

A Comparative Study of Activity Preferences of Learners and Teachers in College English Teaching and Its Implications for Curriculum Design

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Abstract

The present paper takes as its point of departure methodological aspects of the curriculum, and specifically, it attempts at a comparative study of activity preferences of teachers and learners, and wishes to invest tentative thoughts and efforts in College English (CE) curriculum design. It conducts an empirical study on divergent views of 132 students and 30 CE teachers in University of Science and Technology Beijing (USTB) by means of questionnaire on 50 learning activities derived through interviews with a group of teachers and learners. Major findings indicate that there is a considerable lack of correspondence between learners' and teachers' opinions on various learning activities, and teachers respond more favorably to communicative activities while learners express stronger liking attitudes towards non-communicative activities. To provide a comprehensive picture, learners' attitudes towards various learning activities are also examined carefully, which reveals that they embrace both communicative and traditional activities. Tentative implications of the study for curriculum design are:

- 1) it sets up an empirical basis for methodology design in curriculum development by providing a detailed picture of learners' preferences;
- 2) it establishes a useful operating model for prompting a learner-centered curriculum by suggesting several mechanisms such as negotiation and consultation, incorporation of learners' feedback and flexibility and adaptation;
- 3) it supplies the rationale for specifying and optimizing CE classroom teaching by impressing teachers with the divergences of learner teacher views on learning activities.

Keywords: activity preferences, College English teaching, learners, teachers, curriculum design

1. Introduction

In recent years' EFL pedagogy research, there is a noteworthy shift of focus from preoccupation with teachers' role in course planning, implementation and evaluation to incorporation of learners' needs and attitudes in these processes. Accordingly, the newly promulgated *College English Curriculum Requirements (For Trial Implementation)* by the Ministry of Education in China calls for 180 experimental institutions of higher learning nationwide to develop an individualized curriculum as a guidance for their own College English (CE) programs. One of the central themes of the *Requirements* is to replace the traditional unitary teacher-dominant pattern with a learner-centered one. In such a curriculum, it is important that all aspects of the curriculum process be informed by attitudes of the learners rather than be decided by the teachers who base most assumptions on whatever they believe are legitimate. Meanwhile, many studies have already shown that there can be considerable discrepancies of opinion between learners and their teachers or syllabus experts on various elements of curriculum design. A divergence of opinion between these two groups has been noted in relation to what learners need, what they prefer, and the nature of language and language learning (Brindley 1984; Nunan 1988b; Kumaravadivelu 1991). These divergences by all means hinder the effective achievement of course objectives. Among various elements of curriculum development, the methodological aspect, which includes various classroom techniques and learning activities, is generally the area where there is the greatest potential for conflict between the learner and the teacher. In a traditional curriculum, this disagreement would probably be ignored on the grounds that the "teacher knows best", while in a learner-centered teaching model, it is crucial that any conflicts be resolved and learners' needs and attitudes be incorporated in the process of curriculum design.

2. Literature Review

Various studies have been conducted to explore different perceptions of teachers and learners on methodological aspects of curriculum design. These studies appear to have focused on three areas: teachers' preferred activities, learners' opinions on their activity preferences, and comparisons of learners' and teachers' activity preferences. Quinn (1984) conducts a survey aimed for teachers' views on traditional and communicative activities. Results demonstrate quite clearly that, for the sixty full-time and part-time teachers investigated, the concept of "communicative language teaching" is salient with all three non-communicative and one of the buffer statements being accorded "trivial incidental use". Eltis and Low (1985), in a national survey of teaching processes question 445 teachers on the usefulness of fourteen teaching activities. The top five items in the rank ordering are students working in pairs/small groups, role-play, language games, reading topical articles, and students making oral presentations. In general the study supports the previous language teaching study. Both indicate that teachers favor activities and tasks which can be broadly grouped as "communicative".

