Chinese and Japanese Students' Conceptions of the 'Ideal English Lesson'

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Abstract   In developing strategies for increasing learner involvement, a key factor is the extent to which these strategies are compatible with learners' own expectations and preferences. In order to explore this factor, tertiary students in four Asian countries were asked (in an online survey designed on the basis of exploratory interviews) to give their conceptions of their ideal English lesson. Factor analysis revealed three main types of lesson that different groups of students preferred: the communication-oriented lesson, the form-oriented lesson and the control-oriented lesson. Students expressed preference for communication-oriented lessons in all countries except Japan and there were differences between countries in the degree and details of students' preferences. Overall, however, students expressed positive attitudes to a varied range of teaching strategies, giving encouragement to teachers who wish to renew their pedagogy in order to suit new individual and social needs.

Keywords: second language learning, language pedagogy, students' preferences, teaching strategies

Introduction

The current state of second language pedagogy is sometimes characterized as being in the 'postmethod' stage, in the sense that the search for the 'right method' which suits every learner in every situation has proven unsuccessful and is generally agreed to be futile (see for example, Littlewood 1999; Kumaravadivelu 2006). Attention has moved away from set methods and towards ways in which teachers can develop their own pedagogy based not only on general principles but also on their understanding of the specific situation and learners. Thus, however obvious the importance of learners' differing beliefs, preferences and expectations may seem today, it is comparatively recently that they have emerged as a significant focus for investigation. Benson (2005: 5-6) suggests that it is only since the late 1970s that the language teaching field has moved from excessive concern with 'the application of linguistic theories that viewed language from the perspective of form and structure' to the 'now largely unquestioned understanding that learners' *varied* responses to teaching are as important as a factor in language learning, if not more so, than the teaching itself'. This learner's perspective is now firmly established as a key factor to be considered in reflective teaching (Richards and Lockhart 1994).

As Schmidt (2004) points out in enumerating his 'fifty (probably) true and useful findings from SLA', 'people are motivated to do things that are interesting, relevant to their goals (instrumental, knowledge, communicative, etc.) and enjoyable'. This statement reflects a truth which the practising teacher experiences every working day: if the kind of teaching that the teacher offers to the students

creates opportunities for the kind of learning that the students feel is worthwhile and enjoyable, then students will be more ready to engage with what is taking place and learning will be more effective. It makes sense then to explore what kinds of classroom learning activities are perceived as enjoyable and/or effective.

This paper will first review some previous studies that have been conducted in this domain. It will then describe a study in which, amongst other things, students in four Asian countries were asked to describe their 'ideal English lesson'. The responses will be analysed in terms of the features that the students viewed most favorably and, from factor analysis, three main lesson-types will be identified. There was some degree of inter-country variation, which will be described, but overall, students expressed positive attitudes to a varied range of teaching strategies.

Some Previous Work on Students' Preferred Classroom Learning Activities

An influential and often cited study of learners' preferred classroom learning activities is that of Willing (1988), who carried out a survey of how 517 adult migrant students in Australia believed that they 'learn best'. Willing included 30 learning activities, both inside and outside class. Table 1 gives, in rank order, the average responses (on a 4-point scale where 1 is low and 4 is high) for a selection of the in-class activities.

Table 1.　　Students' Perceptions of the Usefulness of Learning Activities in Willing's (1988) Study

Learning Activity	Mean Response
1.　　Pronunciation practice	3.54
2.　　Error correction by teacher	3.51
3.　　Learning by conversation	**3.42**
4.　　Teacher explanations	3.40
5.　　Learning new vocabulary	3.38
6.　　Learning in small groups	**3.14**
7.　　Studying grammar	3.10
8.　　Listening to and using cassettes	**2.77**
9.　　　Discovering own mistakes	2.76
10.　　Learning by pictures, films, video	**2.72**
11.　　Talking in pairs	**2.63**
12.　　Learning by games	**2.35**

In Table 1, activities which are usually regarded as more communication-oriented are printed in **bold** type, whilst those which are usually considered more form-oriented or 'traditional' are printed in *italics*. This characterization is, of course, only approximate and not a reliable guide to what actually occurs in individual classrooms. However, it serves to highlight one noticeable feature: the ESL students in this survey held generally more positive perceptions of the more form-oriented activities. (In a follow-up study reported by Nunan [1995], it was found that this contrasted with the perceptions of a group of 60 ESL *teachers* in Australia, who favoured communication-oriented activities more.)

