consciously taken by students for the analysis and comprehension of new information (25). Therefore, the current study was done to address the medical students' preferences regarding learning the English language.

Methods

This cross-sectional quantitative survey was carried out on three different cohorts of language learners (medical, paramedical, nursery, and midwifery students) from the Hormozgan University of Medical Sciences from September 2020 through January 2021. Four hundred students aged 18 to 46 years were selected using the convenience sampling method. Initially, the Longman Placement Test (26) (LPT) was used to draw on participants with a homogenous English language proficiency level since learners' English language proficiency level affects their language preferences. Based on the results, 93% of the participants were at the intermediate and 7% at the upper intermediate level of the English language. With the exclusion of the upper-intermediate ones (based on the placement test results), a sample of 372 intermediate participants was left. Ethical approval was obtained from university officials based on the university's ethical guidelines. The test comprises 100 written multiple-choice questions assessing learners' grammar and vocabulary knowledge. The participants were given 50 minutes to complete the questions, and the scoring was as follows:

Pre-Elementary: 00-20, Elementary: 21-35, Pre-intermediate: 36-60, Intermediate: 61-85, Upper-Intermediate: 86-100.

To uncover the participants' English language preferences, the English Language Preference Questionnaire (ELPQ) was used, which was designed and developed by the researchers of the present study considering the literature review (Gardner (27) and Chalak and Kassaian (28) and objectives of the study. ELPQ included nine factors labeled Dominant skills, Class activities, Working Style, Error Correction, Media Preferences, Topic Preferences, Learning Activities, Task Preferences, and Classroom Language. The participants were asked to mark whether they agreed with the items on

a 5-point Likert scale (1 'strongly disagree' to 5 'strongly agree'). To design the questionnaire, at first, the relevant literature of the English language and learning preferences was scrupulously examined. Then several semi-structured interviews were performed with some researchers, teachers, and learners in the field of English language to examine whether the interviewees could approve the variables taken from the literature and to check whether or not there were any other affecting variables the interviewees could recommend. The items were examined by some experts to evaluate their redundancy, face validity, content validity, and language clarity. After obtaining the comments of the experts, the value of content validity was calculated based on the CVR formula, and if the calculated content validity value was equal to or higher than the determined value in Lawshe's table, the item was preserved; otherwise, it was eliminated from the list of the items. The feedback contributed to some revisions modifying the structure of questions 3, 5, and 8 as they were structurally vague. Therefore, these questions were structurally simplified. These steps helped the researchers construct an 18-item questionnaire. Cronbach's alpha was used to estimate the questionnaire reliability. The overall Cronbach's alpha for this questionnaire was 0.81, which revealed a good internal consistency of the questionnaire.

The chance of direct contact with students as a member of the research society constituted mutual trust between the researchers and the participants (29-31). The participants were oriented to the objectives of the study, procedure, and limitations and then were asked to participate voluntarily. To keep the participants' information confidential, all identifications were removed, and pseudonyms were used instead. All the completed questionnaires were treated anonymously. Frequency (n), percent (%), and Pearson's correlation coefficient were used for the analysis of data using SPSS version 26 software.

Results

Of total, 135 (36.3%) students were male and 237 (63.7%) were female. Also, 32% of participants were students of nursing, 11% midwifery, 35.2% paramedical, and 21.8% were medical students (Table 1).

As it is shown in Tables 2 and 3, female participants preferred to obtain speaking skills more than other skills (24.5%), which also proceeds the same skill in male participants (18.3%), which shows the significance of speaking skills among medical sciences students. General preferences of the participants' English language skills were in the following order for the students of nursing, midwifery, and paramedical: speaking, reading, vocabulary, grammar, listening, and writing; however, it was slightly different for the medical students: speaking, vocabulary, reading, grammar, writing, and listening.

Regarding class activities, 83.1% of them preferred having an English class with several activities, such as pair/group work and projects. Regarding students' preferences for working styles in the classroom, 55.1% preferred teamwork.