Alcorso and Kalantzis (1985) examine the perceptions of students. Their findings on the most useful parts of lessons according to a representative group of learners are grammar exercises, structured class discussion/conversation, copying written materials, memorizing, drill and repetition work, listening activities using cassettes and reading books and newspapers, among which, only one activity falls into the communicative type. Yorio (1986), too, reports that learners in his study value four traditional teaching techniques (grammatical explanations, using the language laboratory, memorizing vocabulary lists and translation exercises). Barkhuisen (1998) surveys learners' perceptions of fifteen classroom activities and again suggests learners' resistance to participating in communicative-type activities and their preferences for more traditional classroom work. However, a study by Green (1993), which investigates how much learners' enjoyment of communicative and non-communicative activities correspond with their perceptions of the usefulness of these activities, reveals that there is a general tendency for effectiveness and enjoyment to be highly correlated, and that learners tend to enjoy communicative activities more than traditional types. Perry, Theo, Robert and Mieke (2004) investigate students' perceptions of the kind and extent of teacher control behaviors in learning activities and the multilevel confirmatory factor analyses results support three constructs of control behaviors, at least from the students' perspective: "strong", "shared" and "loose" control.

Studies comparing teachers and learners in relation to their opinions on learning activities appear to have centered on their respective views of the same activities. Brindley (1984) interviews teachers and learners about the nature of language and language learning, and discovers, amongst other things, that teachers attach great value to use-oriented activities, while learners favor usage-oriented activities. Nunan (1988a) surveys perceptions of teachers and learners in ten activities, and results of comparisons indicate that only in one instance is there a match between the ratings of students and teachers, and that is, in the importance accorded to "conversation practice". All other activities are mismatched, either moderately or dramatically. Barkhuisen's study (1998:102) explores teachers' perceptions of learners' preferences, although, as he says that this is more of an outcome than the main focus of his study. He comments, "...when I shared the findings of the study with them (the teachers) ...they were frequently surprised to learn about the thoughts and feelings of their learners."

However, there seems to be few recent overseas researches contributed to the field. Moreover, in domestic researches, while most studies concentrate on uses of specific learning activities (Ma 2004; Muo 2005; Ding 2006; Qu 2007; Ren & Xu 2008; Zeng 2008; Tang, Zhang & Dong 2009), few are directed to a comprehensive study of learners' activity preferences and even fewer efforts are given to the comparison of teachers' and learners' activity perceptions. For this reason, the exploration of discrepant views of the learner and the teacher on various CE learning activities has important theoretical and practical implications for classroom practices and curriculum design. It is this area that the present study attempts at, that is, the correspondence between learners' and teachers' beliefs about learning activities and learners' stated activity preferences.

Significance of the present thesis lies in the following three aspects. First, it provides a comprehensive picture of learners' preferences for teachers' references in designing and implementing classroom activities. Second, it serves as a useful operating model for prompting a learner-centered curriculum. In this model, several mechanisms are to be established: (1) negotiation and consultation mechanism, (2) incorporation of learners' feedback mechanism, and (3) flexibility and adaptation mechanism. Third, it sets up the empirical basis for a more learner-centered approach by making teachers realize the important roles learners would take on in various learning processes.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Questions

Based on the insights gained from the literature review, and to fill the gap in the domestic researches, the present study attempts at the following questions:

- 1) How are the activity preferences of learners compared with those of teachers?
- 2) What are learners' attitudes toward learning activities?
- 3) What are tentative implications of the study for curriculum design?

3.2 Subjects

The study involves 132 non-English majors and 30 teachers in the CE Department of University of Science and Technology Beijing (USTB). The students are selected from three regular classes which the author has access to. They are of three representative majors such as Computer Science (polytechnic-oriented), Business Administration (management-oriented), and Public Administration (social sciences-oriented). Meanwhile, all thirty CE teachers teaching regular students in the department are invited to participate in the study. Most hold Master's Degree in English linguistics or literature and most of them are around age of thirty while a few around fifty. They serve in the department from a few months to more than twenty years, averaging twelve years. At the time when the questionnaire is issued, the teachers teach English to regular students, and each one is responsible for at least three classes of mixed majors.

Table 1. Student sample

Regular class subjects					
Class			Gender		Total
Computer Science	Business Administration	Public Administration	Male	Female	
47	45	40	72	60	132

3.3 Instruments

In order to be able to access opinions of a large and potentially diverse population, the author decides to use two five-point Likert-scale questionnaires, one for students and the other for teachers, as the main survey instrument. The questionnaire uses a Likert scale to indicate the preferences of the subjects as follows: 1= strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=not sure, 4=agree, and 5= strongly agree.

