



Exploring the Challenges towards Active Learning at a Public University in Afghanistan: A Case Study of EFL Lecturers' Perceptions

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Abstract: Active learning is often connected with teaching and learning that is progressive and involves active student participation. The chief purpose of this research was to explore Afghan EFL lecturers' perceptions towards challenges hampering active learning. With regard to achieving this objective, a qualitative research approach, in particular, face-to-face interviews were conducted. The researcher interviewed and collected the data from seven EFL lecturers in the Languages and Literature Faculty and EFL lecturers in Education Faculty at Kandahar University. This study identified large classes, lack of technological facilities, lack of time, shortage of lecturers, and cultural issues as the challenges hampering active learning.

Keywords: Active Learning, Challenges, EFL Lecturers, Perceptions

Introduction

In the classroom, developing an active learning environment remains a challenging job for the lecturers. Educators have given much consideration to active learning, and this consideration appears to originate from the rapid change of which new information becomes accessible ^[1]. This leads to the requirement of promoting lifelong learning skills ^[2]. Educators are considering the current education system to use new strategies in teaching and learning process to teach students the knowledge and skill that are necessary for the twenty-first century. Active learning is a term used to identify teaching methods that require students to be actively involved in the learning process ^[3]. However, instructors face challenges all over the world in trying to implement active learning ^[4]. Recent developments in active learning have heightened to a point where many educators today come to an agreement that students learn more in an active learning environment than they do in a passive learning environment.

Typically, active learning is related to learning strategies. For example, experiential learning, learning by doing and service learning, peer tutoring, laboratory work, role-playing, and the use of case studies ^[5]. Accordingly, as all educational institutions encounter a similar double challenge and the lecturers are required to learn how to do their jobs in a better way, and that job is to nurture the learning in their students ^[6]. For the last several years, active learning has received significant consideration, and active learning has often offered as a fundamental revolution from traditional teaching instruction ^[7]. Faculty members have strongly embraced active learning as they have been looking for the replacement of traditional teaching philosophy ^[8].

Problem Statement

In today's classrooms, the students portray a different group of students with a diversity of experience, age, and abilities ^[9] ^[10]. Also, educators must think through how these characteristics impact thinking and actions of the student to enhance learning opportunities utilizing successful pedagogies. This, as a result, is a big challenge at public universities in Afghanistan. According to the Afghan Ministry of Higher Education, Afghan universities are mostly traditional, with teacher-centered pedagogy and passive student learning when international trends in universities are increasingly moving toward active student-centered learning ^[11]. Until now, the lecturers are the leading actors in the classrooms, and the students sit in the rows and listen to the lecturers' lectures ^[11]. With this in mind, most class time in traditional approach is spent with professor lecturing and the students watch and listen ^[12].



To be more precise, Afghan universities urgently need to modernize teaching and learning to reflect and keep pace with international trends. Additionally, in the Afghan context, there are insufficient studies conducted regarding active learning. Therefore, this study seeks to address the following research question.

What are the challenges that hinder the implementation of active learning?

Literature Review

Regarding active learning, various researchers^{[13] [6] [14] [15]} have given their opinions in various ways and various authors' interpretations vary in this respective field. However, commonly recognized definitions are possible which sheds some light on the differentiation of how the term active learning is used. The definition of the term "active learning", according to^[8], is that any instructional philosophy in which students are involved in their learning is called active learning. Active learning activities refer to the activities applied inside the classroom. Primarily, students' activities in active learning implicate their engagement in the learning process.^[16] found in a carried out study that a class where active learning is used can promote the learning process. In active learning, learners move beyond the attainment of information to get involved in higher-order thinking activities of analysis, synthesis, and assessment compared to the traditional classroom activities^[17].