Table1. Demographic characteristics of the participants

Gender	Education	N (%)
Male	Nursing	54(14.5)
	Midwifery	0(0)
	Paramedical	56(15.1)
	Medical	25(6.7)
Female	Nursing	65(17.5)
	Midwifery	41(11)
	Paramedical	75(20.1)
	Medical	56(15.1)
Total		372(100)

Table2. Comparison of the preferred language skills based on gender

Skill	Female	Male	
	N (%)	Frequency	Percent (%)
Reading	60(16.9)	18	5.20
Grammar	18(5.20)	15	3.20
Vocabulary	35(10.25)	19	6.20
Writing	10(2.65)	4	0.75
Speaking	97(24.5)	69	18.3
Listening	17(4.20)	10	2.65
Total	237(63.7)	135	36.3

Table 3. Comparison of the preferred language skills based on field of study

Skill	Nursing		Midwifery		Paramedical		Medical	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Reading	28	7.25	7	2.20	34	11.00	10	3.65
Grammar	8	1.2	4	0.75	14	2.70	7	2.20
Vocabulary	17	4.20	6	1.05	19	5.75	11	3.90
Writing	3	0.6	1	0.15	4	0.75	6	1.05
Speaking	56	17.55	20	6.25	48	12.55	42	10.1
Listening	7	1.20	3	0.6	12	2.45	5	0.9
Total	119	32	41	11	131	35.2	81	21.8

Table 4. Working styles, ways of learning, media preferences, and topic/subject preference

Responses Distribution	Reply	Frequency	Percent (%)
Working Style	Individually	79	21.2
	In pair	86	23.1
	In group	205	55.1
The Ways of Learning	Reading	64	15.7
	Listening	64	15.7
	Problem-solving	28	9.2
	Copying from the board	17	4.2
	Listening and taking notes	69	16.8
	Reading and taking notes	45	11.9
Media preferences	Repeating what they hear	85	26.5
	TV/video/radio /movies/tape/cassette	298	81.2
	Written materials on the board	42	10.5
Topic/subject Preference	Images/posters	32	8.3
	General subjects	216	58.1
	Related to their academic major	135	36.3
Error correction	Both	21	5.6
	immediately, in front of everyone	178	47.8
	Later, in the end, in front of everyone	77	20.7
Language of the classroom	Later, in private	115	30.9
	English	133	35.8
	Persian	25	6.7
	Both	210	56.5

It conveys a clear message to the teachers that teamwork gives students the sense of more comfort, productivity, and relaxation, where their voices would be heard, and their views would be considered and valued. In response to the ways of learning, 26.5% of students preferred to repeat what they heard, and just 4.2% of them preferred to copy from the board. TV/video/radio/tape/cassette and movies received a high percentage of preference (81.2%) in terms of media and topic preferences. Considering the preferred topic, 58.1% of participants preferred general subjects (Table 4).

Regarding the preferred style of correcting errors, 47.8% of the participants preferred an immediate reflection on their errors in front of everyone. In response to the language type use, 56.5% of students showed their interest in using both native language and English language. Therefore, those who believe L1 plays a minimal role in the teaching of language are invited to think back of its role and contributions it makes to the fields of language learning and teaching (Table 4).

There was a statistically significant and positive relationship between learning activities and task preferences among the participants ($r = 0.39$, $p < 0.01$).

Discussion

The world is dramatically changing due to globalization and technological development. This rapid transformation has proceeded with a constant need to change traditional ELT pedagogy. Since multilingual and multicultural interaction with English users worldwide has become an interest in diverse contexts, it is of urgent importance for ELT-oriented researchers and educators to understand and improve students' perceptions of the English language (32). The findings of this study can alter and expand previous literature on academic language learning by considering the differences in practice modes. Becher and Towler have documented disciplinary variations consistent with the present study (33). If learners' overarching preferences can be identified within specific disciplinary fields, educational approaches can be tailored to enhance learning capacities. Therefore, disciplinary teachers need to recognize their students' learning preferences and adjust their teaching based on them.

