

Teach Smarter, not Harder: A Call for Empowering EFL Teachers with Strategies to Activate Learner-Centeredness

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Abstract

Learner empowerment entails making them autonomous in both learning and living and this is also the fulcrum on which the post-pandemic educational paradigm rests. Teachers in the contemporary times are required to train their students on the strategies of lifelong learning and become self-learners. Therefore, this study aims to gauge the perceptions of 110 EFL teachers at Qassim University on their level of motivation and empowerment for their B.A students. The study also establishes correlation between motivation and student empowerment. A quantitative research design is applied here to achieve the goals of the study. A reliable and validated 20-close ended questionnaire items is administrated to the participants using Google Forms and precise data sought. The study results show that EFL teachers at Qassim University have a high positive perception in motivating their students to English learning with a total average of (M=4.11). Furthermore, the study also reported a high level of student empowerment with strategies of self-learning reaching (M=3.90, STD=.708). Finally, a strong and direct correlation was found between motivation and empowerment of Saudi EFL students, in which Pearson coefficient was computed at (.841) and the probability value (Sig.=.000). Accordingly, it is recommended that EFL teachers use active strategies which motive and empower their students to be centered in the learning process.

Keywords: efficient strategies, EFL, learner-centred, Saudi context

1. Introduction

In the process of teaching and learning, especially in promoting learner-centeredness, the role of teachers has significantly changed from being the fountainhead of all learning to that of facilitator and guide working cooperatively to achieve learning goals. When teachers employ effective teaching techniques, engaging media, and creative examples in their resources for explaining things, among other things, they can help students become active learners (Al-Ahdal & Al-Ma'amari, 2015; Indriyah & Ardian, 2021). Instructors' actions in the classroom have an impact on students' motivation. According to some experts, some classroom activities may affect students' motivation for learning. For instance, Wahyudi (2017) discovered that when a teacher employed a variety of teaching methods and means, the students' motivation greatly increased. Therefore, instructors' efforts to make their lessons interesting have an impact on student motivation, affecting the desire of students to study English.

According to Palmer as cited in Williams and Williams (2007), students' motivation is a critical factor that affects the caliber of instruction. Students who are highly motivated pay attention to the lesson, start working on assignments right away, ask questions and provide their opinions, and have a positive attitude. The key to motivating students, whether they are good students or not, lies in the hands of the teacher. It is in accordance with what Hidayati (2016) argues that the teacher plays a vital role in the maintenance of students' motivation. Hornstra *et al.* (2012) proposes that "teachers are essential factors who form the learning environment and whose main jobs include inspiring students to learn." (p. 365). Additionally, according to Vibulphol (2016), teachers' actions and methods of education are crucial in raising students' motivation. On the other hand, empowering students with active learning strategies is also of great importance in the process of building the personality of the learners during their language learning experience (Gilleard, 1997; Loucky, 2017; Patil, 2021).

Studies which investigated motivation in the English classroom are various (Ebrahimzadeh & Alavi, 2016; Ghaedi, 2014; Hornstra *et al.*, 2002). However, none of the previous studies combine motivation with empowerment. Conception of such a combination is what makes this study significant. In the Saudi EFL settings, Ali and Bin-Hady

(2019) explored the use of WhatsApp as a tool which motivate EFL students and minimized their stress. Student motivation is critical to learning and this is what warrants as many studies on this dimension as possible.

2. Literature Review

Motivation

Much emphasis is placed on motivation by both teachers and students, alongside active learning of English. Therefore, motivation is central to changing people's views to learning. One needs to be engaged in order to enroll if they want to be inspired. Progress can only be ensured when learning is challenging. Consequently, it is a process of adjustment of a lot many factors (Nurina et al., 2020). Amri and Syafrizal (2021) further note that motivation is influenced by both internal and external circumstances. Internal factors mainly refer to the excitement that an individual derives from everything inspiring and thrilling with eagerness and passion. It requires aptitude, zeal, and character. Then, the learner's environment, home, school, society, and other factors make up the external component. It is about rewards or benefits from outside sources.