Communicative activities will maximize students' interaction when students give opinions to each other through active learning^[18]. With this in mind, EFL learners improve their speaking skills and acquire fluency by engaging in discussions. This view is supported by^[19] who explored that in order to develop speaking and language acquisition, it is to apply active learning by using groups and discussion. This guided discussion can help many lecturers who want to have effective teaching in their classes and teaching is concentrating on what to learn other than how to learn it. Consequently, the learning quality of EFL will become satisfactory^{[20] [21]}. In these studies, the authors viewed the instructors can help their students to promote essential qualities and skills required for active and effective learning with the increased understanding of nature and the process of active learning.^[21] further emphasized that active learning strategies must be stimulated and reinforced at every level of education, not only in EFL classes by instructors. Furthermore, the lecturers should make decisions about the information that will be presented in their lectures and which ones should be removed or which information could be well learned by active learning experiences^[21]. After that, the lecturer should ask in detail about in-class learning activities. Despite what has been discussed, active learning remains underexplored in the Afghan context, especially from EFL lecturers' perspectives. Many areas need to be investigated first before implementing any interventions that aim at promoting active learning.

Previous studies^{[15] [23]} in this regard have shown that the implementation of active learning has faced challenges in effective language learning. For example, according to^[24], large size of EFL classrooms make active learning tremendously problematic and minimize interaction between educators and learners. Therefore, it becomes unsuccessful to enhance students' language skills. Similarly, large classes are considered as major challenge for active learning^{[25] [26]}. According to the authors, teaching a large classroom at one time might present some hitches for lecturers who wish to implement an active learning, participatory or student-centered approach. Likewise,^[14] suggested that active learning is associated with positive results, however, large classes prevent to implement the use of such techniques. Also,^[13] advocated that lecturers are not able to employ it because of different factors. These factors are large classes, fixed timetables, no training in active learning methods and so on. In light of these concerns, this study addresses these literature gaps.

Theoretical Base of Active Learning

The theoretical basis of active learning is summarized under one main theory which is constructivism theory. This theory was introduced to establish the fact that learners take part in the language learning process^[27]. In fact, it indicates that learners should take responsibility for their own language learning. Constructivist learning theory is related to Jean Piaget's theories of learning. In 1971, Jean Piaget first introduced the theory of constructivism. This theory revolves around two main principles. First, "knowledge is not passively received, but actively built by the cognizing subject and the function of cognition is adaptive and serves the organization of experiential world^[28]. Piaget defines the theory as knowledge being constructed, therefore, this theory has an adaptive function^[26]. Second, the function of cognition does not determine an existing reality, but acclimates a proposed theory of reality to the experiential world. Therefore, the meaning of knowledge exists only within the realm of our experiential world, but this knowledge does not supposed to represent a reality independent of our experiencing.^[29] believed that learning happens when learners are engaged in activities that assist them utilize the content and skills they are learning and knowledge is constructed when learners combine new information with existing information.

Materials and Methods

Research Design: In this study, a qualitative research approach was adopted to examine seven Afghan EFL university lecturers' perceptions. Because qualitative research methods are valuable in providing rich descriptions of unique or

unexpected events and giving voice to those whose views are rarely heard^[30]. Similarly, this qualitative approach describes lived people’s experience of a phenomenon. EFL lecturers’ views are critical in understanding their practices and challenges faced by them; hereby, the use of semi-structured interviews allows a researcher to attain in-depth data. The phenomenon in this study is challenges towards active learning. Since this is a case study, case studies according to^[31], are the preferred approach when “why” or “how” questions are asked and when the emphasis is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context. The case study also enables the researcher to achieve great insight into a case where the focus is on a specific context^[31]. Specifically, a case study involving semi-structured interviews as naturally occurring to give an in-depth description of the subject because qualitative research methods were developed in the social sciences to enable researchers to study social and cultural phenomena^[2].

Participants and Context of the Study: The respondents of this case study were all EFL lecturers from Kandahar University where the challenges were discovered. Kandahar University is one of the leading universities in Afghanistan. These lecturers were likely to be resourceful respondents in this case study and had more awareness of teaching approaches. The researcher purposefully selected and invited seven EFL male lecturers who taught in an English Departments in Education Faculty and Languages and Literature Faculty at Kandahar University because in line with this, an appropriate sampling technique should be purposeful and it should be based on the assumption that researcher wanted to discover, understand and gain insight^[32]. To achieve the objectives, three of the respondents were from the Education Faculty and four of them were from the Languages and Literature Faculty where the gap was observed as a result of challenges in implementing active learning. The characteristics of respondents are given as follows in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of Participants

Instrument: The modified instrument used in this study was adapted from^[23]. The related questions were probed from these lecturers who provided their insights. Prior to the interview, the instrument was consulted with and reviewed by an expert in the field to scrutinize and establish validity. Based upon constructive feedback from the expert, changes were made to the instrument. The core interview questions were as follows:

1. What is your understanding of active learning?
2. Do you think active learning approach suggested in the education policy is understood well by the lecturers?
3. Do you think it is a suitable teaching approach for EFL learners?
4. Do you have the tendency to implement the active learning approach?
5. Would you please list the problems that you think exist in the program in terms of active learning?

