Iranian Undergraduates Non-English Majors' Language Learning Preferences

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Abstract

For effective language learning and teaching , both learner skills and assumptions should be given due attention. In promoting this idea, students should be provided with the opportunity to clarify and assess their preferences. Moved with the conviction that learners and learners' preferences are of crucial importance in the development of language learning, we asked 192 non-English major undergraduates to state their views on how they prefer learning English in the "General English " class. The wide-spread belief among Iranian university instructors is that in General English classes, students' language learning preferences do not differ significantly. However, the results indicate that there is a significant difference among non-English majors' preferences, even in different branches of the same major, regarding preferred teaching method, the most important language skill and their motivational orientations. The results have implications for syllabus and material design and classroom practice.

Keywords: learning preference, non-English major, general English, language skills.

Introduction

Insights from nearly two decades of research in second and foreign language development in natural as well as formal setting have made us aware that language learning is primarily a learner and learning oriented activity (Brown, 2001; Nunan, 1988; Wright, 1990). Consequently, in recent years there have been more emphases on the role of the learner in the language learning process. Learners' beliefs about language learning is one of the more recently discussed learner variables in the field.

In curricula based on a learner-centered approach, learners have greater roles in teaching/learning processes, and this can result in the promotion of their interests and preferences toward language learning (Makarova, 1997). Moreover, Rifkin (2000) asserts that learners' beliefs (including their preferences) about the learning process are "of critical importance to the success or failure of any student's efforts to master a foreign language" (p. 394). According to Nunan (1988, p. 177), "no curriculum can claim to be truly learner-centered unless the learner's subjective needs and perceptions relating to the processes of learning are taken into account." Unfortunately, Allwright (1984) says, "very many teachers seem to find it difficult to accept their learners as people with a positive contribution to make to the instructional process" (p. 167).

Based on Bada and Okan (2000), many teachers acknowledge the need to understand learners' preferences, but they may not actually consult learners in conducting language activities. Teachers may believe that learners are not capable of expressing what they want or need to learn and how they want to learn. However researchers like Block (1994, 1996) claim that learners do have an awareness of what goes on in classes and that teachers should therefore make an attempt to align their task orientation to that of learners. Breen (cited in Block, 1996) showed that students were able to identify specific techniques adopted by the teacher that they preferred and believed that it helped them with understanding the new language. Nunan (1989) describes two Australian studies that show learners favor traditional learning activities over more communicative activity types. Some students want more opportunities to participate in free conversation, expressing their wish towards a more communicatively oriented approach. On the other hand, there are those who would prefer more emphasis on grammar teaching (Bada and Okan, 2000).

Once instructors come to know such learner diversities, they can, "if necessary," take into consideration those preferences and plan and implement alternative behaviors and activities in their classes (Barkhuizen, 1998). Even if learners' desires and those of teachers' are in contrast with each other, they can shift to a negotiated syllabus procedure and come to reasonable agreements (Jordan, 1997).

Although many teachers acknowledge the need to understand the ways in which learners differ in terms of needs and preferences, they may not consult learners in conducting language activities. The basis for such reluctance to cooperate may be that learners are not generally regarded capable of expressing what they want or need to learn and how they want to learn it (Bada & Okan, 2000). Besides, it is argued by many teachers, quite rightly, that in some societies, like Iran, with a top-down curriculum, social roles of teachers and learners are so rigidly drawn that expecting learners to participate in decision-making in the classroom may not be viewed as appropriate(Eslami R. & Valizadeh,2004). The traditional learning styles and habits of the learners may influence learners' perceived self-confidence and their knowledge base to make informed choices in relation to instructional activities. In these contexts promoting learners' participation in the educational process needs to be done with care and sensitivity.

As Cray and Currie (1996) suggest, the important point is that teachers do not have to act on behalf of their learners but with their learners. Attention needs to be given to students' ways of learning and their preferences and unless teachers are aware of those preferences they cannot consider them in their teaching activities and classroom practices.

This study was conducted in order to broaden the scope of studies done in the area of non-English majors' preferences about English learning, and to include learners of a different profile and in a different socio-cultural context from previous studies. The context of English language teaching in Iran, with its anti-Western sentiments after the Islamic revolution, the limited amount of exposure to English language and relative lack of native English speaking tourists and visitors in the country, is different from the EFL teaching contexts reported in other studies (e.g., Bada & Okan, 2000; Lin & Warden,

1998). Therefore, it will be insightful to see if similar findings will be reached. The results of the present study indicate that there is a significant difference among non-English majors' preferences, even in different branches of the same major, regarding preferred teaching method, the most important language skill and their motivational orientations.

