Active Learning Strategies in Language Acquisition: A Study with Saudi EFL Preparatory School Students

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Abstract

This study aims to assess the impact of active learning on English language acquisition among Saudi EFL preparatory school students. It examines the correlation between active learning strategies and students' language acquisition. A mixed-methods approach incorporating both quantitative and qualitative research was employed, involving 122 students and seven teachers from Saudi schools. Data collection instruments included a closed-ended questionnaire measuring students' attitudes towards active learning and its impact on language acquisition, as well as open-ended interviews with teachers. The findings indicate that students exhibit highly positive attitudes towards active learning strategies implemented by their teachers (Mean = 3.85). Inferential analysis using Pearson's correlation coefficient reveals a moderately high correlation between active learning and language acquisition (r = .686, p < .01).

Keywords: Active Learning, Attitudes, Learning Strategies, EFL Acquisition.

Introduction

English in the Foreign Language (EFL) education paradigm has gained significant attention in Saudi Arabia where mastering English is an essential for academic and professional success. Much like other EFL scenarios, traditional teaching methods, often characterized by teacher-centered instruction, have been well entrenched in Saudi schools. However, with the pedagogical shifts over the past few decades, the importance of student engagement in the learning process with active learning have gained momentum as the preferred elements to enhance language acquisition.

Active learning refers to instructional strategies that actively engage students in the learning process, foster critical thinking, problem-solving, and meaningful interaction. These strategies include collaborative activities, discussions, role-playing, and task-based learning, all of which are believed to facilitate deeper language comprehension and retention. Research suggests that active learning can significantly impact students' motivation, participation, and overall language proficiency. However, empirical studies on its effectiveness in EFL contexts, particularly in Saudi Arabia, remain limited.

This study aims to investigate the effect of active learning on improving Saudi preparatory students' English language acquisition. By employing a mixed-methods approach, it examines students' attitudes toward active learning strategies and explores the correlation between active learning and language acquisition. Existing research highlights the potential benefits of active

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learning strategies, such as collaborative activities and task-based learning in enhancing motivation and participation. However, limited studies have systematically assessed the correlation between active learning and English language acquisition among Saudi preparatory school students. Additionally, while general pedagogical discussions support the effectiveness of active learning, there is a need for data-driven insights into students' attitudes toward these strategies and their measurable impact on language proficiency. This study addresses this gap, contribute to the ongoing discourse on EFL pedagogy, and provide insights for educators seeking to enhance English instruction in Saudi preparatory schools.

Literature Review

Active learning has been widely recognized as an effective approach in language education, fostering student engagement and enhancing learning outcomes (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). In contrast to traditional lecture-based methods, active learning strategies encourage students to participate 'actively' in the learning process through discussions, problem-solving, and collaborative activities (Prince, 2004). Research has shown that active learning promotes critical thinking, student motivation, and deeper language comprehension, particularly in EFL contexts (Al-Zahrani & Al-Bargi, 2017).

Language acquisition theories highlight the importance of interaction and meaningful communication in language learning. Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis suggests that learners acquire language more effectively when they receive comprehensible input in an engaging environment. Active learning strategies align with this theory by providing opportunities for authentic language use, student-led discussions, and cooperative learning tasks (Swain, 2005). Other studies indicate that interactive approaches, such as think-pair-share and peer teaching, enhance vocabulary retention, grammar acquisition, and overall linguistic proficiency (Ellis, 2003; Almansour & Al-Ahdal, 2020).

Several studies have investigated the impact of active learning strategies on EFL learners. A study by Alrabai (2016) in Saudi Arabia found that student-centered teaching methods significantly improved learners' motivation and academic performance. Similarly, Al-Nofaie (2020) reported that collaborative learning techniques, including role-playing and problem-solving activities, led to higher student engagement and improved language skills in Saudi EFL classrooms.

Despite its proven benefits, the implementation of active learning in Saudi EFL classrooms faces challenges such as large class sizes, limited teacher training, and resistance to pedagogical change (Al-Seghayer, 2014; Al-Ahdal, Alqasham & Qarabesh, 2022). Traditional teaching methods remain dominant as teachers often prioritize exam-oriented instruction over communicative and interactive approaches (Alrabai, 2018; Alqasham & Al-Ahdal, 2022). However, recent policy reforms in Saudi Arabia, particularly guided by Vision 2030, emphasize the need for modernized educational practices, creating an opportunity for integrating active learning strategies in EFL curricula (Ministry of Education, 2019).