Motivation plays a critical role in the learning process. Students who perform below expectations frequently do so not because they lack talent, but rather because they lack the will to study and to use all of their potential (Widahyu, 2021). Therefore, it may be claimed that students who performed poorly may not necessarily have low talents but instead may be affected by a lack of desire or support. For both teachers and students, motivation is crucial to the teaching and learning process. Human behavior, particularly learning behavior, is driven and directed by motivation, which is viewed as a mental drive (Nasution, 2017). For educators, motivation is the most crucial component in attaining goals that are intended to enhance learning. The environment, the learning technique or process, the subject matter, the instructor or educator, and the students themselves are the five factors that have an impact on student motivation (Siregar, 2017). Ulfa and Bania (2019) found that teachers are greatly responsible for giving students extrinsic motivation which highly influenced EFL students in their English language learning.

Empowering students

Aside from motivation being part of promoting learner-centeredness in the classroom, empowering students with active learning strategies is also vital for them to become self-dependent learners (Hendrickson, 2021). The literature on education highlights the value of active learning in assisting students in experiencing meaningful learning throughout a class experience, drawing from both the education and other discipline domains (Drew & Mackie, 2011). The development of metacognitive skills, reflection, autonomy, skill development, and the cooperative, interactive development of comprehension are all said to be positively influenced by active learning, which can take a variety of forms (Wolff *et al.*, 2015). Professors are encouraged to employ active learning strategies because they can improve their students' comprehension of the content and their capacity to apply what they learn in new contexts by doing so.

Loucky (2017) suggested flipped classroom as an environment for both motivating and empowering EFL students in their autonomous learning process. Students were given the opportunities to grow autonomously by preparing their lesson out of class and encouraged to share their ideas with their peers and teachers. Gilleard (1997) explored the importance of self-assessment as an empowering tool for boosting EFL learners in the learning process. Patil (2021) indicated the importance of providing learners with continuous training along with using planned teaching methods and soft skills in their autonomous learning.

Education should put an emphasis on teaching strategies like active learning that improve students' abilities to communicate, think critically, solve problems, and learn on their own (Wong et al., 2014). An alternative to the conventional teaching method is active learning. Student engagement is emphasized in this student-centered learning strategy. Additionally, the environment fostered by active learning supports the growth of students' communication and self-learning abilities.

By fostering an environment where higher-order Bloom's Taxonomy levels—such as application, synthesis, assessment, and analysis—are employed, active learning is intended to improve students' memory of concepts (McLaughlin et al., 2014; Wong et al., 2014). The use of surveys, game questions, crossword puzzles, fill-in-the-blank slides and tables, films, etc. in the classroom encourage active learning. However, active learning necessitates time from the teacher prior to in-class instruction, which may be perceived as a drawback by some. Active learning may foster student engagement in the classroom, which may help them retain the information better even though it demands more time and effort from the teacher (Sumanasekera et al., 2020).

The aforementioned rationale leads to the conclusion that instructors' efforts to help students become motivated and self-dependent learners are essential. Being a teacher therefore entails teaching and delivering some information;

each meeting is based on the curriculum, but it also requires planning and preparation to get learners excited and more involved in learning. Accordingly, this study aimed to gauge the perceptions of Saudi teachers on the level of motivation and empowerment they facilitated for their B.A students. Specifically, it aimed to:

Determine the extent of Saudi EFL teachers in motivating their students to learn English;

Identify the extent of Saudi EFL teachers' role in empowering their students with active learning strategies; and

Ascertain the relationship between Saudi EFL teachers' perceptions on empowering and motivating students.

Research questions

Accordingly, the following research questions took shape to guide this study:

1. To what extent do Saudi EFL teacher motivate their students to learn English?
2. To what extent do Saudi EFL teachers empower their students with active learning strategies?
3. Is there any correlation between Saudi EFL teachers' perceptions on empowering and motivating students?

3. Methods

Research design

A quantitative research design was applied in this study. Quantitative research is more suited to gather information from a large number of participants. In this study, the researcher obtained the perceptions of 110 EFL teachers at Qassim University to measure their motivational and empowerment strategies as applied with their students.

Participants

The study enrolled as the sample 110 EFL teachers who taught at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. The participants included both male and female teachers in comparable number with a teaching experience of more than 10 years at the university level. However, they belonged to different cultural backgrounds: The majority are Saudis while there are some Arabs, like Egyptian, Yemeni, Jordanian, Sudanese and some Indians. The author shared the online questionnaire with EFL teachers at Qassim university, requesting all to respond electronically.