Data Collection and Ethical Issues: Data collection for this study included two rounds of in-depth interviews over a period of one month with the seven respondents to avoid ambiguities and reach saturation. Since this study involved lecturers of a public university, it was, therefore, a requirement to seek approval through a signed consent form prior to the interviews from the heads of the two departments. Because in any social research including education that deals with beliefs and values, ethical issues are involved^[33]. The respondents were all informed of the purpose of this research and all of them volunteered to

Pseudonyms	Age	Education Level	Teaching Experience
Respondent 1	33	Master	6 years
Respondent 2	35	Master	7 years
Respondent 3	32	Master	7 years
Respondent 4	32	Bachelor	6 years
Respondent 5	33	Bachelor	3 years
Respondent 6	29	Bachelor	2 years
Respondent 7	29	Bachelor	2 years

participate in this study after obtaining the written consent and pseudonym was assigned to each respondent. Each respondent was face-to-face interviewed in his office. During the interview, the researcher allowed the conversation to move on smoothly in a more interactive manner to elicit lecturers’ in-depth perceptions. Also, each interview was audiotaped for accuracy with the permission of all respondents. The length of each interview varied from twenty to thirty minutes. The checklist of the interview included questions addressing lecturers’ feelings about challenges EFL lecturers encountered.

Data Analysis: Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data, which involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what respondents have said and what the researcher has seen and read; it is the process of making meaning^[34]. After transcribing and paraphrasing all the interviews word by word, 10 pages of written documents were obtained from the audiotaped recordings. Then, the researcher reviewed and read twice each respondents’ transcript to immerse in the data. The process of analysis involved the theory of Miles and Huberman consisting of three steps. These steps are data reduction (by summarizing, coding and unraveling themes), data display and conclusion drawing and verification^[35]. The transcripts were first analyzed by identifying the initial codes after the initial immersion in the data analysis. Consequently, the analysis of the

data started determining by locating from codes into themes. Regarding the study’s objective, a theme catches essential evidence and portraying responses in the form of coded data [36]. Finally, five relevant themes were generated after reviewing the coded and entire data set. The themes and codes generated from the interviews are presented in Table 2.

Reliability of the Results: To validate the authenticity of the analysis, the researcher referred to an outside peer perspective who has published several qualitative research papers on teacher education to examine the perceptions and opinions of lecturers and double checking the coding structure. In addition to that, all respondents were informally invited for member checks to review the accuracy, make changes to their insights to avoid any misinterpretation and share further information to increase the reliability of the results [37].

Results

The findings of this research have been organized into themes that emerged through the process of interviews and the findings will answer the question.

Table 2: Findings on factors hindering active learning

Research Question	Theme	Respondents	Codes
Challenges hindering the implementation of active learning	Large Classes	All	Impede active learning process Impossible to make groups Difficult to control large classes Challenging for lecturer Less participation
	Technological Facilities	1, 3, 4 & 6	Limited access to technologies
	Lack of Time	3 & 6	Syllabus remains uncovered Doing activities inside or outside the class
	Lack of Lecturers	2 & 4	Lecturers are overloaded
	Culture	3, 4, 5, 6 & 7	Students’ shyness Gender learning styles vary Male and female group work impossible

Table 2 represents the findings on the factors which hinder active learning. There are five common themes that emerged while the researcher asked the interviewees. The perceived factors are large classes, lack of technological facilities, lack of time, lack of lecturers and cultural issues. The following are the excerpts from the interviews.