The students' questionnaire contains fifty items of a large variety of learning activities that learners might be requested to carry out by teachers either in or outside the classroom. They are selected after analysis of course teaching schemes, of interviews with ten English teachers on what activities they commonly use and thirty non-English majors about what activities they know, and of the author's own teaching experiences. Thus, it is believed that the activities are a good reflection of general classroom practices in CE teaching in this institution. Besides, the questionnaire is piloted and amended among sixty subjects, ten teachers and fifty students. Finally, it is administered in class time and takes approximately fifteen minutes to complete.

The teachers' questionnaire contains the same fifty activities with those of the students'. However, the item stem is different, and it reads, "In your English class, what do you think are your students' opinions toward the following activities?" The questionnaire is finished by the teachers in their own time.

To provide a more comprehensive and rational picture of the analysis, the fifty learning activities are categorized by three established methodological criteria: that of general curriculum concerns, that of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) practices, and that of Cooperative Learning (CL) principles. By the first criterion, activities are divided into five areas, namely, those for development of five traditional language skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating (Anderson & Lynch 1988; Underwood 1989; Grabe & Kaplan 1996; Ding 2006; Tang, Zhang & Dong 2009), those for cultivation of language systems including activities for pronunciation and grammar (Shaffer 1989; Lightbown & Spada 1990; DeKeyser 1995; Zeng 2008), participation modes, evaluation forms and others (Oskarsson 1983; Tierney, Carter & Desai 1991; Harris & McCann 1994; Ur 1996; Muo 2005; Ren & Xu 2008). With reference to the second standard, and in accordance with the item orientations when derived through interviews and observations, and the implementation reality of these activities in language classes in a general sense, seventeen communicative activities, thirteen non-communicative

activities and twenty other types are identified (Littlewood 1981; White 1989; Stern 1992; Littlewood 2000). Thirdly, these items are sorted into headlines of CL activities and Non-CL activities (Huber & Eppler 1990; Slavin 1995; Jordan & LeMetaias 1997; Ghaith & Yaghi 1998; Ghaith 2002) which refer to common competitive forms of instruction such as individualistic and whole-class learning. Again, those which cannot be realized either as CL activities or Non-CL activities are put under the category of “Others”.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 A Comparative Analysis of Activity Preferences of Regular Students and Teachers' Perceptions of What These Preferences Are

The standard deviation range of regular students' questionnaire is from 0.768 to 1.300 with 28 items falling below or at 1.000, while that of teachers' questionnaire is from 0.503 to 1.124, as many as 44 items falling below 1.000. Therefore, teachers' responses are greatly accordant and more disagreement exists in learners' answers. A comparison is also provided of the number of items falling within each Likert point of the two questionnaires. Discrepancies in the item ratings on each scale between the teachers and students are not so eminent, yet there is a mild tendency that students' attitudes are less strong than their teachers think they are.

Table 2. Comparison of number of items falling within each Likert point

Likert scale	Regular students	Teachers
4.00-4.99	8 (16%)	10(20%)
3.00-3.99	38 (76%)	33(66%)
2.01-2.99	4(8%)	7(14%)
2.00 or below	0	0

However, while a comparison of Likert scores for each item gives some indication of similarities and differences between the two groups, it cannot show which are statistically significant. Chi-square is therefore carried out. Results of Chi-square analysis show that twenty-one of the fifty items (42%) are significantly different at a level $p < 0.05$ or below, and specific discussions of these activities are presented as follows.

