



EFL Students' Learning Activity Preferences in Islamic Boarding School: Are They Different from Reality?

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Abstract

Understanding EFL students' preferred activities while learning English is essential since it helps teachers conduct engaging classroom practices. However, teachers sometimes only rely on their choices. Consequently, a mismatch between students' and teachers' preferred activities often happens. Therefore, this study aims to discover students' learning activity preferences and the actual activities they experience, determining their alignment or misalignment and how it affects students in language learning. This study was conducted using a convergent parallel mixed-method design. A questionnaire was administered to 40 first-year students in a lower-secondary Islamic boarding school. Descriptive statistics is used to analyze quantitative data, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The results indicated a misalignment between students' preferred activities and the actual activities they experience while learning English which caused students' dissatisfaction and disengagement. These findings contribute to EFL teachers in creating innovative lesson plan by considering students' preferred activities.

Keywords: *Students' learning activity preferences; EFL classroom practices; Islamic boarding school*

Introduction

In a country with a massive population like Indonesia, English is viewed differently and variously. Many studies from recent decades have shown the role of English and the reason why it is important. Educators who teach EFL students at any level generally share the same opinion on how they perceive English as a means of global communication (Irham et al., 2022; Raja et al., 2022). In addition to that, Isadaud et al. (2022) raise an issue about the urge for English to be continuously added to Indonesia's educational curriculum. Thus, it demands teachers' competence to create appropriate lesson plans to support students' learning process, even though the policy from the Ministry of Education caused the curriculum transition (Salim & Hanif, 2021).

The urgency to learn English also happens in Islamic Boarding Schools. There, students are demanded to master not only Arabic but also English to encounter global

challenges. According to Kuswanto (2024), implementing English language learning in Islamic Boarding Schools offers students international mobility, taking this opportunity to introduce Islamic values internationally using English to interact with other people from different countries. However, teachers in Islamic boarding schools often face the same barriers in creating meaningful language learning. They found that students' motivation and interest are lacking (Akmal et al., 2022; Marzulina et al., 2021). Therefore, it remains challenging to design a well-planned teaching procedure unless teachers consider students' preferences for activities used while learning English (Ahmetović & Dubravac, 2021; Nunan, 2012; Spratt, 2001).

Students' preferences, in this case, can be defined as students' choice of the learning activity that can keep them engaged with the whole process of language learning. Indeed, it has several practical implications for both policymakers and teachers. (Khoiroh et al., 2023) It is in line with a study conducted by Simon (2020) that identifying students' preferences contributes to the arrangement of the curriculum, leading the teacher to compose a set of teaching plans by inserting appropriate learning activities that can boost students' positive engagement and participation. By chance, it also improves students' learning motivation (Ahmetović & Dubravac, 2021). Even though understanding students' learning activity preferences seems promising, teachers sometimes disregard it (Spratt, 2001.). Unlike Nunan's theory that voice the important of embracing students' perspectives in selecting classroom activities, Sanchez (2017) discovers that teachers often rely on their choices. Therefore, a mismatch between students' preferences and teachers' beliefs when choosing learning activities often occurs, and that will later affect the learning process.

Some studies related to this issue have been widely conducted in the context of EFL from time to time. The old research done by Spratt (2001) finds inaccurate perceptions of what activities students like to implement and what actual activities they receive from the teacher. In different area, Sanchez (2017) reports the same result regarding the mismatch. He said that teachers were likely to choose activities based on their teaching style and what they believed was the most effective strategy to meet students' needs. In fact, what students need is not always what they like, and vice versa. It is a kind of misconception since teachers might focus more on what students should acquire, declining what they perceive about the teaching and learning process. Yet, it might have a negative impact on students. Simon (2020) argues that the discrepancy between what students and teachers perceive about which activity should be carried out in a classroom can lower students' self-efficacy. In other words, it can hinder students from achieving better learning performance. It also aligns with Manivannan and

Nadesan (2023) that mismatch can impact students' learning outcomes. They also emphasized that students' intrinsic motivation was likely to decrease. By referring to the psychological factor, Irfani and O'boyle (2024) found the same result that inaccurate preferences in choosing learning activities might become a barrier for students to develop their Zone of Proximal Development.