Large Classes: Concerning the factors hindering active learning, respondent 1 believed that a large number of students in one classroom could impede the active learning process. Equally important, respondent 2 shared his thoughts on factors that hinder active learning. According to his point of view, the overload of students in a classroom will obstruct active learning because there tends to be only 25 students so that the active learning can be implemented. However, the classrooms consist of more than 50 students that most group activities are impossible to be carried out. Similarly, respondent 3 discussed the relationship between active learning and large class. He said that active learning could be carried out in a class that consists of 20-30 students. On the other hand, large classes are not easy to control and implement active learning. In addition, respondent 4 referred to the same point and factors which hinder active learning as respondent 4 exemplified a large number of students in one classroom as the critical factor that hinders active learning.

In the same way, respondent 5 emphasized that one of the leading factors which hinder active learning is having a large number of students in a classroom. He claimed that it would be very challenging for the instructor, in particular to apply active learning. Moreover, respondent 6 provided further insight that problems are source of decreasing the efficiency of teaching.

For example, he complained about a large number of students in one class which influences active learning and lecturers are unlikely to implement active learning. Students, on the other hand, also encounter hitches and it is difficult for them to work in groups. For instance, all students may not have the chance to participate during classroom activities. Additionally, based on respondent's 7 claim, most of their classes are large, and the number of students are more than 50. Active learning in such classes is very challenging because the lecturer needs to spend most of his time arranging and organizing students. For instance, how would the lecturer be able to implement active learning since there are more than 50 students and the time is just 50 minutes?

Lack of Technologies: Regarding the factors which hinder active learning, four of the respondents included technological facilities as one of the factors which hinder active learning. Respondent 1 identified that lack of technological facilities has resulted in hampering active learning process. He emphasized that technology can bring enthusiasm and interest to students' learning and limited access to the sources affect active learning. Correspondingly, respondent 3 also stated that limited technology as a factor hampers active learning. Furthermore, based on respondent's 4 views, a key component that influences active learning is unavailability of technology. In the same manner, according to respondent 6, the most important factor that lecturers face all the time is lack of technological facilities. Applying active learning needs to facilitate the students with anything they need such as technology and library.

Lack of Time: Two of the respondents also identified that lack of instructional time is one of the factors that hinder active learning in the classroom. With regards to these factors, respondent 3 included time limitation as another factor hindering active learning. According to him, active learning would be difficult to practice unless there is enough time for the class. Because if the lecturer proceeds with active learning approaches, then the syllabus will remain uncovered until the end of the class and course. However, the university and Ministry of Higher Education requires them to meet the targeted syllabus by the end of the semester. Similarly, respondent 6 also mentioned the same factor that hinders active learning and said implementing active learning strategies require more time. Performing active learning activities either inside or outside the classroom can be a significant challenge for both learners and lecturers because of the time limitation, he said. He exemplified that an instructional period of fifty minutes and with more than 50 students in a classroom is hugely an impossible task to implement active learning efficiently.

Lack of Lecturers: The respondents for this study agreed on the point of lack of lecturers as one of the factors that hinder active learning. Two of the respondents stated that lack of lecturers had forced them to be overloaded and that is also the factor that barricades active learning. Based on the respondent's 2 comments on factors hindering active learning, he added lack of lecturers. In the framework of higher education, there are very limited instructors and there is not enough employment of lecturers, and mostly the employed lecturers are out of the country for acquiring their master's degree. He claimed that the available lecturers are overloaded that even a single lecturer teaches more than four different courses. Likewise, respondent 4 asserted that the lecturers have to take responsibility for teaching more than five different subjects because of the lack of lecturers. As a result, this unquestionably obstructs active learning.

Cultural Barriers: Likewise, respondent 3 viewed his insights and believed that cultural issues are more sensitive and need serious consideration when applying active learning. Respondent 3 explained that assigning learners in groups is difficult for lecturers because there are female students in class and it is difficult for them to work closely in one group with boys. Additionally, respondent 4 indicated that every aspect should be considered. Particularly, cultural aspect because we are living in religious and cultural society and it very easily provokes sensitivities. Furthermore, respondent 5 talked about considering cultural sensitivities because some cultural issues that require more time and should be avoided for the time being. The example he provided referred to male and female students working in one group that is difficult for female students to work with their male classmates in one group and maybe it will cost them to quit higher education. Even, most families find it difficult to accept that their daughters or sister sit with male strangers.