Peacock (1998) applied a similar methodology to investigating the views of 158 students at a tertiary institution in Hong Kong. He asked for their rating of the usefulness of eleven activities, which included those listed above in Table 1, with the exception of 'learning by games'. (For item 7, Peacock used 'grammar exercises', which is of course not the same as 'studying grammar', but both phrases reflect students' perceptions of the importance of grammar learning). In Table 2, the

activities are still listed in the rank order found in Willing's study, but the right-

hand column gives Peacock's four-level classification of his students' responses.

Table 2**.** Students' Perceptions of the Usefulness of Learning Activities in the Studies of Willing (1988) and Peacock (1998)

Learning Activity	Mean (Willing)	Level (Peacock)
1. Pronunciation practice	3.54	High
2. Error correction by teacher	3.51	Very high
3. Learning by conversation	**3.42**	**Very high**
4. Teacher explanations	3.40	Medium high
5. Learning new vocabulary	3.38	High
6. Learning in small groups	**3.14**	**Medium**
7. Studying grammar / Grammar exercises	3.10	High
8. Listening to and using cassettes	**2.77**	**Medium high**
9 Discovering own mistakes	2.76	Medium high
10. Learning by pictures, films, video	**2.72**	**Medium high**
11. Talking in pairs	**2.63**	**Medium high**
12. Learning by games	**2.35**	**--**

The general direction of Peacock's findings is similar to those of Willing. Except for

'learning by conversation', the students generally perceive the more non-

communicative activity-types as more useful for their learning than the

communicative activity-types which (in Peacock's study, too) were more highly

valued by the teachers.

Also in Hong Kong, a survey by Littlewood and Liu (1996) asked 2156 first-

year undergraduate students to respond to 12 items with the prompt 'I like a

university English class in which ...'. The resulting rank order is shown in Table 3.

Table 3**.** Rank Order of Methodology Preferences in University English Classes in Littlewood and Liu's (1996) Study

A lot of attention is paid to listening and speaking.
Learning focuses on the importance of fluency.
A lot of attention is paid to using everyday language.
Materials contain a lot of communication exercises, e.g. role-plays,

discussions, etc.
Students do most of the talking.
Teacher corrects most of the mistakes that students make.
A lot of materials from real life (e.g., TV, radio) are used.
There is a lot of pair work and group work.
Teacher helps students to find out for themselves the language they need to get things done.
Learning focuses on the importance of correct grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation.
Teacher explains the learning purpose of class activities.
There is a lot of teacher guidance and explanation.

At first sight these results seem to contradict those of Willing and Peacock, in that the more communicative activities are ranked generally higher. However we need to consider the nature of the prompt. Willing and Peacock asked students how they 'learn best' and Peacock too focused on the usefulness of activities. The rank order in Table 3 reflects how much the students *liked* the activities. There is clearly a difference between 'liking' an activity and considering it 'useful'. This difference is illustrated in another section of Littlewood and Liu's study, in which the same first-year students were asked to reflect on their last two years at secondary school and say (a) how much they liked particular activities and (b) how much they think these activities helped improve their English. The results are shown in Table 4. For ease of comparison, activities are grouped into three levels (high, medium and low) for degree of liking and perceived usefulness. Within each level, the actual rank order is retained.

Activities for which the ratings for liking and usefulness differ by two levels are printed in capitals and bold. Those which differ by just one level are printed in capitals only.