1. Significantly differently scored speaking activities: As many as 90% of the teachers believe learners desire the two communicative and CL activities “role plays in class” and “taking part in language games” while the actual percentages of learners are 61.4% and 65.1% respectively. No teachers think learners might disapprove such activities, embodying their high priority over communicative speaking activities. Another individualistic communicative activity “giving oral presentations individually” also receives more approval from teachers (80%) than learners (73.4%) though the distinction is not so noteworthy. For the last non-communicative activity “reading aloud in class”, learners rate more highly than their teachers think they do and the latter hold prominently uncertain views to this item.
2. Significantly differently scored listening activities: As for these two non-communicative listening activities “listening to text tapes” and “doing listening exercises after class”, while the majority of learners (78% and 74.3% respectively) manifest their support, their teachers do not believe so. A great proportion of them either express their doubts (50% and 45% respectively) in learners' preferences or simply assume negative opinions from learners (20% and 15% respectively).
3. Significantly differently scored reading activities: The majority of learners are fond of the two extensive reading forms “reading newspapers and journal articles in class” and “reading teacher-produced handouts in class”, to which teachers entertain a discriminating attitude. 80% of them vote for the latter while only 25% for the former. The follow-up interview with teachers shows that this is because they think more highly of prepared materials which are specific and pertinent to instructional purposes.
4. Significantly differently scored writing activities: “Writing essays after class” has elicited wide agreement from both parties though the approving attitudes of learners are slightly stronger than teachers think they are. On the other hand, the other communicative CL activity “writing essays in small groups in class” is not so welcomed, and half of the teachers exhibit uncertainty concerning validity of this activity.
5. Significantly differently scored translating activities: 74.3% of the learners prefer “doing translating exercises after class”, differing substantially from teachers' perceptions where 15% respond disagreement and 45% feel

not sure.

6. Significantly differently scored grammar activities: “Doing written exercises such as gap-filling and error-correcting in class” is not so popular among learners and teachers. The fact that “doing written exercises such as gap-filling and error-correcting after class” obtains a “4.06” Likert point from learners and a 3.80 from teachers gives the indication that such exercises are preferred to be conducted outside classroom probably due to time and effects concerns.

7. Significantly differently scored assessing forms: “Midterm exams” is denied by both learners and teachers, especially by the latter who display outstanding doubtfulness (55%) and disfavor (30%). More learners prefer “doing in-class informal unassessed quizzes” to “doing in-class formal assessed quizzes”, which may be attributed to the external pressure the latter exerts on them. These two quiz forms do not produce qualitative distinctions in perceptions of teachers, 55% of whom believe learners like them. “Final oral test” is favored by large proportions of learners and teachers, and slightly more supported by the latter.

8. Significantly differently scored participation modes: In this item, “working in a group of 6 to 10 people”, students (39.4%) score more highly than teachers’ (15%) perceptions of them. Many teachers (40%) are reserved toward the use of working in a large group.

9. Significantly differently scored other activities: Teachers (80%) approve more highly of communicative activities such as “doing practical tasks within a small group e.g. surveys, reports” and “speech contest” than learners (50.8% and 54.6% respectively), and enjoy less the non-communicative activity “reciting texts” than learners with half of them being eminently unsure about it. A noteworthy thing is CE teachers in USTB have great interest in the extracurricular English learning activity “speech contest” and spare no effort to conduct one contest each year.

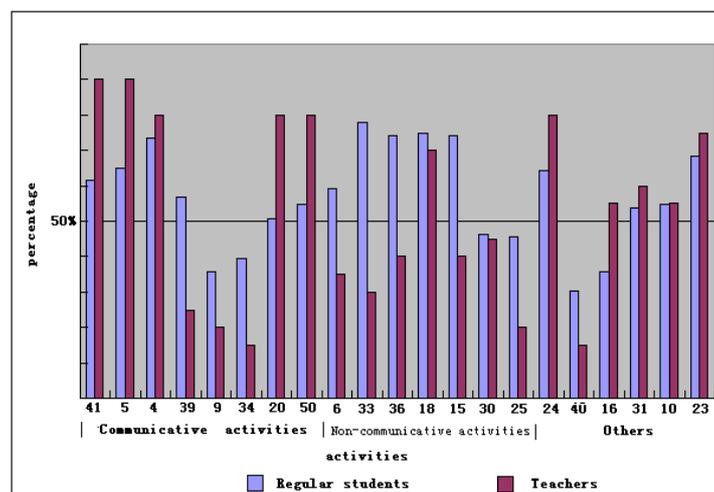


Figure 1. General approving attitudes of regular students and teachers toward the 21 significantly differently scored activities