While specific studies focusing exclusively on the impact of active learning strategies on Saudi preparatory students' English as a Foreign Language (EFL) acquisition are limited, several recent research efforts have explored related areas within the Saudi EFL context. Al-Shihri (2019) investigated the effect of active learning strategies on Saudi first-year secondary EFL learners' grammar achievement. The quasi-experimental research revealed that students exposed to active learning strategies outperformed those taught through traditional methods, indicating a positive

impact on grammar acquisition. Jamshed et al. (2024) assessed Saudi EFL learners' perspectives on the efficacy of the flipped learning model. The findings indicated that while learners viewed flipped classrooms as a favorable alternative mode of instruction, challenges such as lack of motivation and self-discipline still exist. The study suggests that addressing these issues could enhance the effectiveness of flipped learning in Saudi Arabia. Suleiman's (2022) study explored the administration of active learning strategies in English language e-learning environments within Saudi universities. The research highlighted instructors' positive attitudes toward learner-centered strategies and emphasized the importance of engaging students actively, even in virtual settings. These studies collectively suggest that while direct research on active learning's impact on Saudi preparatory students' EFL acquisition is scarce, investigations with other learners indicate positive outcomes associated with active learning methodologies in various Saudi EFL educational contexts.

Research Questions

The aim of this study was to answer two research axes:

What are the preparatory school EFL students' perceptions of their teachers' active learning strategies?

What is the impact of active learning on preparatory school EFL students' language acquisition?

Methodology

A mixed-methods research design was adopted in this study, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. A closed-ended questionnaire based in previous literature was developed by the researchers to gather primary data, while open-ended interviews were conducted with teachers. The study was conducted in Saudi preparatory schools during the academic year 2024. Participants' demographic data is summarized in Table 1 below.

Variables		Frequency	Column N %
Age	15 years	17	26.0%
	16 years	28	28.6%
	17 years	50	45.4%
	Total	122	100.0%
Gender	Female	122	100%
	Total	122	100.0%
Language Spoken at Home	Arabic	104	85.1%
	Arabic and English	17	14.0%
	English	1	0.9%
	Total	122	100.0%
Parents' Educational Level	Basic education	22	17.8%
	University	75	61.4%
	High school	25	20.8%
	Total	122	100.0%
Average Study Time per Day	1-2 hours	55	45.1%
	2-3 hours	32	26.4%
	3-4 hours	19	15.4%
	More than 5 hours	9	7.7%

	less than one hour	7	5.5%
	Total	122	100.0%
Previous English Grades	Excellent	74	60.7%
	Very good	22	17.9%
	Good	18	15.4%
	Week	7	6.0%
	Total	122	100.0%

Table 1: Students' Demographic Data

The study sample comprised 122 female preparatory school students across the country. The majority of participants (45.4%) were 17 years old, 28.6% were 16 years old, and least were 15 years old at 26%.

Regarding language spoken at home, 85.1% of students reported using Arabic, while 14% used both Arabic and English. Only one student (0.9%) reported using English exclusively at home. In terms of parental education levels, 61.4% of students' parents had a university degree, 20.8% completed high school, and 17.8% had only basic education.

The study also examined students' learning habits. The majority (45.1%) studied 1-2 hours per day, while 26.4% studied for 2-3 hours daily. A smaller percentage (15.4%) studied 3-4 hours per day, and only 7.7% studied more than 5 hours per day. Additionally, students' previous academic performance in English varied, with 60.7% achieving excellent grades, 17.9% scoring very good, 15.4% earning good grades, and 6.0% obtaining weak scores.

The study utilized a closed-ended questionnaire developed by the researcher and validated by two university professors specializing in English language teaching. The questionnaire comprised three sections:

Demographic Information: Contained seven items related to students' age, language background, parental education, study habits, and previous English grades.

Perceptions of Active Learning Strategies: Included ten items measuring students' attitudes towards the use of active learning in the classroom.

Perceptions of Language Acquisition: Contained ten items evaluating students' beliefs about the impact of active learning on their English language acquisition.

Additionally, three open-ended questions were designed for teacher interviews, focusing on their perspectives regarding active learning's role in enhancing students' language acquisition. The participating teachers were purposefully selected based on their teaching experience, ranging from over ten years (five teachers) to less than one year (two teachers). All teachers held degrees in English education or English language and literature.

A pilot study was conducted to examine the feasibility and effectiveness of using active learning techniques in improving English as a Foreign Language (EFL) acquisition among Saudi preparatory students. The aim of this pilot study was to refine the research methods, test the validity and reliability of data collection instruments, and identify potential challenges before implementing the full-scale study.

