

## **PEDAGOGICAL PREFERENCES OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS IN LEARNING ENGLISH**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated the pedagogical preferences of pre-service teachers in learning English. Participants were 113 pre-service teachers (29 males, 84 females) in the second semester of a Bachelor of Education (TESL) Foundation Program. Pre-service teachers' responses to a 22-item questionnaire on their pedagogical preferences in English class revealed that they preferred to work in pairs or small groups rather than individually. They also showed a preference for learning activities that are fun, exciting, relaxing and interactive rather than teacher-centered activities where they were not that actively involved. The reasons given for liking certain activities included being able to relax, enjoy, and raise their self-confidence, and having opportunities to practice speaking in English and interact with classmates. Meanwhile, the reasons given for disliking some of the activities indicate that they have problems with staying focused on tasks, poor listening skills, language anxiety, and lack of confidence in completing tasks alone. In conclusion, pedagogical implications of the findings and suggestions for further research are put forward.

*Keywords:* pedagogical preferences, learning English, pre-service teachers

## Abstrak

Kajian ini menyiasat pilihan pedagogi guru-guru pra perkhidmatan dalam pembelajaran bahasa English. Peserta kajian terdiri daripada 113 guru praperkhidmatan (29 lelaki, 84 perempuan) dalam semester kedua Program Persediaan Ijazah Sarjana Muda Perguruan (Pengajian Bahasa English). Respons guru-guru praperkhidmatan kepada soal selidik yang mengandungi 22 item mengenai pilihan pedagogi semasa kelas Bahasa English menunjukkan mereka lebih suka bekerja dalam pasangan atau kumpulan kecil daripada secara berseorangan. Mereka juga lebih suka aktiviti pembelajaran yang menyeronokkan, menarik, santai dan interaktif berbanding dengan aktiviti berpusatkan guru di mana mereka tidak terlibat secara aktif. Sebab-sebab mereka suka aktiviti tertentu termasuk dapat berehat, berseronok, meningkatkan keyakinan diri, dan ada peluang untuk bercakap dalam bahasa Inggeris dan berinteraksi dengan rakan sekelas. Sementara itu, sebab-sebab mereka tidak suka sesetengah aktiviti menunjukkan mereka mengalami masalah menumpu kepada tugas, kelemahan kemahiran mendengar, kebimbangan bahasa, dan kurang keyakinan dalam menyelesaikan tugas-tugas secara bersendirian. Implikasi pedagogi penemuan kajian dan cadangan untuk penyelidikan selanjutnya dikemukakan.

*Keywords:* pilihan pedagogi, pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris, guru praperkhidmatan

## Introduction

### **Pedagogical Preferences in the English Language Classroom**

Pedagogical preferences refer to the learners' preferred choice of teaching and learning activities carried out in the classroom. Students have different preferences about teaching and learning, and different responses to specific classroom environments and instructional practices. Pedagogical preferences of learners influence their quality of learning in the classroom. Understanding these preferences is of paramount importance in the teaching and learning process because the learning environment can either support or inhibit the learners' intentional cognition and active engagement (Soo, 1999). In developing strategies for increasing learner involvement, a key factor is the extent to which these strategies are compatible with learners' own expectations and preferences. According to Benson and Nunan (2005), in recent years there has been a growing interest in 'learners'

voices' in an attempt to better understand learners' motivations, reasons for success, dropping out, and learners' choices in how they approach the language learning process. Therefore, in deciding on strategies for increasing learner involvement, it is important to consider the extent to which the strategies are compatible with students' pedagogical preferences. As Schmidt (2004) pointed out, learning will only be effective when students are motivated to do things that are interesting, relevant to their goals and enjoyable. It is only then that they will be more ready to engage with what is taking place and the learning that takes place will then be more effective.

Educators should therefore make an effort to find out what are the pedagogical activities their students prefer and implement these activities to ensure learning is effective and enjoyable. Findings from such studies inform teachers of their students' needs and wants and how their teaching is being received. By taking these wishes into consideration in the teaching decision making process, educators are more likely to foster the enthusiasm of language learners. In addition, by knowing learners' worries or misleading perceptions, teachers may make timely interventions by raising awareness of the 'right' strategies, explaining the rationale of activities, or instructing students on how to proceed with tasks.