Instrument

A specially-designed questionnaire was used to gather data from 110 EFL teachers who teach at different Saudi universities. The responses were based on a five-points frequency scale ranging from 'always' to 'never'. There were, in all, 20 items which were divided into two factors. The first part was aimed to measure the participants' perceptions on motivating their Saudi EFL students and included 8 items, (Table 2), whereas the second contained 12 items. The aim was to measure the participants' role in empowering their students to use strategies for self-learning.

Validity and reliability

Face validity was performed on the study instrument. The questionnaire items were reviewed by three university professors in the field of Applied Linguistics. They suggested the divisions of double verb sentences to avoid ambiguity. All the referee's comments were complied to to enhance the clarity and accuracy of the questionnaire items to measures the research questions set previously. To check the consistency of the questionnaire, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated for all the 20 items. The measure showed a high consistency level. Table 1 indicates Cronbach Alpha at .93, which is considered a high score. It signifies that the instrument used is highly trustworthy for collecting the data from the participants.

Table 1. Reliability statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.939	20

4. Data Analysis

The questionnaire applied five-frequency scale alternatives. 'Always' was given the code 5 and 'never' was coded 1. The data were processed using SPSS (version 22). Descriptive analysis was performed for answering the first and second research questions. On the other hand, inferential analysis was applied (including finding the correlation coefficient, R^2 , probability value) to answer the third question.

5. Findings

RQ1: To what extent do Saudi EFL teachers motivate their students to learn English?

Table 2 shows that EFL teachers at Saudi Arabia universities have a high positive perception on the role of motivation in enhancing their students' learning of English. Table 2 indicates that the total average mean scores of the participants on this count reached (M=4.11, Std=.706). Furthermore, all the questionnaire items received high scores. They ranged between (3.91 into 4.27), considered high statistically.

Table 2. Saudi EFL teachers' motivation of their students

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
I urge my EFL learners to use their English outside of the classroom.	4.16	1.027
I motivate the EFL learners to select their own learning styles.	4.18	1.006
I motivate my BA EFL learners to select their own learning strategies	3.92	1.046
I motivate problem-solving	4.20	.911
I urge my EFL learners to assess their own progress	3.91	1.054
I motivate the EFL learners practice English online	4.24	.956
I motivate the EFL learners to teach each other	4.27	.938
I motivate my EFL learners to create their own learning goals	4.04	1.026
Total	4.11	.706

RQ2: To what extent do Saudi EFL teachers empower their students with active learning strategies?

Table 3 shows the degree of empowerment of EFL students with active learning strategies in the Qassim University. Data shows that the level of empowerment with active learning strategies reached (M=3.90, Std=.708). The individual items touched an average mean score between (3.35 and 4.34). This range indicates empowerment between medium and high. However, the total average indicates a high level of empowerment.

Table 3. Saudi EFL teachers' empowerment of their students

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
I encourage the EFL learners to become more aware of learning processes	4.34	.833
I assess the EFL learners to become more aware of learning strategies	3.97	.972
I use teaching pedagogical tasks which ensure the EFL learners' engagement	3.88	1.038
I give learners opportunities to make choices between different options in the classroom	3.97	.977
I give room to small group discussions	3.78	1.037
I show my EFL learners how to design their own learning activities.	3.75	1.135
I support the EFL learners with chances to master some aspect of English language	4.21	.892
I support my EFL learners to teach the aspect of English language they master to others	3.98	1.040
I try to bring researchers out of my students.	3.35	1.185
I create contexts wherein my students can exchange and discuss their own research ideas	3.61	1.072
I give the EFL learners chances to reflect on their own learning.	3.93	.956
I set explicit instructional objectives to the learners.	4.12	.979
Total	3.90	.708

RQ3: Is there any correlation between Saudi EFL teachers' perception on empowering and motivating students?

According to Table 4, there is a significant correlation between motivation and empowerment in the teachers' perceptions. The correlation score came to .84, showing high significance. The Pearson coefficient value shows (.841) at the level of significant, (Sig. =0.000). On the other hand, the coefficient of determination (R^2) amounted 0.7073, which indicated that the (70%) of the changes in empowering students is strongly linked with the variable of empowerment, whereas the remaining 30% of the changes are associated with other factors.