It should be noted that the terms *likes* or *Preferences*, following Spratt (1999) and Eslami R. (2004), has been used in its simplest form. Thus, when students prefer a teaching method or focusing on a language skill, it means that they either enjoy it or find it useful.

The Study

The present study aimed at investigating non-English majors' language learning preferences. The study involved students majoring in different fields who responded to a questionnaire on how they like to learn college English.

Research Hypotheses

Many language teachers in Iran, assume that non-English majors can be treated with the same standard approach and as a result students in different non-English majors attend the same General English class. Can we assume that different majors have the same interest and outlook, value the same skills or generally appreciate our efforts in the same way? More specifically, to show this is the case or not, the following hypotheses were formulated:

Ha1: There is a significant difference among non-English majors' preferred language skills.

Ha2: There is a significant difference among non-English majors' preference for learning English in an all- English environment.

Ha3: Students in different branches of the same major, do not differ significantly in their preferred teaching method.

Ha4: Students in Science Majors and Humanities, differ significantly in their preferred teaching method.

Ha5: There is a significant difference among non-English majors' perspectives about college language course.

Ha6: Non-English majors differ significantly in their motivation to learn English language.

Context

English is formally taught as a foreign language to Iranian students from the second year in junior high school. The students have about three hours of formal instruction in English every week. Teachers use a combination of grammar-translation method and audiolingual method in most schools. At the university level, students mostly study English for academic purposes (EAP) and therefore, reading is the most emphasized skill. The first course university students have to take is 3-credits of "General English" and then they take more specialized English courses in which they focus on their field related English texts and learn related terminology. The curriculum in high schools is a top-down curriculum; the Ministry of Education dictates all the decisions regarding the textbook selection and the exams. However, not much control is exerted on teaching methodology. The culture of teaching is basically a teacher-centered one in Iran. Contrary to secondary education, at the university level, instructors have the freedom to choose the textbooks and activities for their classes. Compared to EFL learners in other contexts, Iranian EFL students do not have much exposure to English outside the classroom. Very few English programs are broadcasted on TV or radio. Of course, through advancements in technology and the more frequent use of the Internet, satellite, and rapid growth of private language institutes in Iran, the opportunities for English language learning have greatly improved (Talebinezhad & Aliakbari, 2002).

Subjects

A total of 192 students in different majors (Social Sciences, Business Management, Banking Management, Industrial Engineering, Chemistry, Physics, and Politics) at Azad Universities of Dehaghan and Shahreza, participated in the study. All the subjects had studied English formally for six years in junior and senior high school and ranged in age from 17 to 27. They were first-year students from the Science and Humanities Departments taking the "General English" course. They attended two class sessions a week (each 75 minutes) and the purpose of the course was improving reading comprehension.

Instrument

The data for this study were collected through a 13-item questionnaire, adapted from Lin and Warden (1998). Considering their fields of study, students specified how they like to learn college English. Each item in the questionnaire explored a particular L2 topic. However, they can be categorized into three major classes: preferred teaching method, the importance of the four basic language skills and students' motivational orientations. Based on the experiences of working with English learners, the instrument was amended (some items omitted and some added with a different format). To make sure that students understand the items in the questionnaire, students' native language (Persian) was used.

Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using SPSS statistical package. A Chi-square frequency analysis was carried out in order to define significance of dispersion of choices ($p<0.05$). Results concerning each research hypothesis, will be presented in a tabular form in percentage, beginning with Ha1.

Regardless of non-English majors' needs and preferences, instructors just concentrate on reading skill (using GTM) in General English and LSP classes in Iran. We asked students to determine the importance of each language skill, considering their majors. Sixty percent of the respondents believed that the four language skills (and not just reading) are highly important. However, their responses differ significantly regarding the importance of "speaking".

Table 1: Importance of speaking

Speaking Importance	Majors						
	Social Sciences	Business Manag.	Banking Manag.	Ind. Eng.	Chem.	Phys.	Politics
	%						
High	56.8	70.5	47.8	89.5	100	85.7	73.3
Average	35.1	22.7	32.8	7.9	0	14.3	20.0
Low	2.7	4.5	17.9	2.6	0	0	0
Chi-sq = 53.710			Sig = .029				

Contrary to instructors' wide-spread assumptions, the importance of "speaking" is not the same for students in different majors. As shown, while 100% of the Chemistry students believe that "speaking" is highly important, only 47.8% of Banking Management and 56.8% of the students in Social Sciences, have such an opinion. In considering learners' views towards the importance of speaking, the nature of different majors and students' goals play an important role. For Science students, the main specialized textbooks and references are in English. Compared with students in Humanities, Iranian Science students are typically more motivated to study abroad or attend international conferences.