A recent study by Littlewood (2010) identified three main types of lessons that students preferred: the communication-oriented lesson, the form-oriented lesson, and the control-oriented lesson. A communication-oriented lesson is where there is a relaxed atmosphere, plenty of active discussion, use of authentic materials and a lot of enjoyment. In a form-oriented lesson, the teacher teaches new language items, corrects most grammatical mistakes and there is revision of grammar. Meanwhile a control-oriented lesson is where the teacher pays a lot of attention to correct pronunciation, guides most of what the students do, and corrects most grammatical mistakes. In general, Littlewood (2010) found that students preferred communication-oriented lessons and expressed positive attitudes to a varied range of teaching strategies. Meanwhile, Ochert (2011) found that university level male students in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environment were motivated to learn English with tasks involving physical activity rather than traditional teacher-fronted lessons. Other findings included preferences for both group work and lectures among some of the students, a preference for communicative and task-based activities over traditional activities, and a preference to actively learn socio-collaboratively.

While there have been studies on pedagogical preferences of students at the college and university level, there are hardly any documented studies that investigate the pedagogical preferences of pre-service teachers. A review of the literature shows that in Malaysia, there is an apparent scarcity

of documented studies on pedagogical preferences of students as well as pre-service teachers. It is imperative for teacher educators to explore what kinds of classroom teaching and learning strategies are preferred by pre-service teachers so that appropriate measures can be taken to meet their preferences. Besides considering pedagogical ideas from the educators and researchers, it is important to pay attention to the voices of pre-service teachers regarding the pedagogical activities that they prefer. This need becomes even more compelling in a context where these pre-service teachers are being trained to be future teachers of English. It is important to employ teaching-learning activities that are suited to pre-service teachers' preferences so that more effective learning takes place. The present study aimed to fill this gap in research by eliciting feedback on pedagogical preferences of pre-service teachers of English and what are the reasons for such preferences. The pedagogical implications drawn from the findings of this exploratory study will be useful for the development of language teaching and learning in this particular context as well as elsewhere.

### **Research Questions**

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the pedagogical activities that pre-service teachers (a) like, and (b) dislike?
2. What are pre-service teachers' reasons for (a) liking, and (b) disliking specific pedagogical activities?

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

This is a survey study that collected data through administration of a questionnaire consisting of closed-ended and open-ended questions on pre-service teachers' pedagogical preferences and the reasons for their preferences in learning English.

### **Participants**

Participants were 113 pre-service teachers (29 males, 84 females) in the second semester of a B. Ed. (TESL) Foundation Program in a Teacher Education Institute in Malaysia. The pre-service teachers were in five intact groups randomly selected from six groups available. The mean age of the participants was 19.19 years ( $SD = .47$ ). All the pre-service teachers are non-native speakers of English; however they have studied English as a subject in school for at least 12 years.

## **Instrument**

**Questionnaire on Pedagogical Preferences.** A questionnaire entitled “What are your preferred ways of learning English?” (adapted from Pham Thi Hanh, 2005) consisting of 22 items was developed to gain insights on pre-service teachers’ pedagogical preferences. The items were on various learning activities including reading, (2 items), writing, (2 items), speaking (5 items), listening (3 items), learning grammar (3 items), participation modes (4 items), and other activities such as games, role play/drama/simulations, and listening to English songs/watching English movies (3 items). For each item, pre-service teachers were required to indicate their preference for the activity on a 5-point Likert scale, that is, 1 = *dislike very much*, 2 = *dislike*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *like*, and 5 = *like very much*. As can be seen, the word *like* made no distinction between activities learners enjoyed and those they found useful. Students were free to interpret *like* in either way. The initial pool of items was piloted on a representative sample of pre-service teachers ( $N = 20$ ) not involved in the actual study. For those activities that they had never experienced in class, they were required to indicate it in a separate column titled ‘*No experience*’ and they were also required to write down any other activity not listed in the questionnaire that they enjoyed during English class. Perusal of the responses of pre-service teachers involved in the pilot study showed that they had experienced all of the activities listed in the questionnaire and some of them mentioned an additional activity that is, “watching English movies”. Following that, appropriate adjustments were made to the questionnaire for the actual data collection. The questionnaire also had an open-ended question section where pre-service teachers were requested to choose two activities that they liked most and two activities that they disliked most and write down the reasons for liking or disliking each activity chosen.

## **Procedure**

The questionnaire on pedagogical preferences was administered to each intact class by the researcher in this study. They were advised to read the statements carefully and respond honestly to each of them. They managed to complete the questionnaire in about 30 minutes.