Figure 1 exhibits the general approving attitudes of regular learners and teachers by comparing sums of percentages on points of “agree” and “strongly agree” respectively of each group on each activity. Teachers seem to give more support to communicative activities such as “taking part in language games”, “role plays”, “giving oral presentations individually”, “doing practical tasks within a small group e.g. surveys, reports” and “speech contest” except their low ratings to communicative reading or writing activities such as “reading newspapers and journals in class” and “writing essays in small groups in class”. On the other hand, regular learners are more in favor of non-communicative activities like “reading aloud”, “doing listening exercises”, “listening to text tapes”, “writing essays after class”, “doing translating exercises”, and “reciting texts”. The results conform to former discoveries that teachers prefer communicative activities more than learners do (Brindley 1984; Alcorso & Kalantzis 1985; Eltis & Low 1985). In consequence, communicative language teachers will find themselves in a dilemma when confronted by learners who have traditional attitudes and beliefs about what appropriate classroom activities are. It is suggested that the way out of this dilemma must lie in extensive consultation, negotiation, incorporation of learners’ feedback, and flexibility and adaptation mechanism established among

teachers and learners.

4.2 Analysis of Learners' Activity Preferences

Means of each activity scored by the students are obtained and displayed in Figure 2, and number of items falling within each Likert point is summarized in Table 3. These imply that there exists a general approving attitude towards all the 50 activities with 46 of them rated positively and only 4 negatively. However, the liking attitudes seem not so strong for the majority of favored activities (38 of the 46) fall within the 3.00-3.99 scale, and only 8 the 4.00-4.99 scale. Meanwhile, the fact that no activity falls within 2.00 or below accords with learners' reserved attitudes in expressing their feelings, especially, their negative views, which was testified in the follow-up interview with the subjects. Thus the analysis focuses respectively on four activities in the 2.01-2.99 scale and eight in the 4.00-4.99 as disfavored and highly favored activities.

Table 3. Number of items falling within each Likert point

Likert scale	Number	Percentage
4.00-4.99	8	16%
3.00-3.99	38	76%
2.01-2.99	4	8%
2.00 or below	0	0%

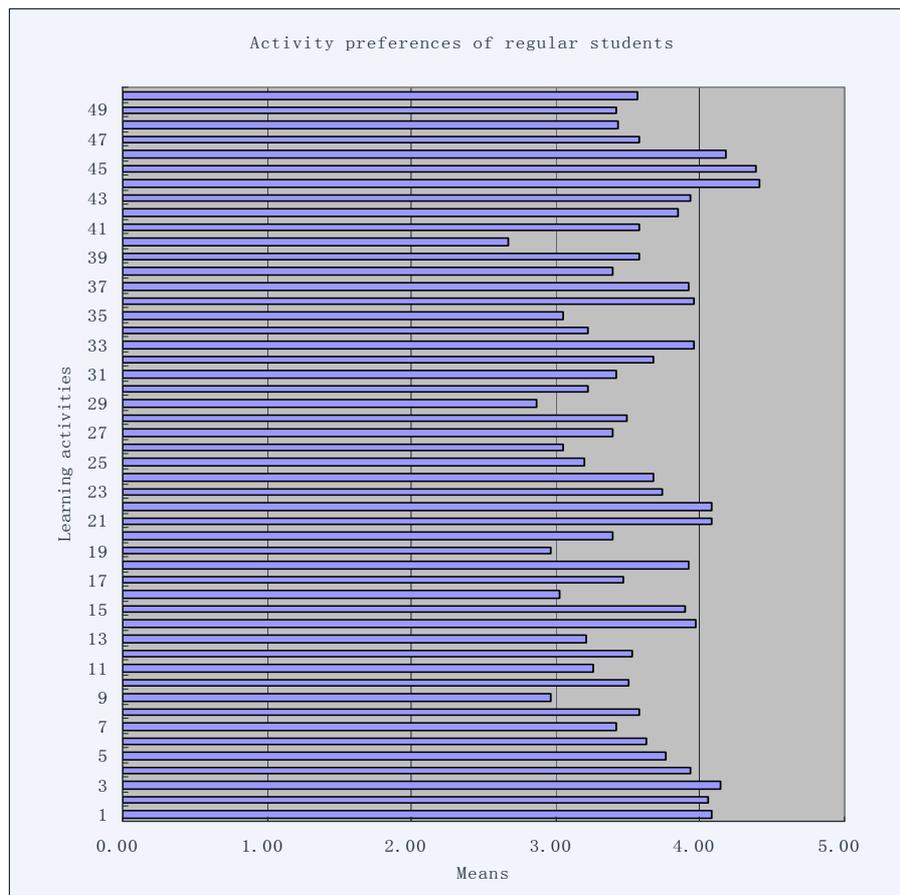


Figure 2. Activity preferences of students

4.2.1 Analysis of Disfavored Activities

Table 4 Classification of the disfavored activities

Areas	Activities	Means
Evaluation	40 Mid-term exam	2.67
	19 Classmates giving me oral or written feedback in class	2.96
Writing activities	29 Writing essays in class individually	2.86
	9 Writing essays in class within a group	2.96