Table 4.	Students' Perceptions of the Enjoyableness and Effectiveness of Classroom Activities in Littlewood and Liu's (1996) Study

	How well students liked these activities	How much students think the activities improved their English
High	Reading comprehension **WATCHING VIDEOS** Listening comprehension Listening to teacher	Reading comprehension Listening to teacher Listening comprehension **GRAMMAR EXERCISES**
Medium	ROLE PLAY / DRAMA Answering teacher's questions Writing essays GROUP DISCUSSION	VOCABULARY EXERCISES Writing essays Answering teacher's questions ERROR CORRECTION
Low	Pair work ERROR CORRECTION VOCABULARY EXERCISES **GRAMMAR EXERCISES**	Pair work GROUP DISCUSSION ROLE PLAY / DRAMA **WATCHING VIDEOS**

The pattern in Table 4 is striking. Of the six activities which change their level, three are 'communicative' (watching videos, role play/drama, group discussion) and three are 'non-communicative' (grammar exercises, vocabulary exercises, error correction). In each case, as we go from 'liking' to 'usefulness', the communicative activities move *down* by one or two levels and the non-communicative activities move *up* by one or two levels. The most extreme instance of this is the contrast between 'watching videos' (top level for liking, bottom for usefulness) and 'grammar exercises' (bottom level for liking, top for usefulness). In other words, reflecting on their secondary school experience, these first-year students in Hong Kong had found most enjoyment in activities of a communicative nature but thought that for their actual learning progress, the non-communicative activities had been more valuable.

Green's (1993) study suggests a similar trend. This study compared the views of 263 first-year ESL students at a Puerto Rican university on (a) the enjoyableness and (b) the effectiveness of 17 classroom activities, of which 9 were 'communicative'

and 8 were 'non-communicative'. The activities were described for the students in concrete terms which made their nature clearly recognizable. In Table 5, the results are displayed in the same format as Table 4 above, except that we now revert to the convention of printing communicative activities in bold and non-communicative activities in italics.

Table 5　　　Students' Perceptions of the Enjoyableness and Effectiveness of Classroom Activities in Green's (1993) Study

	How well students enjoy the activities	How effective students think the activities are for learning
High	**Listening to songs** **Small group discussion** **Pair work: questioning** **Teacher-led class discussion** **Singing songs** **Teacher responding to journal entries**	Grammar explanations in English **Teacher-led class discussion** Teacher correcting mistakes in journal entries Looking up words in a dictionary **Pair work: questioning** **Small group discussion**
Medium	**Circulating and asking for information** **Reporting on articles selected by students** Grammar explanations in English Oral transformation drill (individual responses) Oral transformation drill (whole-class responses) Teacher correcting mistakes in journal entries	**Listening to songs** **Teacher responding to journal entries** Students correcting written errors Written gap-filling exercises **Reporting on articles selected by students** **Interviewing native speakers and reporting**
Low	Students correcting written errors **Interviewing native speakers and reporting** Written gap-filling exercises Looking up words in a dictionary Grammar explanations in Spanish (= students' L1)	Oral transformation drill (individual responses) **Singing songs** Oral transformation drill (whole-class responses) **Circulating and asking for information** Grammar explanations in Spanish (= students' L1)

The changes are less unidirectional than in Littlewood and Liu's study. Thus, perhaps surprisingly for teachers brought up to regard drills as 'boring', these

students actually ranked them higher for enjoyment than for effectiveness. In general, however, the same trend is evident. The top level for enjoyment is occupied entirely by six communicative activities but when these are judged for effectiveness, three of them descend (two by one level and one – 'singing songs' – by two levels). By contrast, of the eight non-communicative activities, six *rise* by either one or two levels when their perceived usefulness is compared to their enjoyability.

The Present Study

The present study is part of a broader investigation into the perspectives on the English classroom of students in four Asian countries (Hong Kong, Japan, Mainland China and Singapore). It began with interviews in which students voiced freely their opinions about the type of English language classroom they valued most. Recurrent themes were then grouped into four main categories:
1. The features of a good English lesson.
 2. The role of a good teacher.
 3. The role of a good student.
 4. Acceptable rules of classroom behaviour.

These themes were then used to design a questionnaire which consisted of 40 items i.e. 10 for each theme. This paper focuses on the responses in section 1, in which students were asked to give their perceptions of their 'ideal English lesson'. The ten items can be seen in Tables 6 and 7.