The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding a high reliability coefficient ($\alpha = .96$), indicating strong internal consistency. Specifically, Cronbach's

Alpha for the first dimension (students' perceptions of their teachers' active learning strategies) was .954, while the second dimension (impact of active learning on language acquisition) had an Alpha value of .952. Both values exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of .70, confirming the reliability of the instrument, summarized below.

Reliability Scale

Dimension	N of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Students' perceptions on their teachers' active learning strategies	10	.954
The impact of active learning on students' acquisition	10	.952
Average	20	.963

Descriptive analysis was conducted to calculate frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations to summarize participants' demographic data and responses. Inferential statistical analysis, including Pearson's correlation coefficient, was used to assess the relationship between active learning and language acquisition.

Data Analysis and Results

The results from the students' questionnaire indicate a generally positive perception of active learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms among Saudi preparatory school students. The overall mean score was 3.85 (SD = 0.97), indicating moderately strong agreement with the benefits of active learning for EFL acquisition. The perceptions were tested across four factors:

Engagement and Enjoyment in Learning

Students reported that active learning methods made lessons more engaging (M = 4.08, SD = 1.03), the highest-rated statement in the survey. Additionally, the use of games and activities in English lessons was also rated highly (M = 3.99, SD = 1.12), reinforcing the notion that interactive strategies contribute to a more enjoyable learning experience. Similarly, students expressed greater enjoyment when participating in discussions and activities (M = 3.83, SD = 1.22).

Comprehension and Retention of English Lessons

Students generally agreed that interactive activities enhanced their understanding of English lessons (M = 3.98, SD = 1.14) and helped them remember vocabulary better (M = 3.84, SD = 1.13). These findings align with existing research suggesting that student-centered strategies improve cognitive retention and comprehension in second language learning.

Confidence and Motivation in Learning English

The findings indicate that active learning techniques contribute to increased confidence in speaking English (M = 3.77, SD = 1.13) and motivation to study the language (M = 3.79, SD = 1.12). The use of interactive teaching strategies also made English lessons feel more relevant to real-life situations (M = 3.78, SD = 1.13), supporting the idea that context-based learning enhances language acquisition.

Active Learning as a Source of Additional Learning Resources

Students acknowledged that active learning provided new resources for learning English (M = 3.84, SD = 1.05), suggesting that such methods introduce diverse learning materials beyond traditional textbooks.

To sum up, the highest-rated statement (M = 4.08) indicates that students find lessons significantly more engaging through active learning. The overall mean score (M = 3.85) suggests a positive inclination towards active learning, but variations in standard deviation values imply differing levels of agreement among students. The results highlight a strong correlation between active learning and improved comprehension, confidence, and motivation in EFL acquisition. Enjoyment, engagement, and real-world relevance are key factors influencing students' attitudes toward active learning.

However, the relatively high standard deviations in some responses suggest varying experiences, highlighting the need for a tailored approach to active learning that considers individual learning preferences.

Table 3 presents responses to questionnaire that elicits students' perceptions of their teachers' use of active learning strategies. The overall mean score was 3.85 (SD = .965), indicating a generally positive perception. The highest-rated item was "Active learning methods make the lessons more engaging" (M = 4.08, SD = 1.03), while the lowest-rated item was "I like learning English more because of the interactive teaching strategies used" (M = 3.72, SD = 1.19).

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
Active learning methods make the lessons more engaging.	4.08	1.03
I understand English lessons better when my teacher uses interactive activities.	3.98	1.14
I feel more confident speaking English when we use active learning techniques.	3.77	1.13
Active learning helps me remember English vocabulary better.	3.84	1.13
Active learning supplies me with new resources for English language learning.	3.84	1.05
I enjoy English class more when we participate in discussions and activities.	3.83	1.22
English lessons feel more enjoyable when we use games and activities.	3.99	1.12
I can relate English lessons to real-life situations better through active learning.	3.78	1.132
I like learning English more because of the interactive teaching strategies used.	3.72	1.19
Active learning has increased my motivation to study English.	3.79	1.12
Average	3.85	.965

Table 3: Saudi Preparatory School Students' Perceptions Towards Their Teachers' Use of Active Learning

Teachers' responses in the interviews highlighted the key benefits of active learning. Teachers reported that active learning enhances students' language skills, promotes confidence in speaking, facilitates understanding, and increases classroom interaction. Additionally, teachers emphasized that active learning reduces the fear of making mistakes, and makes the lessons more engaging, thus improving students' information retention.