Among the four disliked activities, two are writing activities such as “writing essays in class individually” and “writing essays in class within a group”. Disfavor of the former activity together with an evaluation form “mid-term exams” can be attributed to high pressure that they generally impose on the students. Mid-term exams are a commonly denounced nerve producer for learners, and often the effects are not worth the efforts invested in its administration and scoring. That is one of the reasons why the CE Department of USTB has canceled the practice recently. “Writing essays individually” is also considered a source of stress for learners. However, the skill of completing a certain-length composition within a limited period of time is required of all non-English majors in institutions of higher learning (Ministry of Education 2004). Thus the teacher should be discreet and thoughtful in carrying out the practice.

The other disliked writing activity “writing essays in class within a group” is a communicative CL activity. The merit of sharing writing is that the activity moves away from being just an assignment towards being a more natural exchange of ideas and reflections with each other (Galbraith & Rijlaarsdam 1999). Learners can benefit as they plan together, compose a section each, check each other’s drafts, and give suggestions to one another for improvements. Also, a teacher can be liberated from having to assess piles of compositions and will have much less pieces of work to monitor, assist with, and evaluate. However, the worth of group writing seems not to have been recognized by the majority of regular learners, which stems from the fact that communicative activities in writing area are not so well acknowledged as those in other areas of speaking, reading and listening. Other administration considerations also play a part such as timing consuming issues and effectiveness concerns.

Another disfavored activity “classmates giving me oral or written feedback in class” is a CL learning strategy, and one reason behind its unpopularity is that in China’s EFL situation, peer academic support is not highly valued; instead, teachers’ knowledge and status are held to be more legitimate and authoritative. This is consistent with previous research findings that learners do not regard their peer as reliable resources for language learning, and prefer to rely on their teachers for assistance (Chaudron 1984; Davis 1997). Moreover, this activity being a form of formative assessment, the broad negative opinions of learners may present obstacles in its implementation and popularization, advocated by the *Requirements*. There is still a long way to go for reforming the current assessing forms and formative evaluating concepts and methods should be incorporated at greater length into the current teaching syllabus.

4.2.2 Analysis of Highly Favored Activities

Table 5. Classification of highly favored activities

Areas	Highly favored activities	Means
Speaking activities	1 Participating in group discussion	4.08
	46 Practicing dialogues in class	4.18
	22 Doing listening exercises in class	4.08
Listening activities	3 Watching training videos	4.14
	45 Listening to English songs	4.39
	44 Watching movies	4.41
Activities for grammar	2 Finishing written exercises such as gap-filling and error-correcting assigned by the teacher after class	4.06
Others	21 Listening to the teacher illustrating various skills such as writing, reading and listening etc.	4.08