In General English and LSP classes in Iran, instructors use students' native language (Persian) to translate the texts and explain the rules. It is generally assumed that non-English majors prefer this teaching method and are not motivated to learn English communicatively at least in college language classes. As a result, GTM (Grammar Translation Method) is the dominant teaching method in most of the language classes and

students in different majors, attend the same General English class. To investigate students' preferred teaching method, we asked them to express whether they preferred learning English in an all- English environment in class or not .

Table 2: Preference for an English-only teaching method

Preferred Teaching Method	**Majors**						
	Social Sciences	Business Manag.	Banking Manag.	Ind. Eng.	Chem.	Phys.	Politics
	%						
Just English in class	24.4	22.0	27.5	48.7	80.0	28.6	20.0
Chi-sq = 71.575			Sig = .000				

As predicted, learners seem to be divided on the issue of preferred teaching method. The results suggest that 80.0% of the Chemistry students prefer learning English in an all-English environment; however, it is not the case for Physics or different majors in Humanities . To see whether it is the case for different branches in the same major, we tested Ha3.

Table 3: Preference for an English-only teaching method for branches of
Chemistry major

Preferred Teaching Method	**Branches of chemistry**			
	Petrochemistry	Chemistry Engineering	Applied Chemistry	Teaching Chemistry
	%			
Just English in class	47.2	80.0	20.0	11.1
Chi-sq = 19.174		Sig = .084		

Students in different branches of Chemistry major, are different in their preference for an English-only teaching method. As can be seen, 80.0% of Chemistry Engineering students and 47.2% of Petrochemistry students prefer such a teaching environment. However, Applied Chemistry and Teaching Chemistry students (in-service Chemistry teachers), do not hold this belief. This is a clear message to the instructors that even students in

different branches of the same major, have different learning preferences. To check the discrepancy between teaching method favored by students in Science and Humanities, we tested H4.

Table 4: Preference for an English-only teaching method for students in Humanities and Science majors

Preferred Teaching Method	Science Majors	Humanities	Chi-sq	Sig
	%			
Just English in class	47.0	24.8	12.708	.013

As shown, Science students are more inclined to learn English in an all-English environment. Despite the generally accepted assumption, the results indicate that, teachers are not aware of non-English majors' preferences regarding in-class learning. They seem to lose sight of the fact that some non-English majors are not interested in the existing teaching method ; that is, using Persian as the language of instruction in English language classes.

To investigate non-English majors' perspectives about college language course, we asked whether students took college language course because (1) it is compulsory (2) they are interested in language courses (3) it has an important role in their future career and (4) it is necessary for modern life. The results are presented in the table below:

Table 5: Perspectives about College English Course

Taking English course due to:	**Majors**						
	Social Sciences	Business Manag.	Banking Manag.	Ind. Eng.	Chem.	Phys.	Politics
	%						
Being compulsory	51.2	22.7	32.9	28.9	25.0	50.0	50.0
Being interested in English	12.2	4.5	21.4	7.9	12.0	14.2	12.5
Its role in their future career	34.1	70.4	38.5	63.1	50.0	35.7	31.3

Its necessity for modern life	2.4	2.3	7.1	0	2.8	0	6.3
Chi-sq = 102.996				Sig = .050			

As can be observed here, students in Business Management (70.4%), Industrial Engineering (63.1%), and Chemistry (50.0%) are more inclined to learn college English for better job opportunities and its effect on their future career. Half of the students in Social Sciences, Physics and Politics take college English just because it is a compulsory subject for them. A significant number of students are not interested in the language course or would not mind taking college English course as a necessity for better modern life. Many university students mainly attend the language classes because it's a part of the general curricular program and graduation requires their passing marks from their English classes (for insufficiency of English course at schools and universities see Sadeghi (2003); Mazandarani (1998); Seif (1998); Ghasemi (1996).

It is important to note here that many Iranian university students enrol in private language institutes because they feel they cannot get satisfactory result from their English courses at university. They think they can only learn the communicative skills of English language over there (Talebinezhad & Sadeghi, 2005). To take a more realistic perspective about non-English majors' general motivation to learn English as a foreign language, we asked their basic purpose of studying English.