## **Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics was used to identify the mean scores for pre-service teachers’ responses regarding their preference for each pedagogical activity in the questionnaire. Pre-service teachers’ reasons for liking or disliking specific pedagogical activities were content analyzed and summarized.

## Findings and Discussion

### Ranking of Pedagogical Activities according to Preferences

This study set out to investigate pre-service teachers' preferences with regards to pedagogical activities in the classroom. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and ranking of pedagogical activities according to pre-service teachers' responses.

Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations and Ranking of Pedagogical Activities*

Item No.	Item	Means	SD	Ranking
1	Reading texts silently in class for information and doing follow-up exercises	3.44	0.99	18
2	Reading texts aloud in class	3.71	1.04	13
3	Writing short passages in pairs or groups	3.51	1.01	16
4	Writing short passages individually	3.57	1.05	15
5	Taking part in whole-class discussions	4.02	0.99	5
6	Oral discussion in pairs or groups	3.95	0.94	7
7	Giving individual oral presentation	3.42	1.25	20
8	Giving group oral presentation	3.90	0.96	10
9	Taking part in oral exercises (grammar, pronunciation drills)	3.90	0.96	9
10	Listening to lecturer's instructions and explanations	3.88	0.83	11
11	Listening to classmates giving oral presentation	3.94	0.76	8
12	Listening to tapes and doing follow-up exercises	3.21	1.12	21
13	Doing grammatical exercises	3.65	1.02	14
14	Listening to lecturer explaining and giving grammatical rules	3.74	1.16	12
15	Learning grammatical rules by myself	3.17	1.25	22
16	Listening to the lecturer/staying in my seat	3.49	1.05	17

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	(teacher-centered activities)			
17	Working in pairs or groups on tasks	3.96	0.86	6
18	Working individually on tasks	3.44	1.13	19
19	Interacting in English with classmates in class	4.25	0.77	3
20	Taking part in language games	4.39	0.81	2
21	Taking part in role plays/drama/simulations	4.06	1.05	4
22	Listening to English songs/watching English movies in class	4.65	0.67	1

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Perusal of Table 1 shows that the six pedagogical activities (ranked 1 to 6) that were very much liked by pre-service teachers included: Listening to English songs/watching English movies in class, taking part in language games, interacting in English with classmates in class, taking part in role plays/drama/simulations, taking part in whole-class discussions, working in pairs or groups on tasks, while the six activities (ranked 17 to 22) that they disliked were: Listening to the lecturer/staying in my seat (teacher-centered activities), reading texts silently in class for information and doing follow-up exercises, working individually on tasks, giving individual oral presentation, listening to tapes and doing follow-up exercises, learning grammatical rules by myself. This finding reveals that in terms of participation mode, pre-service teachers preferred to work in pairs or small groups rather than individually. In terms of types of activities, they showed a preference for learning activities that are fun, exciting, relaxing and interactive (games, movies, singing, drama/role play) rather than teacher-centered activities or activities where they were not physically active or not interacting with their peers such as doing seat work or listening to the lecturer. These findings concur with those of other researchers (Littlewood, 2010; Ockert, 2011) where students showed a preference for communication-oriented lessons (Littlewood, 2010) and communicative and task-based activities (Ockert, 2011).

### **Reasons for Liking and Disliking Specific Pedagogical Activities**

The open-ended question section provided rich and interesting information from the pre-service teachers regarding why they liked or disliked certain teaching-learning activities. Tables 2 and 3 present some of their verbatim responses for six of the activities they liked most and six of the activities they disliked most respectively.

Table 2

*Pre-service Teachers' Reasons for Liking Specific Activities*

Activities they like	Reasons
Listening to English songs/ watching English movies in class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A brilliant and relaxing way to learn English</li> <li>• Helps to improve my listening skills</li> <li>• It is very fun to listen to English songs, at the same time we learn new words in the lyrics</li> <li>• Uplift my mood in studying English and it is fun instead of always listening to lecture in class</li> <li>• It makes the process of learning more interactive and enjoyable, thus reducing the tension and stress</li> </ul>
Taking part in language games	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I love activities that involve physical movements instead of learning from the text</li> <li>• Games bring happiness and it gives me a lot of knowledge</li> <li>• I don't like to be bookworm, I like something fun, dangerous and interesting while I am learning</li> <li>• It is a fun way to learn English and I think it is more useful than hours of English lecture in class</li> <li>• So that I can play and at the same time learn English</li> </ul>
Interacting in English with classmates in class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Able to boost my confidence and fluency in speaking English</li> <li>• Helps to improve my communication skills and helps me to gain more confidence</li> <li>• By speaking English, we can learn better and it is also a fun way of learning with my friends</li> <li>• I feel comfortable speaking in English with friends; I do not feel afraid to make a mistake</li> </ul>
Taking part in role plays/drama/ simulations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I will experience it by myself, I will know what exactly is happening and what the excitement is all about</li> <li>• Through these activities I can increase my self confidence to communicate in English</li> <li>• It is fun and can improve my English</li> </ul>
Taking part in whole-class discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can gain much new knowledge and information from my friends</li> <li>• I can give my own opinion and discuss with others</li> </ul>
Working in pairs or groups on tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can get in touch with classmates</li> <li>• I can discuss better in pairs</li> </ul>



