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**THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ACTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES IN ESL CLASSROOM: STUDENTS'
PERSPECTIVES**

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ABSTRACT

Student participation plays a critical role in fostering an efficient learning process within an ESL classroom. One innovative approach to promote learning engagement is the integration of active learning strategies into classroom activities. Even though an active learning approach can potentially improve students' engagement and learning outcomes, there is a lack of understanding of students' perspectives on the efficacy of these strategies and the overall language learning experience. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to explore students' perspectives regarding the efficacy of employing an active learning approach in ESL classroom learning activities. To facilitate this investigation, the active learning approach was implemented over eight weeks among diploma-level students with diverse English proficiency levels. The primary data source was an open-ended survey administered using Google Forms. The responses received from 68 participants were mostly positive feedback, and the results were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings substantiate that many students preferred incorporating active learning activities, which benefits them in many ways throughout their learning experience. Subsequently, the implications of this study have spread into the broader field of instructional methods, leading educators to think about a paradigm change to more interactive and dynamic teaching strategies. Teachers can enhance their professional growth by seeking training and support to integrate active learning strategies into their ESL classrooms. Thus, future studies must examine the potential improvements that can further enhance the impact of active learning in ESL classrooms.

Keywords: Active Learning; ESL Classroom; Student Perspectives.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the realm of education, the landscape of language teaching has undergone significant transformations, with educators continually seeking innovative methods to enhance the efficacy of pedagogical practices. Among these methods, active learning has garnered substantial attention due to its potential to foster deeper understanding, engagement, and critical thinking among students. With a growing body of research supporting the advantages of active learning across various disciplines, its integration into the ESL classroom warrants careful exploration. According to Tezer and Besgul (2014), in active learning, the teacher guides the students, eases learning, and pays attention to the student's needs while the students are being active by thinking, researching, discovering, producing, deciding, relating to previous and new learning and structuring the information. By actively involving students in the learning process, educators aim to create an environment that promotes interaction, collaboration, and the application of knowledge. Research within the broader educational context has shown that active learning methodologies can lead to improved retention of information, higher-order cognitive

skill development, and increased student satisfaction (Freeman et al., 2014). However, the extent to which these benefits translate to ESL classrooms and students' perceptions within these settings remain areas of inquiry. Recent findings have suggested that active learning strategies can be effective in ESL contexts. Munna and Kalam (2021) found that students' cognitive learning and emotional behaviour could be improved by adopting practical techniques like gamification, collaboration, and peer learning, which would increase their level of engagement. In addition, Khaled and Jehad (2022) highlighted how the active learning approach positively influences students' satisfaction and supports the moderating role of the classroom environment. These studies underscore the potential of active learning to create a dynamic and enriching ESL classroom experience.

Given the evolving paradigm of language education and the diverse students' English proficiency levels present in ESL classrooms, it is imperative to understand students' perceptions of the learning process facilitated by active learning approaches. Exploring their viewpoints can shed light on the alignment between educational goals, instructional strategies, and student preferences. By capturing the perspectives of ESL students, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding effective pedagogy and curriculum design within the realm of language education. In light of these considerations, this study investigates ESL students' perspectives regarding the learning process when facilitated through active learning approaches. The research questions formulated in the current study are:

1. What is the students' preferred learning approach in an ESL classroom?
2. What are the students' perspectives on the active learning approach used in their language learning process?

2. METHODOLOGY

This section presents the research design, participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis techniques employed in the study.

2.1 Research Design

A mixed-methods research design was employed in this study to comprehensively investigate students' perspectives on the language learning process by implementing an active learning approach in an ESL classroom. This design integrated both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods that allow for an exploration of the research questions.

2.2 Participants

The study was conducted among diploma-level students enrolled in an ESL course, encompassing varying levels of English proficiency, thereby capturing a diverse range of experiences and viewpoints. The participants were purposefully sampled and comprised 68 students, who voluntarily participated in the study. The demographic insight provides a comprehensive characteristics overview of the participants involved in the study, including their age, gender, ethnicity, and English proficiency levels.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Respondents (N = 68)

Item	Statement	Percent (%)
Age	18-20 years old	80.6
	21-23 years old	16.4
	24-26 years old	3.0
Gender	Female	37.3

Ethnicity	Male	62.7
	Malay	85.1
	Chinese	9.0
	Indian	4.5
	Others	1.5
SPM CEFR Level	A1	1.5
	A2	6.0
	B1	43.3
	B2	43.3
	C1	6.0

Table 1 presents the age distribution in which the majority of participants (80.6%) fell within the 18-20 years old category, while 16.4% were between 21-23 years old, and a smaller proportion (3.0%) were aged between 24-26 years. Regarding gender distribution, the study included 37.3% female and 62.7% male participants. The ethnic makeup of the respondents reflects a predominant Malay representation (85.1%), followed by Chinese (9.0%), Indian (4.5%), and other ethnicities (1.5%). The respondents' proficiency levels, as determined by the SPM CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) classification, indicate that only a minor portion of participants were at the A1 (1.5%) and A2 (6.0%) levels. In contrast, most respondents (86.6%) were situated symmetrically within the B1 or B2 proficiency levels, with a smaller portion (6.0%) falling within the C1 level.