The study used Pearson's correlation to check the statistical significance of the findings. This indicated moderately high positive correlation between active learning and language acquisition ($r = .686$, $p < .01$). This suggests that increased use of active learning strategies leads to higher levels of language acquisition among students. Approximately 68% of the variance in students' English acquisition can be attributed to active learning strategies, with the remaining 32% possibly influenced by other factors.

Correlation between using active learning and students' language acquisition

		Active learning	Language acquisition
Active learning	Pearson Correlation	1	.686[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	126	126
Language acquisition	Pearson Correlation	.686[**]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	126	126
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

During the interviews, teachers also emphasized the role of active learning in enhancing students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills. They highlighted that active learning facilitates deeper engagement, enables information absorption, and promotes student-centered learning, as opposed to traditional teacher-centered methods.

Conclusions

The study found that Saudi preparatory school EFL students hold a highly positive perception of active learning strategies used by their teachers. This finding aligns with Almulla (2017) who reported that both teachers and students in Saudi schools demonstrated positive attitudes towards active learning approaches. Additionally, Alharbi and Yang (2018) found that active learning enhances students' problem-solving skills. However, the findings contrast with Alshihri and Mansory (2022) who reported difficulties in implementing active learning in Jeddah schools.

The study also confirmed a moderately high correlation between active learning and language acquisition. This finding aligns with Wabwoba, Mugambi and Okoth (2021) who concluded that active learning activities, such as group discussions, significantly contribute to language acquisition. Similarly, Sovhar (2021) found that active learning strategies enhance student engagement and collaboration in language learning.

This study highlights the positive impact of active learning strategies on EFL acquisition among Saudi preparatory students. Given the moderately high correlation between active learning and language acquisition, it is recommended that EFL teachers integrate active learning strategies into their classroom practices. Additionally, professional development programs should be provided to equip teachers with effective active learning techniques. Future research should

explore the long-term effects of active learning on language acquisition across different educational levels. To conclude, the findings of this study support the integration of active learning strategies in Saudi EFL classrooms to enhance engagement, comprehension, and confidence among students.

Recommendations

The study recommends the integration of active learning strategies into EFL classrooms to enhance students' language acquisition. However, the pedagogies and strategies may be improvised and modified to suit specific situations. It is also recommended that teachers be educated and trained in the application of active learning strategies along with the integration of technology to achieve optimum results and learning objectives.

Limitations

While the study provides valuable insights into the positive impact of active learning on Saudi preparatory school students' EFL acquisition, its limitations are the size and gender of the sample, self-reported data, and lack of longitudinal analysis. Future research should address these limitations and explore broader questions about the implementation, effectiveness, and contextual adaptation of active learning strategies in EFL classrooms.

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Appendix

Teachers' use of active learning strategies	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Active learning methods make the lessons more engaging.	4.0880	1.03966
2. I understand English lessons better when my teacher uses interactive activities.	3.9840	1.14992
3. I feel more confident speaking English when we use active learning techniques.	3.7778	1.13764
4. Active learning helps me remember English vocabulary better.	3.8480	1.13632
5. Active learning supplies me with new resources for English language learning	3.8468	1.05186
6. I enjoy English class more when we participate in discussions and activities.	3.8387	1.22565
7. English lessons feel more enjoyable when we use games and activities.	3.9919	1.12254
8. I can relate English lessons to real-life situations better through active learning.	3.7886	1.13262
9. I like learning English more because of the interactive teaching strategies used.	3.7236	1.19631
10. Active learning has increased my motivation to study English.	3.7934	1.12485
The impact of active learning strategies on language acquisition	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**
11. Active learning has improved my English reading comprehension skills.	3.6508	1.30425
12. Active learning has improved my English-speaking skills.	3.4921	1.33714

13. Active learning has improved my English listening comprehension skills.	3.4762	1.34292
14. My participation in English class has increased because of active learning.	3.7302	1.27381
15. I find it easier to write in English when my teacher uses creative exercises.	3.6111	1.36219
16. My participation in active learning empowers me with leadership strategies	3.4921	1.34311
17. Active learning encourages us to search for feedback	3.4603	1.36617
18. My performance in English tests has improved due to active learning methods.	3.3254	1.40188
19. Using active learning improves my knowledge in various cultural awareness	3.5397	1.36030
20. Group activities in English class help me learn more effectively.	3.5397	1.40086
Total	3.6917	.96222