Table 4. Correlation between motivating and empowering students

Variables	Mean	Standard deviation	Correlation coefficient	Coefficient of determination (R^2)	Sig. (2-tailed)
Motivation	4.11	.706	.841**	0.7073	*.000
Empowerment	3.90	.708			

* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

6. Discussion

The study found that EFL teachers at Qassim University have a high positive perception as far as motivating their students to learn English is concerned. This finding is in line with the discovery of Indriyah and Ardian (2021) who came to the conclusion that teachers in make a reasonable attempt to inspire children to study English. It can be demonstrated that the teacher employs a variety of teaching techniques, creates some interesting teaching materials, assigns students work based on what they have learned, connects classroom content to students' daily lives, prompts reflection on experiences, gives feedback to students, uses encouraging language, gives students the opportunity to present their course work, and gives memorable grades when students complete group projects quickly. In this study too, data shows that the EFL teachers worked hard to inspire the learners to learn English, and the results are visible.

This is a good indication as student motivation improves learning according to Johnson (2017). Although intrinsic motivation to perform or complete a task might motivate students to learn more, extrinsic variables like prizes or incentives can also have an impact (Theobald, 2006). The degree to which students are motivated to study is not the only factor. Teachers are essential in enhancing students' learning via encouragement (Schuitema *et al.*, 2016). Teacher support for student autonomy, relevance, relatedness, competency, instructors' passion in the topic, and teacher's own self-efficacy can raise students' drive to study (Schiefele & Schaffner, 2015; Zhang *et al.*, 2012). Regardless of whether it is intrinsic or extrinsic, motivation is crucial for teachers to provide a suitable environment for students to study.

Additionally, Rahman and Sahayu (2020) asserted that students must be persistent, motivated, and interested in order to acquire a foreign language because it is difficult to master a foreign language by classroom instruction alone. Numerous elements, including classroom management, learning environments, student interest in learning, student motivation, teachers, and many more, have a big impact on how well a student learns a foreign language in class. Thus, students that are really eager to study a foreign language will experience successful learning results. Students are inspired to study, practice, and utilize a foreign language by having motives. It implies that learners will be eager to study a foreign language and will significantly contribute to enhancing their learning (Alahdal & Al Ahdal, 2019; Othman & Shuqair, 2013). As a result, motivation becomes a crucial factor in determining whether or not students learn anything successfully (Dörnyei, 2009; Mahadi & Jafari, 2012; Mustafa *et al.*, 2015; Williams & Williams, 2011).

However, due to reasons such as family issues, peer pressure, personal issues, laziness, and professors, student motivation is not always steady (Alizadeh, 2016; Matsumoto & Obana, 2001; Nicholson, 2013). The answer, then, is to keep students' motivation for learning high in the classroom. It can be accomplished by encouraging a possible source of inspiration from inside or outside the classroom. Additionally, a number of research have focused on student motivation and the impact of motivation on learning (Brumen, 2011; Öztürk, 2014; Santosa, 2017; Ying *et al.*, 2013).

Likely, the study indicated that the participants also have high positive perceptions on the role of empowering their students with active learning strategies to be self-dependent learners. The result is confirmed by the findings of Emaliana (2017). According to the study's results, teachers may have heavily embraced the active learning teaching technique as a way to apply a student-centered teaching strategy because of the students' good attitudes regarding group activity in class. Because students are actively participating in class activities, group work can increase learning, as also demonstrated by Molungo's (2013) research findings. This conclusion suggests that it is crucial to employ educational strategies that enable students to collaborate in groups.

Active learning involves students doing things and reflecting on what they are doing throughout educational sessions (Bin-Hady, 2019; Thambu *et al.*, 2021). Active learning strategies put more of an emphasis on helping students improve their abilities than on teaching them information. Additionally, they frequently emphasize the need of learners exploring their own attitudes and beliefs. In contrast to simply listening to an expert, according to Freeman *et al.* (2014), active learning involves students in the process of learning through activities (reading, writing, and demonstrating) or class discussion and producing presentations. Higher-order thinking is emphasized, and collaborative projects are frequent.