On the other hand, it should not be neglected that what students prefer is not always part of their needs (26). Seemingly, teachers embark on the activities based on their perception of their students' demands and needs. Therefore, teachers are required to modify the activities students do not prefer to follow because they do not enjoy having them in their learning experience, even if such activities are considered useful for students. Few academic language teachers are inclined to share most of their students' learning preferences, which could result in an unclear picture of those preferences failing to accommodate them. Thus, determining the boundaries of these overlapped areas in designing the corresponding ESP/ EAP courses is a need that should not be neglected.

This quantitative study was designed and accomplished

to know the preferences in English language learning among Iranian Medical students. The results showed that the participants' English language skills' preferences are in the following order: speaking, reading, vocabulary, grammar, listening, and writing using TV/video/radio/tape/cassette and movies working on general subjects. Learning medicine is a complicated task followed by the stressing need for individual commitment, developing reading habits, and establishing communicative skills. Therefore, reading skill is significant in clinical skills; it increases knowledge and thinking process regarding everyday clinical challenges (29). Concerning the developments in language teaching, Strevens pointed to two principles being drawn on the learners' specific needs and attempt to increase their communicative ability to function in authentic discourse situations (5). Hence, a shift of focus in research is required to investigate the matter of usefulness and importance in terms of preferred activities and tasks in the learning process from the students' points of view. Falout et al., for instance, indicated that traditional grammar-centered activities were mostly disliked by students (10). In the same vein, Sullivan revealed that students welcome chances to communicate and interact with their classmates and their English language teachers (11).

Furthermore, the results revealed that conversations, dialogues, and communicative practices in team or group work are the most preferred learning activities among participants of the study with the help of a teacher who plays the role of a facilitator and guide rather than a participant. In other words, the expectations of students and the teaching situation can be built if English language learning meets students' needs effectively, especially the four language skills (speaking, reading, listening, and writing). Moreover, the results showed the participants' interest in using both their native language and the English language. Therefore, L1 role in and contributions to the field of language learning and teaching should be reassessed. Referring to the preferred style of correcting errors, the participants preferred an immediate reflection on their errors in front of everyone. Quinn believed that a deeper concentration on learners' error correction helps them vividly notice their weaknesses (34).

Therefore, both educational scholars and syllabus designers should sharpen the focus on incorporating learners' preferences and involvements to academic settings all around the world to revolutionize the bases of traditional curriculums, which were increasingly found to be ineffective. The findings of the current study would be useful for both students and teachers to maximize the learning outputs by taking into account the students' preferences before designing the course curriculum because the materials, which cover the students' needs, interests, and demands can act as a strong motivator to support and promote students' achievements in learning a language.

Conclusion

This study provides those responsible for curriculum

design with important information to adjust their English language teaching while taking learners' preferences into account. In brief, given the growing global importance of the English language and the salient interpretation of the impact of these shifts on students of medical sciences' attitudes towards learning the English language, there is a need for theoretical and practical exploration of learners' preferences towards the English language. Based on the above-mentioned, teaching the English language can be better designed to satisfy different students, thereby strengthening the possibility of their ability to apply the English language successfully in their future educational and professional life. Furthermore, to minimize the effects of irrelevant course content selection, the ESP practitioners are strongly required to conduct a proper needs analysis. Despite its strengths, there are some limitations in this study that should be taken into consideration. First, the study sample is for the typical Iranian context, limiting the generalizability of the results to other settings. Our data were obtained from 372 students from three different fields of medical, paramedical, and nursing, and midwifery in Iran, and these results may not be generalizable to other EFL contexts. Besides, since the informants were all Iranian, this aspect of the participants made it difficult to generalize the findings across other contexts. Therefore, a future study may consider recruiting participants with diverse ethnic backgrounds. It would be valuable to replicate the study in other contexts to check the results. Additional longitudinal studies are needed to study participants' preferences.

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Conflict of Interests: The corresponding author declares that there are no competing interests to be expressed on behalf of all the authors.

Ethical approval: The current study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Hormozgan University of Medical Sciences (1398.075). Besides, participants were assured that the collected data would be used only for research, and the name of the participants would be kept confidential.

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