As the responses in Table 2 show, pre-service teachers like learning English through listening to songs or watching English movies as it is relaxing, enjoyable, less stressful, and at the same time such activities will improve their listening skills and increase their vocabulary. They like being involved in language games also as it is exciting and fun and enables them to learn through play. Interacting with peers in English is also well-liked by pre-service teachers because this boosts their confidence in communicating in English and mastery of the language. Another activity that improves their language proficiency besides enhancing their understanding through first-hand experiences is taking part in role plays, drama or simulations. They also like taking part in whole-class discussions as this is one way to acquire new knowledge and exchange ideas with peers. Pre-service teachers also like to work in pairs or groups on tasks because through these activities they get to interact and discuss with their classmates. Generally, the reasons given for liking the above activities emphasize the importance of (i) being relaxed, (ii) having opportunities to practice using English, (iii) learning through interacting with classmates, (iv) raising their self-confidence, and (v) enjoying the learning process, while they are acquiring language skills and knowledge.

Table 3

*Pre-service Teachers' Reasons for Disliking Specific Activities*

Activities they dislike	Reasons
Listening to the lecturer/ staying in my seat (teacher-centered activities)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This activity is quite stressful for me as I feel stressed if there is a lecturer standing in front of me</li> <li>• Because these kinds of activities could get really boring at times; not much movement or activities to do</li> <li>• My ideas will not develop</li> <li>• I do not think that I will learn anything if it is just the lecturer who talks and explains during a lesson; I surely will get bored easily and fall asleep</li> <li>• I can't really focus; easily lose focus, class is boring</li> </ul>
Reading texts silently in class for information and doing follow-up exercises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This kind of activity is boring and decreases my interest in studying and disturbs my concentration</li> <li>• I can't answer some of the questions if I don't understand the passage and I am not able to discuss with my friends</li> <li>• I find that it is boring</li> <li>• It often makes me feel sleepy because it is too boring. I prefer to read text aloud in the class, so that I can practice my pronunciation</li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I usually dislike this activity as it is actually a dull and boring way to learn language. It will be better if the students can join in some small activities planned by the lecturer so as to make the environment more enjoyable and at the same time learning will be more efficient</li></ul>
Listening to tapes and doing follow-up exercises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Honestly I hate this kind of activity since primary school</li><li>• I am not so good at listening, so by doing this activity, I feel bored</li><li>• It is quite boring and makes the class too silent; I feel very sleepy</li><li>• The pronunciation of the text in the tape can be quite incoherent, making the text difficult to understand</li><li>• I dislike it because it will not help me to pay full attention on it</li></ul>
Working individually on tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Individualistic is not good because I will not finish my work on time</li><li>• Quite bored</li><li>• I am often late in completing the task when working by myself</li><li>• Tension</li></ul>
Giving individual oral presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I dislike standing in front of people because I will be nervous and afraid that the lecturer will judge me according to my oral presentation</li><li>• I get nervous easily and forget about what I want to say</li><li>• I always get nervous when I do an oral presentation all by myself</li><li>• Even though I have prepared myself for it, I will not feel confident because I'm afraid that the audience will laugh at me</li><li>• No ideas, stress</li></ul>
Learning grammatical rules by myself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hard to understand the rules without explanation, too many rules and sometimes very confusing if I study alone</li><li>• I often get confused with the grammatical rules and I do not understand much about it</li><li>• Grammar is fun to learn in groups because people would be able to correct my mistakes instead of learning it alone</li><li>• Sometimes I can't even understand any grammatical rules after reading it for a few times</li></ul>