2.3 Data Collection

The primary data source for this study was a close-ended and open-ended survey administered using Google Forms. The survey was designed to elicit participants' perspectives based on their experiences and reflections on the learning process during eight weeks of active learning implementation. It comprised a series of statements and questions that encouraged participants to articulate their thoughts in their own words. The survey was distributed electronically to the participants, who had the flexibility to respond at their convenience. Ethical considerations were upheld throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the study's purpose and their voluntary participation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their confidentiality and anonymity were ensured during data collection, analysis, and reporting.

2.4 Data Analysis

In terms of the data analysis procedures, descriptive statistics were used for quantitative data, including demographic information, to provide a comprehensive overview of the participants' characteristics and to answer Research Question 1. Meanwhile, thematic analysis was employed to answer Research Question 2 to derive meaningful patterns and themes from the collected responses. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), thematic analysis is a technique for methodically locating, classifying, and providing an understanding of patterns of meaning (themes) throughout a dataset. While the study aimed to capture diverse perspectives, the findings may be influenced by the specific context of the ESL course and the participants' characteristics. The subsequent sections will investigate the respondents' perspectives on the active learning approach implemented in the ESL classroom.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Students' Preference for Learning Approaches in ESL Classrooms

Students' responses to the question regarding the preference between active learning and teacher-centred style in an ESL classroom varied. On the one hand, a significant number of respondents, around

58.9 per cent, expressed a preference for active learning in class. The result is comparable to those of earlier studies, such as Dilmaç's (2021) discovery that 21st-century students want to be active learners and take charge of their education. Some students believe that active learning can improve critical thinking skills, as it allows for free discussion and interaction with peers. Active learning is seen as a more engaging and participatory approach, where they are not just passive listeners but active participants in the learning process. It is also considered less boring and more versatile, making the class more fun and exciting. Some individuals mentioned that active learning helps them to be more disciplined and focused, as it requires active thinking and involvement. Moreover, others appreciate the opportunity to improve their speaking and social skills through active learning.

On the other hand, 26.5 per cent of respondents preferred a teacher-centred style in class. They believe that a teacher, with their knowledge and experience, can adequately teach and guide students. They appreciate the face-to-face interaction and the ability to ask questions directly to the teacher. The traditional lecture is still the preferred method in most college and university settings despite a wealth of evidence indicating that it is not the most effective way to promote learning (Al Basheer & Almazrou, 2021). The teacher-centred style is seen as a more guided and structured approach, where everything is explained and directed by the teacher. Some individuals mentioned that they learned better when the teacher is in front of them, and they can receive more knowledge in this way.

Additionally, about 14.7 percent of respondents preferred a combination of both active learning and teacher-centred style in class. They believe both methods have advantages and disadvantages, and it is reasonable for teachers to use both methods in class. Their stance is underscored by recognising that each method harbours distinct advantages and limitations (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014). They appreciate the benefits of active learning, such as improved critical thinking and independent learning, as well as the benefits of teacher-centred styles, such as clear delivery of information and more opportunities to learn from the teacher. They believe that a balance of both methods can provide a better understanding of the lessons.

3.2 Students' Perspectives of the Active Learning Strategies Used in ESL Classroom

The students' perspectives based on their experiences and reflection on the active learning activities conducted in ESL classes were highlighted into five themes: (1) Improvement in Language Skills, (2) Confidence Building and Social Skills, (3) Good and Positive Feelings, (4) Benefits of Active Learning, and (5) Concerns and Suggestions.

3.2.1 Improvement in Language Skills

Active learning is seen as a way to improve language skills. A student mentioned that through active learning, he/she can practice and apply the language skills in real-life situations. Activities such as transferring information into a mind map (note making) and presenting their note to their peers provide opportunities for students to express themselves, develop their study and speaking skills, and expand their vocabulary range. Chang and Huang (2018) figured that these active learning experiences, characterised by real-life language usage, are perceived by students as conduits for bolstering their communication proficiencies. From the feedback received, some students believe that active learning activities help them improve their communication skills and overall language proficiency. Below are some of the excerpts from students:

S31: "... improved language skills: Through active learning, students can practice and apply their language skills in real-life situations..."

S47: "... improved language skills."

S57: "... active learning improves my English level."