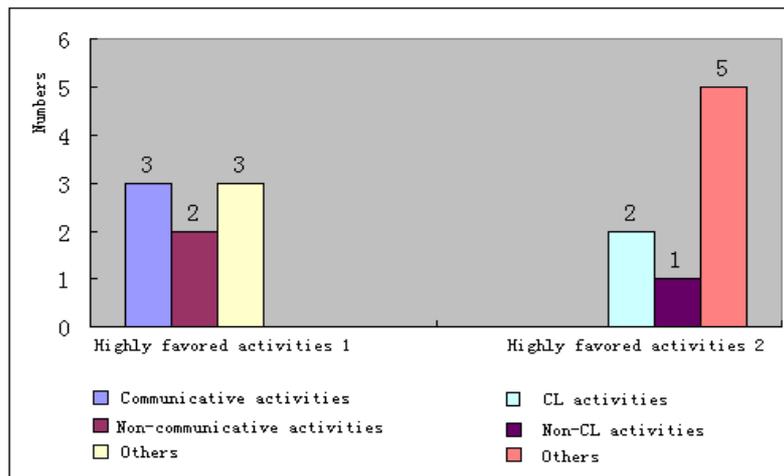


Figure 3. Numbers of highly favored activities in each category

The highly favored eight items fall into three groups: two speaking activities, four listening activities and one activity for grammar. This displays learners' general concern with listening and speaking skills, two commonly-condemned areas by most students, consistent with the CE goal advocated by the *Requirements* which highlights the development of these two abilities among non-English majors (Ministry of Education 2004). Another emphasized activity "finishing written exercises such as gap-filling and error-correcting assigned by the teacher after class" reveals the great importance learners attach to grammar, which concurs to previous findings about learners' preoccupation with grammar acquisition. Figure 3 displays numbers of highly liked communicative and non-communicative, CL and Non-CL activities. There are no regular patterns as to which particular activity category attracts regular learners' fondness.

The last highly approved activity "listening to the teacher illustrating various skills such as writing, reading and listening etc" can be traced to learners' instrumental motivation to skill acquisition, which helps them pass the term tests or standardized tests such as CET 4 and CET 6.

5. Conclusions and Implications

The present paper examines discrepancies of learner teacher opinions on fifty learning activities and learners' preferences of these items. To provide a more comprehensive picture, it categorizes the fifty items by criteria of general curriculum practices, communicative syllabus design and CL principles, and tries to discover some predictive patterns in these representative activity areas. The analysis part starts with a comparison of divergent views of learners and teachers. Revealed substantial discrepancies promote a close look at learners' attitudes towards these activities. Major findings suggest that teachers' perceptions of learners' preferences for activities cannot be fully relied upon when used as an input to lesson planning and syllabus design, and therefore need careful mediation. To prompt a more learning-centered approach to classroom practice, teachers need to build learners' needs and beliefs into lesson conduct. Tentative implications of the study for this process are arrived at as follows:

First, it sets up an empirical basis for methodology design in curriculum development by providing a detailed picture of learners' preferences for teachers' references in designing and implementing classroom activities. Teachers are informed of activity preferences of the majority of students about which activities are likely to be welcomed, and might therefore be incorporated as design features, and which activities might need careful monitoring to highlight their value. Specifically, it could be announced that teachers may feel safe to use both communicative and traditional activities in CE class in USTB; they are suggested to place high priority to the development of students' listening and speaking skills (which also conforms to CE goals stipulated in the *Requirements*), and employ a variety of activities accordingly, especially "group discussion", "listening to English songs", and "watching English movies" which have elicited very high ratings from the learners. Meanwhile, teachers should make good use of multimedia for the effective cultivation of listening and speaking competences. Some other items such as nerve-associated activities (mid-term exams, formal quizzes etc.) should be carefully administered in order not to cause anxiety from students. To solve this, formative assessment forms such as self-evaluation and peer evaluation need to be frequently practiced in class so that their values are

strengthened.

Second, it serves as a useful operating model for prompting a learner-centered curriculum. In the methodology design stage, teachers should explain frequently to students purposes and rationales of various activities, later discuss with learners their reactions to the activity, elicit evaluation, and maybe even abandon the activities if students' reactions continue to be negative. It's important that teachers be flexible and adaptable in teaching planning and conduct. As for the authorities, it is highly recommended to carry out teacher training programs related to learner-centered curriculum design.

Third, it supplies the rationale for specifying and optimizing CE classroom teaching by promoting a more learner-centered approach. Teachers are impressed with the divergences of learner teacher views on learning activities and are encouraged to realize the important roles learners would take on in relation to the actual processes of syllabus design. These include giving feedback at the design stage, or actually contributing in various ways to syllabus writing, specifically, goal setting, materials selection, evaluation forms etc.

The results of the present study demonstrate great value of obtaining learners' views on activities that form part of the learning process. Often, due to constraints such as time and shortage of personnel, those involved in syllabus and activity design predict what learners would like or dislike on the basis of their experiences or by referring to relevant literature. The thesis reflects that such an approach would have failed to capture many of our students' preferences and how useful it is to consult learners and invite them in the teaching and learning design process. To conclude the whole paper, I would like to quote Kumaravadivelu's (1991:98) comment that "...the narrower the gap between teacher intention and learner interpretation, the greater are the chances of achieving desired learning outcomes."

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