The questionnaire was administered online. Responses were received from a total of 410 tertiary students, of whom 166 were from Hong Kong, 47 from Japan, 88 from Mainland China and 101 from Singapore. Eight did not indicate their country.

Forty percent of the students were in their first year of study, 23% in their second and 33% in their third. Fifty-three percent of the students gave English as their major subject.

A disadvantage of administering a survey online is that it is less easy to ensure that samples are comparable or that possible contaminating variables are controlled. To take one example: Hu (2003) shows that there is wide variation according to region in the nature of Chinese students' English learning experiences, which is in turn likely also to influence their preferred ways of learning. However, there is no way of knowing an online responder's geographical location, unless the information is elicited in the questionnaire itself, which might then soon become discouragingly long. (In any case the incentive for students to respond in online mode proved to be weaker than in previous studies using face-to-face mode.)

Students' Mean Responses

Table 6 gives the mean responses and standard deviations for all 410 students to the ten items. They are on a four-point scale in which maximum agreement = 4.

Table 6.   Mean Responses of All Students (N=410)

In my ideal English lesson:	Mean	Std. Dev.
The atmosphere is relaxed.	**3.53**	**0.57**
Some of the materials we use are from real life (e.g. TV, magazines).	**3.46**	**0.60**
There is plenty of active discussion.	**3.27**	**0.63**
We spend some time 'having fun' (e.g. singing songs or playing games).	**3.22**	**0.73**
The teacher teaches us new language items (e.g. grammar or vocabulary).	3.13	0.62
The teacher insists, most of the time, on correct pronunciation.	2.81	0.79
We spend some time revising grammar.	2.79	0.69
A lot of time is spent working independently of the teacher, e.g. individually or in groups.	2.70	0.70
The teacher corrects most of our grammar mistakes.	2.68	0.77
The teacher guides most of what the students do.	2.68	0.63

It should be remembered that the items were drawn from themes which arose during interviews rather than from any *a priori* theory. However they fall broadly into the two main 'communicative' and 'non-communicative' categories which are familiar from previous studies. This is again shown in Table 6 by the use of bold and italics. Item 8 is neutral (one should also say 'ambiguous') in this respect, since work which is 'independent of the teacher' may be of almost any form, ranging from e.g. imaginative discussion to focused grammar exercises.

Mention should be made of the standard deviations in Table 6, which range from 0.57 to 0.79 and indicate considerable variation. Here are the features of lessons, listed with standard deviations and ranked according to how much students agreed *with each other* in their attitudes to them. The figures in brackets are the rank order in terms of the mean strength of students' preference (this information is also given above in Table 6).

The atmosphere is relaxed   0.57 (1)

Some of the materials we use are from real life (e.g. TV, magazines)   0.60 (2)

The teacher teaches us new language items (e.g. grammar or vocabulary)	0.62 (5)
There is plenty of active discussion	0.63 (3)
The teacher guides most of what the students do	0.63 (10)
We spend some time revising grammar	0.69 (7)
A lot of time is spent working independently of the teacher	0.70 (8)
We spend some time 'having fun' (e.g. singing songs or playing games)	0.73 (4)
The teacher corrects most of our grammar mistakes	0.77 (9)
The teacher insists, most of the time, on correct pronunciation	0.79 (6)

The features at the top of the list are the less 'controversial' features which most students in the class are likely to regard in a similar way. Those towards the bottom are those which are more likely to appeal to some students but not to others. For example, if the correction of grammar mistakes not only came out fairly low in average preference (2.68 – see Table 6) but also had a large standard deviation of 0.79, teachers will often find classes consisting of a large number of students whose attitude is negative as well as many who appreciate it.

Three Main Lesson Types

It was decided to investigate through factor analysis whether students' preferences followed recognizable patterns related to underlying lesson characteristics (or 'factors') such as orientation towards communicative activities or focus on form. In other words, could the students' preferences be summarized in terms of recognizable lesson types with coherent sets of features? The results are summarized in Table 7.

In Table 7, weak loadings of less than .40 are put in brackets; it also happens that these bracketed items appear (more strongly) in other factors.