Those studies were conducted within the same scope of identifying a mismatch between students' and teachers' preferences in selecting an adequate activity in English language learning but in different territories such as Hong Kong, Mexico, South Korea, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Moreover, three of them were focused on students in higher education. Meanwhile, the last two studies were for lower education. In the Indonesian EFL context, literature underlying this phenomenon is still restricted, particularly in Islamic schools where people often have stereotypes that, there, students and teachers are not aware of mastering English as a foreign language. Considering that students' preferences vary and are subjective, it is not fixed but dynamic; another study conducted in divergent areas involving different participants will still be valuable. Bridging the gap, therefore, this present study aims to answer the following questions: What activity do students prefer while learning English? What are the actual activities students experience? What will happen if the actual activity they experience aligns or does not align with their preferences?

Method

To answer the research questions, this study applied a convergent parallel mixed-method design (Creswell, 2015). It is conducted in one Islamic Boarding School in a rural area in Jember, Indonesia. Forty students who belong to seventh graders were selected using convenience sampling based on their willingness and availability in involving to this research (Sugiyono, 2020). The demographic information of participants is presented in the table below.

Table 1. Participants demographic information

No.	Demographic	Criteria	Frequency
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1.	Gender	Male	12
		Female	28
2.	Age of participants	11	1
		12	4
		13	33
		14	2

Concerning the research design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously through a questionnaire, containing dichotomous variables which supposed to collect numerical data and open-ended questions to collect qualitative data. It was done in Bahasa Indonesia to make it easier for students to understand and answer the questions. Additionally, the questionnaire was already reviewed by experts who have advanced experience in teaching English as foreign learners to ensure the validity and reliability of research instrument. Furthermore, quantitative data were manually analyzed to calculate the relative frequency (%). Meanwhile, qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) where some themes were created to help the researcher compose a concise interpretation of the results.

Result and Discussion

This section delves into the findings in addressing students' learning activity preferences and the actual activities they experience, determining their alignment or misalignment, and how it affects students' language learning.

1.1 Students' Learning Activity Preferences

In relation to the first research question, students' preferred activities in Islamic boarding school, particularly for first-year students, fall into two broad categories: student-centered and teacher-centered, which are common approaches in classroom practices, as can be viewed in the figure below.

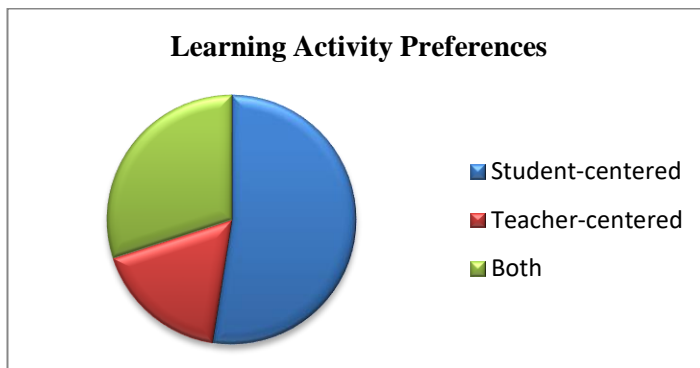


Figure 1. Relative frequency of students' preferred activities

It shows that 52,5% students prefer an activity requiring active participation as the core of meaningful learning. In contrast, only 17,5% are interested in teacher-led instruction, while approximately 30% students preferred both approaches. For further identification, the researcher grouped students' preferred learning activities into fun and active learning.

1.1.1 Fun Learning

Fun learning becomes the number one activity students choose as their preference. The definition of "fun" itself varies depending on students' perspectives. Most of them define learning English as fun through the integration of games. Some students said:

I like to learn English when my teacher incorporates various games into it. It is very exciting for me.

I prefer to learn English by playing games with my friends. We have a competition to win the game related to the English lesson.