According to Nayak's (2018) research, implementing active learning techniques is a great way to assist students' learning. According to the results of her study, providing learners with active learning methodologies led to a distinctive manner of learning on their part. They were also able to combine concepts more effectively and became more than just rote learners as a result. Additionally, a lot of learners thought it helped them do better on tests. Active involvement in the current study implies that employing active learning in the classroom may help students gain the abilities for creating concepts, and it has proven to be a successful activity for reviewing previously taught material.

To instill an integrated learning attitude in learners, innovative curriculum delivery mechanisms should be developed for teaching English topics. Concept-building exercises in a lecture setting should pique students' interest in the learning process and help them develop a deep approach to learning.

Finally, the current study reported a high direct correlation between motivating and empowering students in the learning process. According to the results, active learning strategies are a good way to help students feel empowered, helped, successful, motivated, and caring. Patil (2021) reported that learning a language requires both motivation and strong desire which make the learning interesting for the learners. Gilleard (1997) explored the importance of self-assessment as an empowering tool for boosting the learning of EFL learners. Loucky (2017) suggested flipped classroom as an environment for both motivating and empowering EFL students in their autonomous learning process. Students were given the opportunities to grow autonomously by preparing their lesson out of class and sharing their ideas with their peers and teachers. Academic achievement depends on assisting students in following their interests and boosting motivation (Caruso, 2021). Educational leaders could provide opportunities for professional growth for teachers through workshops on how to engage students and empower them through active learning techniques, where teachers find their own interests to support their own development and individually contribute to outcomes at the school level like inclusive learning environments, and wellness.

7. Conclusion

This study aimed to gauge the perceptions of 110 EFL teachers at Saudi Qassim University on the level of motivation and empowerment they facilitated for their B.A students. The study found EFL teachers at Qassim University have a high positive perception of motivating their EFL students to learn English. Likely, the study indicated that the participants also had a high positive perception on the role of empowering their students with active learning strategies to be self-dependent learners. Finally, the study reported a high direct correlation between motivating and empowering students and the learning process.

8. Recommendations

Though a small-scale study in terms of the sample size, this study brings forth many useful lessons. Accordingly, the main recommendation based on the findings is that EFL teachers need to use active strategies which motivate and empower their students to make learning truly learner-centered.

9. Limitations

The interesting findings that this study reached, depended on a quantitative design which may lessen its consistency. It is suggested that future studies that replicate this evaluate the correlation between motivation and empowerment using more than one data collection instrument to ensure more usable results.

Bio:

Dr. Sultan Abdul-Aziz Albedaiwi is an Associate Professor of ELT at the College of Education, Buraydah, Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. Dr. Albedaiwi is a former Vice Dean of quality, development and planning in the College of Education. He has been working extensively on foreign language acquisition and the latest strategies of English language teaching. He has published many papers in peer-reviewed International Journals and attended many conferences worldwide such as FACE, BESA, ICET, and SSIC. He is a member of the Glasgow University Council, United Kingdom. He was also Chair of the Saudi Council in Glasgow city, the largest number of Saudi students' circle in the UK. His research interests include learner autonomy and teaching autonomy, new approaches to language teaching, and the 21st century English language learner skills.

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Appendix

	Always	often	sometimes	hardly	Never
I urge Saudi EFL learners to use their English outside of the classroom.					
I encourage Saudi EFL learners to become more aware of learning processes					
I assess Saudi EFL learners to become more aware of learning strategies					
I motivate Saudi EFL learners to select their own learning styles.					
I use teaching pedagogical tasks which ensure the Saudi EFL learners' engagement					
I motivate Saudi EFL learners to select their own learning strategies					
I give learners opportunities to make choices between different options in the classroom					
I give room to small group discussions					
I motivate problem-solving					
I show Saudi EFL learners how to design their own learning activities.					
I support Saudi EFL learners with chances to master some aspect of English language					
I support Saudi EFL learners to teach the aspect of English language they master to others					
I urge my Saudi EFL learners to assess their own progress					
I try to bring researchers out of my students.					
I create contexts wherein my students can exchange and discuss their own research ideas					
I motivate Saudi EFL learners practice English online					
I motivate Saudi EFL learners to teach each other					
I give Saudi EFL learners chances to reflect on their own learning.					
I set explicit instructional objectives to the learners.					
I motivate Saudi EFL learners to create their own learning goals					

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