Table 7.   Factor Analysis of 410 Students' Responses

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
The atmosphere is relaxed.	**.78**		
There is plenty of active discussion.	**.69**		
Some of the materials used are from real life (e.g. TV, magazines).	**.61**		
Some time is spent 'having fun' (e.g. singing songs or playing games).	**.59**		
The teacher teaches new language items (e.g. grammar or vocabulary).		.74	
The teacher corrects most of the grammar mistakes.		.70	(.36)
Some time is spent revising grammar.		.45	
The teacher insists, most of the time, on correct pronunciation			.64
A lot of time is spent working independently of the teacher, e.g. individually or in groups	(.36)	(.33)	.59
The teacher guides most of what the students do.			.49

The factor analysis confirms that the general distinction between 'communicative' and 'non-communicative' characteristics is reflected in students' perceptions and preferences. The former constitute a clear Factor 1 and the latter appear to be distributed over Factors 2 and 3. It is interesting that the neutral or ambiguous item mentioned above ('working independently of the teacher') participates in all three factors, albeit only weakly in Factors 1 and 2. Perhaps many students associated the term more with focused, teacher-determined tasks than with free, creative activity.

If we exclude the 'working independently' item both on the grounds of its ambiguity and because it features also in the other two factors, the common feature

distinguishing Factor 3 seems to be that the student values teacher control, in the form of frequent monitoring and guidance. I will therefore call Factor 3 'control-oriented teaching'. I will call Factor 2 'form-oriented teaching' and Factor 1 'communication-oriented teaching'. The characteristics of the three lesson-types corresponding to the three factors are summarized below. They are also compared to the four types of learner which Willing (1988; see also the discussion in Nunan 1999) distinguished on the basis of his study of the learning preferences of 517 ESL learners in Australia.

The communication-oriented lesson (overall mean: 3.24). In this lesson-type:

1. The atmosphere is relaxed.
2. There is plenty of active discussion.
3. Authentic materials are used.
4. There is a lot of enjoyment.

The communication-oriented English lesson is likely to appeal especially to Willing's category of 'communicative learners', who like talking to friends, listening to native-speakers, etc., and to his category of 'concrete learners', who like playing games, watching video, talking in pair-work, etc.

The form-oriented lesson (overall mean: 2.83). In this lesson-type:

1. The teacher teaches new language items.
2. The teacher corrects most grammar mistakes.
3. There is revision of grammar.

The form-oriented English lesson is likely to appeal especially to Willing's 'analytical learners', who like studying grammar, reading, finding their own mistakes, etc.

The control-oriented lesson (overall mean: 2.72). In this lesson-type:

1. The teacher pays a lot of attention to correct pronunciation.
2. The teacher guides most of what the students do.
3. The teacher corrects most grammar mistakes.

The control-oriented English lesson is likely to appeal especially to Willing's 'authority-oriented learners', who like the teacher to explain everything, like to study grammar, etc.

Variation between Countries

The tables below show the degree of liking that students in the four countries expressed for the three main lesson-types. The asterisks in the columns show each pair of countries for which the difference is significant at $p < 05$. For example, in Table 8a, column (a) shows that for *communication-oriented* lessons, there is a significant difference between the degrees of liking expressed by Singapore and Hong Kong students; column (b) shows a significant difference between Singapore and Japanese students. However, no significant difference is indicated between Singapore and Mainland Chinese students, since there is no column in which both countries are asterisked.

Table 8.   *Inter-country Variation: The Communication-oriented English Lesson (overall mean: 3.24)*

	Mean	(a)	(b)			
Singapore	3.37	*	*			
Mainland China	3.34			*	*	
Hong Kong	3.19	*		*		*
Japan	2.94		*		*	*

Table 9   Inter-country Variation: The Form-oriented English Lesson (overall mean: 2.83)

	Mean					
Hong Kong	3.04	*	*			
Japan	2.96			*		
Singapore	2.84	*			*	
Mainland China	2.55		*	*	*	

Table 10   Inter-country Variation: The Control-oriented English Lesson (overall mean: 2.72)

	Mean					
Hong Kong	2.88	*	*			
Japan	2.81			*		
Mainland China	2.68	*				
Singapore	2.57		*	*		

In Singapore, Mainland China and Hong Kong, there was a clear preference for communication-oriented lessons rather than the other two types. This was not the case with the Japanese students, who in fact showed a very slight (but negligible) preference for form-oriented lessons.