The excerpts above show that students were likely to prefer an activity strongly related to traditional game-based and gamified learning. This activity becomes an alternative strategy for the teacher to fill the absence of ICT since they cannot bring a mobile phone and other electronic devices. Other students describe fun learning differently:

In my preference, I like to learn English by listening to music or singing a song.

I prefer to create song lyrics while learning English. This activity helps me to be more creative.

Based on the previous excerpts, the researcher assumed that students perceived the use of English songs positively to enhance their macro and micro skills, specifically for listening and pronunciation. Besides, some students acknowledged that:

Learning English in the classroom is boring, so I prefer to learn outside the class.

Outing class has become my favorite activity while learning English. I can explore everything.

Referring to the two latest excerpts, students quickly get bored while learning English when their classroom environment isolates them. A solemn and rigid atmosphere will probably give them pressure rather than pleasure. It is align with a study conducted by Bukit et al. (2023) that as young learners, students demand learning strategies that can help them escape from a negative feeling they called boredom. A successful fun learning leads students to achieve better language learning outcomes, releasing their strain and tension (Bukit et al., 2023; Ghafar, 2024). Even though implementing fun learning offers several benefits, something that researcher suggests is that teacher should always hold the learning goals, what students should reach at the end of the lesson. It is because the main point between how to create the learning fun and how to teach language through fun learning is totally different. In addition, teacher must be aware of this concern, otherwise the teaching and learning process will be less meaningful.

1.1.2 Active Learning

Based on students' perspectives about their preferred activities in learning English, they also demand active learning to be implemented in a classroom setting. They prefer to have a discussion and group work. Some students stated:

I love to work with my friends during English lessons. They will help me if I do not understand the materials.

Discussing with the whole class belongs to my preference for English language learning. We can share about everything.

I prefer to work in a group because I feel tired if I do the task individually.

The excerpts above show that students prefer to learn English collaboratively. Assigning students to work in a group and have a discussion with their peers will reinforce their active participation during the lesson. Previous researchers from different EFL contexts further report that group work positively impacts students' cognitive (Alfares, 2017) and social development (Sajidin & Ashadi, 2021). Subsequently, this activity trains them to behave in a way that allows them to respect

others' opinions, appreciate others' contributions, and share responsibilities among members.

1.2 Actual Activities Students Experience

Despite their preferences in choosing learning activities, the actual activities they received were a bit far from what they preferred. The activities implemented in the classroom are quite varied, but they are all considered to be part of passive learning.

1.2.1 Passive Learning

In learning activity they experienced, there are three points highlighted by students such as explaining, giving assignments or exercises, and root memorization. Some students reported that most of the activities they did in the classroom were listening to the teacher's explanation and taking notes of what the teacher wrote on the whiteboard. It is acknowledged by students that:

The teacher explained the materials, wrote them down on the whiteboard, and then let us copy them to our notebooks.

My teacher gives many explanations during English lessons, and I need to take notes.

The excerpts above indicate that the teacher is the center of learning. Students do listening and writing at the same time. They might find it challenging since they need to keep track of what the teacher said, also the time and pace they made during note-taking. Another idea stated by other students:

The teacher gives me a lot of assignments to do; sometimes I do not understand them.

I demanded to do the tasks while learning English.

There is so many exercises we need to do to learn English. I do not like it.

Reflecting on the above excerpts, besides note-taking, students are required to do the assignments to make them deeply learn English. However, students felt like this treatment became a burdensome task. They got a lot of pressure, particularly if they did not understand the instructions, so they had no clue how to complete it. Besides, some students also emphasized root memorization where the teacher asked them to memorize vocabulary along with its meaning as stated below:

