Full Length Research Paper

Teacher trainers' and trainees' perceptions, practices, and constraints to active learning methods: The case of English Department in Bahir Dar University

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This study is on teacher trainers and teacher trainees' perceptions and practices of active learning and the constraints to implementing them in the English Department of Bahir Dar University. A mixed study approach that involves a quantitative self administered questionnaire, a semi-structured lesson observation guide, and qualitative in depth interviews was used to obtain relevant data. Information on what perceptions and attitudes teacher trainers and teacher trainees' hold towards active learning, how often they use such methods, and what factors constrain teacher trainers from implementing active learning methods are obtained through the questionnaire. In-depth interview of teacher trainers and classroom lessons observation were used to extrapolate the subjects' responses from the questionnaire. The findings indicated that both teacher trainers and teacher trainees employed Active learning. Teacher trainers used pair and group work more than they use other active learning methods. Teacher trainees on the other hand used more group work, reflection and whole class discussion. No statistically significant difference was noted in the perceptions of teacher trainers and trainees towards active learning. Overall, the study results indicated that there was a shift from the traditional teacher fronted lecture to student centred active learning, which is desirable. While the study findings indicate that both teacher educators and trainee teachers have positive perceptions towards Active Learning, the particular methods they use in their classroom tended to be dictated by the peculiarities of the classroom contexts they work in. The findings point towards a need among teacher practitioners to make informed decisions in choosing active learning methods that suit the specific realities of the classroom they work in. The findings have implications to teacher trainers at the university and trainee teachers working in high schools.

Key words: Perception, practice, constraint, active, learning, teacher, trainer, trainee.

INTRODUCTION

Background

The Ethiopian educational system adopted different schemes aimed at transforming its approach to achieve quality Education. The Higher diploma programme (HDP) is one such scheme adopted to familiarize teacher trainers with more up to date pedagogic methods.

The ministry of education espoused the HDP to overhaul

the lecture method, which despite being practised for a long time has not been effective, and to familiarize teachers in universities with various student-centred methods. In Bahir Dar University, the training has been provided for the last ten years.

The training is part of efforts to bring an informed shift from teacher centred teaching to student centred learning. Different student centred methods are introduced in the program. The training familiarizes teachers with pedagogic methods that empower the learners to be active participant rather than passive recipient of teachers' input. Moreover, it licenses or certifies university teachers in the teaching speciality. Many junior and senior staff of the English department have attended the training.

The setting of this study, the English Department of BDU is one of the earliest in the university. Most staff in the English department specialized in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). The rest of the staff have specialities in linguistics, literature, multicultural education, ESP and the like. The department trains EFL language teachers at diploma and bachelor degree level, and more recently at master's and PhD level.

The problem statement

Although several measures have been taken in the Ethiopian educational system to improve the quality, progress is still limited. The higher diploma training is one of the schemes launched by the ministry of education to enhance the pedagogic skills of teachers in higher education institutions in Ethiopia. The higher diploma training has been provided to teaching staff in Bahir Dar University for the last ten years. Active learning methods is one of the student centred methods introduced in this training.

However, there is little research carried out to find out the post training experiences of the teachers who had the training, and teacher trainees who have been educated by trainers.

Consequently, it is not known what attitudes and perceptions teacher trainers and teacher trainees have towards active learning methods, whether and how frequently they employ active learning methods, and what (if any) constraints they encounter to implement them in the classroom in the post HDP training professional practices. Consequently, there is lack of empirical evidence about whether the HDP training led to actual changes in the teacher trainers' classroom practices especially with respect to using active learning methods.

In Ethiopia, there are few studies on active learning. A study by Betel (2011) investigated Practice and Perception of Bulbula school community towards the implementation of Active Learning in Bulbula high school. All English teachers of the school, the school principal, and 120 students participated in the study.

Questionnaire, interview and observation were instruments used to obtain the required data. The results showed that the active learning tasks they used were fewer in number and lack variety. Misperception of teachers towards active learning, lack of pre-service training in active learning, large student number in their classes, lack of essential resources were some of the constraints the researcher identified. Enhancing teacher's awareness of active learning methods and providing course books involving active learning tasks were among the remedies suggested.

A study by Derebssa (n.d) investigated the tension between traditional and innovative teaching learning approaches, and the implementation of innovative teaching learning approach in Ethiopian primary schools through an exploratory and descriptive approach. Questionnaire and observation were used as main data collection instruments along with review of curricular materials, classrooms. The data sources consisted of primary school teachers and students. The results indicated that traditional lecture methods in which teachers talked and students listen dominated. The study identified obstacles to implementing active learning such as the Ethiopian child upbringing tradition, institutional support, and lack of expertise of teachers, inappropriate curricular materials, and students' unfamiliarity with the approach.

Few studies explored active learning in the context of Bahir Dar University (BDU). A study by Gara and Asrat (2009) investigated the attitude of teachers towards active learning methods on 23 purposively selected teachers from English department. Results indicated that teachers have positive attitude. However, data for the study was drawn from fewer respondents (23) subjects. Secondly, data was drawn through a single method (interview alone), and it involved only the attitudes of teachers towards active learning disregarding the view of the learners. The study did not incorporate students' attitudes which overshadowed on the validity of the findings.