If we look at the actual *degree* of liking expressed for the three lesson-types, there are significantly different responses from Hong Kong students on the one hand and, on the other hand, students from Singapore and Mainland China. Thus, Hong Kong students expressed:

1. A *weaker* liking for communication-oriented lessons (3.19 compared to 3.37 and 3.34).

2. A *stronger* liking for form-oriented lessons (3.04 compared to 2.84 and 2.55).

3. A *stronger* liking for control-oriented lessons (2.88 compared to 2.57 and 2.68).

The only significant difference *between* Singapore and Mainland China is in the degree of liking for form-oriented lessons, which seem to be more acceptable in Singapore than Mainland China. This may echo at 'grass roots' level what a recent official report describes as Singapore's 'unique language learning environment', in which 'a strong grounding in grammar [is] important to students' acquisition of English' (English Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review Committee 2006: 10) and the role of grammar has always remained strong in the syllabus (Lim 2003).

These results can be compared to those of an earlier study (reported in Littlewood 2001), in which Hong Kong students' responses showed a similar trend compared to those of Mainland Chinese students (Singapore students were not included in that study):

1. When asked whether they 'like activities where there is a lot of discussion with classmates in small groups' and 'like activities where they are part of a group working towards common goals', Hong Kong students (N=286) expressed an average agreement of 3.70 (out of 5) compared to Mainland Chinese students' (N=371) higher average of 3.83. (Japanese students, N=212, averaged 3.57).

2. When asked whether they 'see knowledge as something the teacher should pass on to them rather than something they should discover themselves', Hong Kong students expressed an average agreement of 2.94 compared to Mainland Chinese students' lower average of 1.99. (Japanese students averaged 2.72.)

Taking all these results together, students in Hong Kong expressed generally more conservative preferences than their counterparts in Singapore and Mainland China. Japanese students were in general the most conservative except that, in the 2001 survey, they showed more liking than Hong Kong students for discovering knowledge themselves.

Conclusion

This article has reported on a limited-scale study of students' conceptions of the 'ideal English lesson'. We have seen that the students' responses enable us to identify preferences for three basic lesson types (which are reminiscent of the four learner types identified by Willing, 1988). Except in Japan, the students' preferences were more inclined towards communication-oriented teaching than towards the other two types. There were also some other inter-country differences. However, perhaps more striking than the differences of preference and the variation between countries is the general openness of students in all countries to a varied range of teaching and learning styles. In Table 6, which gives figures for all countries and specific strategies, no mean acceptance is lower than 2.68. In Tables 8 – 10, which give figures for each lesson type and specific countries, no mean is lower than 2.55. This might be taken to indicate that, in developing their 'postmethod' pedagogy referred to at the beginning of this paper, teachers may count on students' tolerance of a flexible range of teaching and learning approaches. Seen from the perspective of both Chinese and Japanese learners, there is encouragement for those teachers who, as advocated by Tan (2007: 100), wish to 'adopt more egalitarian, decentralized ways of teaching' and 'change their role into a facilitator and organizer instead of knowledge transmitter'. On the other hand, students also value more formal and teacher-led aspects of learning.

The data give no information about the students' previous learning experiences, which are likely, as mentioned earlier, to be an important influence on their current preferences. However, this does not alter the general implication that, whatever the reasons, students are ready to respond favorably to a range of teaching and learning approaches.

A weakness of the present research is that it did not distinguish, at the design stage, between preference based on enjoyability and preference based on perceived usefulness. The studies discussed in section II indicate that students are aware of this distinction and that, even when they find communication-oriented teaching more enjoyable, they may still perceive the more traditional types of teaching as more useful. This weakness needs to be remedied by further investigation.

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