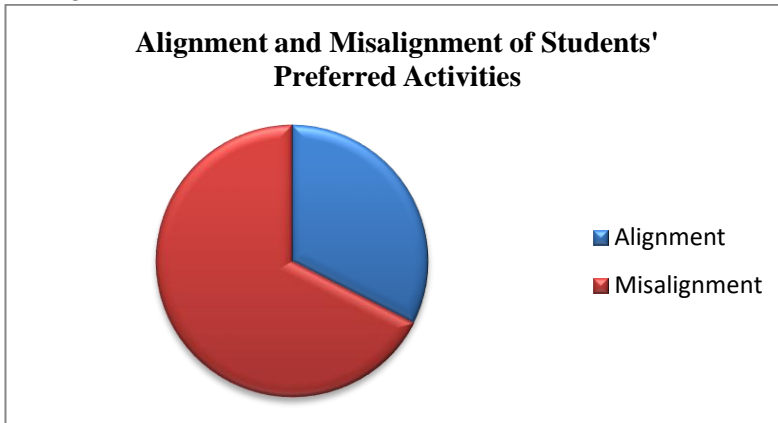
We are given fifty vocabularies. Then, we should memorize twenty-five of them.

There are too many words that should be memorized. The activity we did in English class sometimes was reciting our memorization to the teacher.

The data above shows that students are demanded to memorize as many words as they can. Even though some students like memorizing words, they think it is too much since they are still in the first year of junior high school. The researcher assumes that students are still mostly covered by traditional learning instruction, which can hinder them from mastering language skills. It is supported by Pastini and Lilasari (2023) that those activities shape students to be passive learners in which they can be over-reliant on the teacher. Furthermore, students will not have great opportunities to grow within community.

1.3 Misalignment of Students' Preferred Activities and Its Impact on Their Language Learning

Based on the previous results, the researcher drawn a similar conclusion with other previous studies over decades that there is misalignment between what students prefer about activities used while learning English and what actual activities they experience (Irfani & O'boyle, 2024; Manivannan & Nadesan, 2023; Simon, 2020; Sanchez, 2017; Spratt, 2001). This conclusion is supported by students' perception, as shown in the figure below.



Approximately 32,5% students found alignment between their preferred activities and what is done in the classroom, while the majority of 67,5%students perceived different opinions. They thought the activities they experienced during English learning did not meet their preference. They are really into fun and active learning but frequently receive teacher-centered approaches, which are passive learning, to be more specific. This misalignment has some drawbacks, considering

students' attitudes while learning English. First, students are dissatisfied with the process of learning. Students said, as a sample:

I felt disappointed when I discovered that none of my preferences was used in learning English.

I feel unhappy because I must write a lot and do many assignments.

It is sad when I am supposed to do the exercises I do not understand, and it is frustrating.

The situation described in the above excerpts indicates that the misalignment can affect how students perceive English. They might have a stereotype that learning English is difficult. Another drawback is related to students' disengagement. It is reported by some students that:

I feel bored every time I do an activity that I do not like.

I easily fall asleep if I find that the activity does not match my preferences. I also feel lazy when following the lesson.

The information or data from students' point of view allowed the researcher conclude that this kind of misalignment will automatically affect students' psychological, physical, and emotional aspects. Teachers actually do not need to implement all of the students' preferred activities since it is still challenging in some aspects. In addition, EFL teachers should put aside the belief of one-size-fits-all in selecting learning activity for students at any level. It is important for teacher to raise this issue. take some benefits from considering students' preferences in learning English to hold a more appropriate teaching strategy.

Conclusion

This study aims to discover students' learning activity preferences and the actual activities they experience, determining their alignment or misalignment and how it affects students in language learning, particularly in an Islamic boarding school. The findings reported that students mostly preferred fun and active learning to be integrated into the ELT context, but, in reality, their activities are covered by passive learning. This phenomenon indicated a misalignment that triggered students' dissatisfaction and low engagement in English learning. This study contributes to policymakers and teachers in considering students' preferred activities before designing a curriculum or lesson plan. By highlighting the point that students' preferences are fluid and dynamic, another study in a different setting is worth exploring. Moreover, this study is limited by the way it did not include the English teacher's point of view. There might be hidden

reasons why teachers did not implement students' preferred activities that need further investigation in the future.

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