3.2.2 Confidence Building and Social Skills

Activities that promote active learning are also thought to build confidence and improve social skills. Students mention that active learning encourages them to interact with their peers, which helps them develop their social skills and become more confident in communicating with others. According to Jeong et al. (2019), using active learning methodologies not only significantly promoted positive emotions and self-efficacy beliefs but also positively impacted the students' learning outcomes. A few students appreciate the opportunity to exchange knowledge and explore new things through active learning activities conducted in the classroom. The excerpts from students' statements as below:

S3: "... active learning activities can help improve critical thinking skills and communication skills."

S36: "A great way to improve knowledge and social skills."

S62: "... active learning activities are the things that are very helpful for students who are trying to develop their social skills and interact with others during class."

3.2.3 Motivation and Positive Feelings

Some feedback highlighted a positive perspective on active learning methods in an educational context. The students praised that they could foster independence and autonomy in their learning process through active learning. This sentiment underscores the idea that such approaches encourage students to take initiative and responsibility for their education. A few other students expressed enthusiasm for active learning by associating it with enjoyment, specifically mentioning the desire to engage in speaking activities within the classroom setting and describing it as interesting and useful. These results concur with Betti et al. (2022), who discovered that students appear happier in an active learning environment. This suggests that active learning methods enhance the educational experience and create an environment where students feel motivated to participate and contribute actively. Below are some of the excerpts from students stating their motivation for having active learning activities in ESL classrooms.

S5: "... active learning is very good as it encourages students to be more independent when doing their job."

S54: "It's fun. Honestly, it does make me want to try speaking English in class."

S55: "It's interesting and useful."

3.2.4 Benefits of Active Learning

Many students expressed positive opinions about active learning activities. They believe that such activities increase student engagement, collaboration, critical thinking, and communication skills, as well as enhance language acquisition. In this respect, Okumus et al. (2020) discovered an excellent correlation between student collaboration and learning. The students valued the opportunities to actively participate in the learning process by learning new vocabulary. Moreover, they were becoming more disciplined and attentive in class, which promoted a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Aside from that, students also found that active learning activities could force them out of their comfort zones by fostering a culture of risk-taking. Here are a few sample excerpts from students:

S8: “... engage actively in the learning process, promoting participation, collaboration, and critical thinking. Such activities can enhance language acquisition, communication skills, and overall student engagement.”

S34: “... good to keep our body stay active so we do not get bored in class. Plus, we can understand better.”

S41: “... active learning pulls students out of their comfort zone by creating an environment where risk-taking is encouraged.”

3.2.5 Concerns and Suggestions

While the majority of opinions are positive, some concerns are raised regarding the effectiveness of certain active learning activities. A student mentioned that the problem lies in the peer group itself and not the concept of active learning. They might suggest that changing roles in respective groups may have a positive impact on students. Additionally, another participant mentioned that some students paid less attention to other groups' presentations on their subtopics, as they tended to be too focused on delivering their part. The concerns raised on the neglecting part among certain students and the lack of contributions to the other peers. Barkley et al., (2014) suggested that by taking heed of students' insights and embracing adaptive strategies, educators can harness the strengths of active learning while proactively mitigating any concerns or unintended consequences. Some of the excerpts from student feedback are included below:

S15: “... the problem lies in peer itself and not the concept of Active Learning. Rotating the group may positively impact the student rather than playing a quiet game where when the first people engage, the others join in as well.”

S56: “... but then when there's a group work where every group was given different sub-topics and we have to prepare it on the spot in class, there's a chance for a student to have a lack of focus on other group's subtopics because the students were too focused on what and how to deliver their part of simplified notes/ mind maps to the classmates.”

S64: “It's good for students to independently learn for themselves so they can fully focus on learning, but some other students may be neglected or not put in a lot of effort in studying.”

4. CONCLUSION

The present research aimed to explore students' preferences for active learning in English classrooms and the result reveals a strong inclination toward active learning due to its benefits in fostering critical thinking, peer interaction, language skill development, confidence building, and social interaction. The study's findings resonate with the broader discourse on effective pedagogical strategies, affirming the importance of student engagement, interactive learning, and the cultivation of essential language skills. In essence, this research contributes to the ongoing dialogue surrounding language education methodologies by providing rich insights into student preferences and perspectives. By analysing their perspectives based on experiences and feedback, we aim to provide educators, curriculum designers, and language instructors with valuable insights that can inform the integration of active learning strategies into ESL classrooms. Through this exploration, we strive to enhance ESL education and further enrich the pedagogical practices employed in language classrooms. Future research in this area could delve deeper into the specific strategies and activities within active learning that yield the most substantial improvements in critical thinking, language acquisition, and social skills. Additionally, investigating the impact of different group dynamics and rotation patterns on student engagement and inclusivity could offer valuable insights for optimising active learning experiences. Comparative studies between various language subjects or across different age groups could further enhance our understanding of the efficacy and adaptability of active learning approaches. This research highlights the importance of a harmonious blend of active learning in the learning process to create a holistic and effective language education environment.

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