Table 6: Students' basic purpose of studying English

Basic purpose of learning English	Majors							Chi-sq	Sig
	S.S	Business Manag.	Banking Manag.	Ind. Eng.	Chem.	Phys	Pol.		
	%								
Communication with foreigners	53.6	69.8	62.3	69.1	85.0	92.8	68.8	40.578	.276
Understanding every day English	85.5	97.8	88.3	89.8	99.0	100	100	37.252	.411
Ability to read English texts	58.6	21.4	43.5	38.5	25.0	42.8	31.3	64.104	.003

As shown, non-English majors do not differ significantly in their motivation to learn English language for communication with foreigners or Understanding every day English. Regardless of their majors, an overwhelming majority of them are inclined to learn English for communication. However, they differ significantly in their motivation to learn language for reading English texts. While by 58.6% of students in Social Sciences

would like to be able to read English texts, only 4.8% of students in Physics hold this belief. The striking point about these results is that a significant number of non-majors would not like to learn English for ability to read English texts. They prefer to learn English communicatively; however, instructors are not aware of this preference.

Conclusion and Discussion

Teachers, curriculum designers, material developers, and others who want to be sensitive to the needs of the students they serve, cannot always rely on their unaided intuitions (Rudduck, 1991). In this study, we investigated students' perspectives about English learning. Of special interest was the way different majors showed preferences for different language skills and teaching methods.

The general lack of research on the issues surrounding non-English majors has led many language teachers in Asia to assume that all students can be treated with the same standard approach (Warden&Lin, 1998). The reality is that the students in Asia,including Iran, are EFL, as opposed to ESL, and the vast majority of students studying English are non-majors. Can we assume that different majors value the same skills or generally appreciate our efforts in the same way? This survey has clearly shown that this is not the case.

The findings show a discrepancy between skills and teaching method favored by non-English majors and teachers' intuitions about them. Our findings show that, regardless of their fields of study, types of learning that focus merely on "reading skill" and using Persian in teaching English, do not appeal to all non-English majors. There is a significant tendency among learners towards class content that observes both receptive and productive skills emphasized equally. Some groups of students, Industrial Engineering and Chemistry majors for example, highly prefer to learn English in an all-English environment but majority of learners in other majors prefer a more traditional classroom work and teaching method. Certainly this data points towards understanding the special needs of each group of students. This could mean adopting methods to have a better "fit" with the target students, as Leng (1997) points out. While fashionable teaching methodologies come and go, the teaching situation in Asia is generally similar with large class sizes and limited resources. Rather than dismissing teaching methodologies, such as grammar translation, we should realize that such methodologies may have useful applications when combined with other factors such as students' backgrounds, levels, preferences, future needs for English, teachers, schools, culture, etc. (Warden&Lin,1998).

Therefore, as Eslami and Vlizadeh (2004) state, it seems that a locally developed version of a communicative language teaching approach (Thompson, 1996: 36) may be more appropriate and acceptable for some EFL contexts. Obviously, adapting a communicative teaching approach for EFL contexts like Iran, requires time, a well-structured teacher training, and a transition period. Most importantly, the students' needs and the sociocultural context of English in the Iranian EFL setting should be considered.

Moreover, the results of the present study show that non-English major students are highly motivated to learn English for communication with foreigners, understanding everyday English, ability to read English texts, and for its effect on their future career. They have realized that they need English not only for academic purposes but also for communication.

However, a vast majority of these students are not interested in college English course and take it just because it is a core requirement at all universities. In other words, they have positive attitudes to language learning in general but negative attitudes to college language courses. It may signify the fact that the traditional methods of language instruction in General English and LSP classes cannot help them to develop their communicative competence. It seems that instructors need to put a great deal of thought into developing programs which result in a change in non-English majors' attitudes towards college language learning.

On the whole, besides the conclusions mentioned above, the differences among majors found in this study sheds some light on the special groups and their specific needs that make up non-English majors studying English. While most studies of English learners have dealt with English majors, there are far more students studying English because it is a core requirement at all schools.

Notes

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Azam Noora, M.A in English language teaching, graduated from Isfahan University. Being the top student, his professor, Dr. Eslami R. who is now teaching at A & M University of Texas, invited him as one of her research members. They have had academic collaboration since then. His latest work is a paper in Pragmatics, accepted for 31st International Conference on Intercultural Pragmatics in Germany in 2006. His major fields of interest are Pragmatics, SLA, ESP and non-English majors' affairs. Now he is a member of academic staff at Azad University of Dehaghan.