Likewise, respondent 6 mentioned that varieties of aspects should be considered in applying active learning. With cultural aspects, they consider lecturers' attitudes towards the students and male students' attitudes towards female students. Moreover, respondent 7 reinforced the above insights and said he firmly believes that cultural issues are more serious and sometimes emerge serious conflicts. He also exemplified when it comes to the male and female students, the lecturer needs to be very careful because it might inflame sensitivities.

Discussion

This study sought to understand EFL lecturers' perceptions towards the constraints of using active learning. The results of the current study found that large classes and the number of students can be overwhelmingly the most frequent barrier towards the application of active learning. According to the respondents, a large number of students such as 50 to 60 students have made the implementation of active learning challenging for lecturers. This finding is consistent with the finding recognized

by ^[24] that the large size of EFL classrooms causes classroom management and active learning is tremendously problematic and minimizes interaction between educators and learners. Therefore, it becomes unsuccessful to enhance students' language skills. Furthermore, the data also viewed lack of technological facilities as another factor thought to be influencing active learning. The respondents of this study declared that faculties with limited technological resources do not support the implementation of active learning. Currently, utilizing technology has become a central part of the higher education system, and as an advanced instructional approach, active learning is allied with technology ^[25]. The author added that it is necessary to think through the technology being included is assisting the development of active learning, and some lecturers are integrating technology into their instructional approaches in order to improve learner involvement and to fight the lack of interaction.

Moreover, the result of this study identified another set of issues related to active learning. That is, instructors' concern about a lack of instructional time. Doing activities either inside or outside the classroom tends to be a challenge to both lecturers and students because with the lack of time, the lecturers would not be able to apply active learning efficiently. This finding is associated with that of ^[38] who perceived finding that active learning requires too much class time. As a result, it turns out to be difficult to cover the obligatory course content. However, the author claimed that none of a single challenge makes active learning impossible. From the findings, it was discovered that these two departments are understaffed and they have to accept the responsibility of teaching several subjects. This indeed affects their teaching performance. As a result, they are unable to prepare themselves properly for implementing active learning strategies. This finding is closely aligned with ^[39]'s study who found that teachers who were exposed to teach more than four subjects were overloaded. This, indeed, had negative impact on their teaching performance.

Additionally, this result clearly indicated that cultural issues are also one of the leading factors that hamper active learning. The respondents of this study believed that cultural sensitivities should be carefully taken into consideration because they can merely incite sensitivities. For example, when it comes to working in groups, the lecturer cannot let both males and females work together. As a result, active learning is not implemented. This finding verifies the findings of some other related study. For instance, a study carried out by ^[40] revealed that the conservative nature of culture, customs, and habits inhibits females in the Arab World from socializing and establishing relationships outside their immediate circles, which is a prerequisite for topping in attaining a foreign language within any communicatively learning approach to language learning. Also, ^[41] found that females in a conservative society where they may not have chances to socialize with speakers of English, but they may have classrooms as the only setting for using approaches to learn English.

Limitations and Recommendations: This was preliminary research involving interviews. Therefore, limitations must be noted in this study. First, even though the sample had diverse educational levels, this study was only limited to Kandahar University with a sample size of seven respondents and this could not be generalized to other public universities in Afghanistan. Second, there is no evidence from the EFL learners' perspective.

Based on the limitations of this study, recommendations for future studies on the same topic are listed below.

1. Further research could be conducted with a wider sample size from other public universities to generate a more fined grained understanding.
2. Further study should be carried out right from EFL learners' perspectives on challenges towards active learning.

Conclusion

The main goal of the current study was to investigate the perceptions of the lecturers to determine the factors that contribute to hindering the implementation of active learning at Kandahar University. The current study has employed a qualitative approach. This study found some key challenges resulting as barriers towards the application of active learning. In this research, the leading factor which impedes the active learning process was large classes and the number of students in the classroom. Specifically, it becomes more challenging for the lecturers to work with students in the framework of active learning where the number of students is more than 50 in the classroom. Similarly, lack of instructional time, lack of lecturers, limited access to technological facilities, and culture are other factors that obstruct the active learning process.

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