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- Because it always makes me confused and too many rules that needs to be learned
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Meanwhile, pre-service teachers' reasons for disliking specific activities suggest that they prefer to be actively involved physically and socially while being cognitively engaged in the learning process. They found that it was difficult to remain focused, boring, ineffective and even stressful to listen to the lecturer or stay in their seats during English lessons. Another activity they disliked was reading texts silently in class for information and doing follow-up exercises. They found that this activity was boring, puts them to sleep, and made them lose concentration easily. Similarly, listening to tapes and doing follow-up exercises was considered difficult, boring, and tested their ability to stay focused on the task. Working individually on tasks was also not popular with the pre-service teachers because it was boring, stressful, and slowed down their progress. Pre-service teachers also disliked giving individual presentations in front of the class because it was stressful and even though they had prepared beforehand they had no confidence and forgot what they wanted to say. Another unpopular activity was learning grammatical rules by themselves. They found it difficult to understand and remember the many grammatical rules they have to learn. The above reasons given by pre-service teachers indicate that their dislike for the activities was due to problems with (i) staying focused on tasks, (ii) poor listening skills, (iii) language anxiety, and (iv) lack of confidence in completing tasks alone.

## Conclusion

### Summary

The findings show that pre-service teachers preferred to work in pairs or small groups rather than individually. They also showed a preference for learning activities that are fun, exciting, relaxing and interactive (games, movies, singing, drama/role play) over teacher-centered activities or activities where they were not physically active. Generally, the reasons given for liking specific activities reveal the importance of being relaxed, having opportunities to practice using English, learning through interacting with classmates, raising their self-confidence, and enjoying the learning process while learning English. Meanwhile, the reasons given for disliking specific activities suggest that they have problems with staying focused on tasks, poor listening skills, language anxiety, and lack of confidence in completing tasks alone.

## Implications

A number of pedagogical implications can be put forward based on the insights gained through this study. The fact that pre-service teachers prefer communication-oriented lessons over traditional teacher-centered lessons suggests that English lecturers need to make an effort to have more fun-filled, exciting, relaxing and interactive activities such as games, drama, watching videos, singing, role plays and simulations. These kinds of activities will also help to provide pre-service teachers with a more relaxed socio-emotional environment which will help to reduce tension and make learning less stressful for those who lack confidence or experience language anxiety. Steps can also be taken to alleviate stress through relaxation activities or instruction on stress management. Oxford (1990) suggested three types of affective strategies that can be used to regulate learner attitudes, motivation, and emotions, namely strategies for anxiety reduction, self-encouragement and monitoring emotions.

Apart from that, providing more opportunities for pre-service teachers to interact with each other will enhance learning for those who need the support of their peers in completing learning tasks. This is because one of the reasons given by pre-service teachers for disliking certain teaching and learning activities was that they disliked working alone on tasks. English lecturers may want to employ cooperative learning strategies to provide an environment where pre-service teachers work together to complete a task. Cooperative learning has been found to be effective in promoting social-interdependence (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), enhancing language learning (Noorchaya Yahya & Huie, 2002; Oxford, 1997; Zhang, 2010), and reducing foreign language anxiety (McCafferty, Jacobs, & DaSilva Iddings, 2006; Ning, 2011; Suwantarathip & Woolfolk, 2010). Pre-service teachers who revealed that they faced problems staying focused when working on tasks alone may also benefit from working with peers in a cooperative learning environment as they have to work together as a team in achieving a common goal. Those who suffer from language anxiety may benefit from cooperative learning as it fosters active participation, a sense of community and emotional support, and provides more opportunities for students to communicate in English.

Pre-service teachers' problems with listening skills should also be addressed as listening is a critical element in communication and one of the most important skills when learning a language (Nunan & Miller, 1995). English lecturers may want to provide instruction on listening skills and also more opportunities for pre-service teachers to hone their listening skills through setting more listening tasks that include various forms of support to aid comprehension. The use of visual support in the form of videos or authentic materials and situations, familiar content, instruction in development of listening strategies such as predicting, asking for

clarification, and using non-verbal cues have been found to improve listening skills (Mendelsohn, 1994; Rubin, 1994; 1995; Thompson & Rubin, 1996).

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Since this is an in-context study with a small number of respondents, it is not the intention of the researcher to generalize the findings. Replication of this study involving similar respondents from other institutes of education in Malaysia will add to the generalizability of the findings. Future researchers may want to explore pre-service teachers' perceptions concerning which activities are more useful or more effective in learning English. It would also be interesting to assess pre-service teachers' motivation to learn and find out how this is related to their pedagogical preferences.

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