Understanding problems in implementing active learning requires more than measuring teachers' attitudes. Information is needed about both university teachers and their students' conceptions of what active learning is, its practices, and the constraints to implementing it in class. This study makes up for the limitations of the afore mentioned study by taking more English teacher participants, including teacher trainees as study participants, using both qualitative and quantitative data and methods, multiple data collection tools and non-purposively selected questionnaire respondents. Besides, this study collected data not only on teachers' attitudes to active learning but also about the frequency of using active learning, constraints encountered in implementing it in their actual classes.

In terms of significance, this study may lead to findings that contribute empirical evidence essential for making

decisions about enhancing English language teachers in particular and teacher education in general in Ethiopian universities.

Purpose

The aim of this study is to explore perceptions of teacher trainers and trainees towards active learning, the frequency of its use, and factors that hinder its implementation. More specifically, the objectives of this study are:

1, To determine the teacher trainers and teacher trainee's perceptions towards the active learning methods
2. To determine the active learning methods teacher trainers use and their frequency of use
3. To identify the factors that impede the implementation of active learning approach in EFL classes

The research questions

The questions which this study aims to answer include:

i. Is there a difference in perceptions towards active learning between teacher trainers and trainee teachers doing post graduate diploma (PGDT) 'English for secondary school teachers' in Bahir Dar University?
ii. How frequently do teacher trainers use particular active learning methods and how does their use compare with the use of active learning methods by teacher trainees?
iii. What constraints do teacher trainers encounter when they attempt to implement active learning in their English classes?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

What is active learning?

The aim of modern schooling is to produce an active learner who is responsible for learning the skills that sustain self-directed lifelong learning (Wang and Palincsar, 1989). Meyer and Jones (1993) note that active learning takes into account two assumptions: different people learn in different ways, learning is primarily a constructive process, and that learners should be more responsible for their own learning. In the wider literature, active learning is discussed in terms of its goals and objectives, teacher and students' roles, its attention to the different skills of speaking, writing, reading and listening the learning arrangements it requires (pair work, group work, individual work etc.) and the cognitive skill it requires on the part of the students, such as memorizing, applying etc.

Why active learning (AL)?

Scholars recommend active learning based on a number of reasons. They argue that lecture method which assumes transfer of information from the notes of the lecturer to the notes of the student without passing through the minds of either, students learn more when they are engaged through methods that involve active learning. Some researchers reported that experiments that measure learners' information retention favour Active learning (McKeachie et al., 1987). Compared to lecture, discussion method leads to dramatic students' gains (Hake, 1998), higher test scores, more positive students' attitudes (Springer et al., 1998), and better conceptual understanding (Knight and Wood, 2005).

Researchers note that students learn through talking about what they are learning, writing about it, relating it to their experiences, and applying it in their daily lives rather than sitting in class and listening to teachers and memorizing (Chickering and Gamson, 1987).

Other researchers note that Active learning empowers learners to participate (Hustler and Hodkinson, 1996), allows more engaged, meaningful and autonomous learning (Halsal and Cocket,1998), leads to the development of higher order thinking skills such as comparison, recall, definition, analysis, and Evaluation (Bonwell and Eison,1991).

Active learning (AL) methods

Mocinic (2012) identifies several ways active learning techniques could be practised in the class. These include: *pair-work* where a pair of students discuss a lesson ; *Brainstorming* which involves introducing a topic or problem and soliciting for students' input through a whole class discussion; *Games* that involve competitions and solving puzzles, *debates* which engage students in thinking about several sides of an issue; *Group work* which involves working together with others as a team; *Role plays* which integrate real-life stories and real-world situations. Active learning tasks are much appreciated for making the learning experience enjoyable by allowing presentation of the material to learn in a see, hear, do or touch fashion.

Theoretical background

The theoretical base relevant for this study is Constructivism. Constructivism renounces the principles and assumptions of the traditional teacher-centred instruction who tend to be objectivist. Objectivists view learning as a change in learners' behaviour, as change in learner's cognitive structure, view reality as one, and knowledge as a reflection of reality (Vrasidas, 2000).

Figure 1. A model that specifies learning activities that do and do not involve active learning.

Objectivists uphold the view that effective instruction involves transferring knowledge from teacher to learner, and that learners learn from passive listenership rather than from active involvement.

Constructivists on the other hand (Adams and Burns, 1999) believe that learning occurs when students are engaged in activities that help them utilize the content and skill they are learning and knowledge is constructed when students combine new information with existing through the process of reflection. Figure 1 shows an adaptation of Dale (1969) cone of learning presents a model that specifies learning activities that do and do not involve active learning.

Boyle (2000) outlines principles relevant to active learning such as authentic tasks, attention to interaction, and negotiation of meaning. Learners construct knowledge through negotiation and discussions as this allows them have voice and ownership in the learning process. The teacher is expected to play the role of consultant for students rather than a task master. This requires a shift in the role of the teacher from teaching to facilitating learning since such shift enable students to feel trusted, respected and their voice attended. Constructivism also emphasizes the art of learning how to learn also called *meta-cognition* which *involves* reflecting on one's own thinking as a way of enhancing learning.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study adopted a mixed study founded on an interpretive paradigm. Interpretive paradigm promotes the value of qualitative data in pursuit of knowledge (Maxwell, 1994). It involves qualitative research aiming to describe, decode, and interpret meaning of phenomena occurring in social contexts. The study used qualitative interviews and a structured questionnaire survey as a main means of collecting data. Questionnaire is administered to the teacher trainers (n=35) in the English department of the faculty of humanities at BDU and one section of teacher trainees attending post graduate diploma training(PGDT). The same questionnaire which was administered to teacher trainers to elicit their perceptions towards active learning and the frequency of use in class has also been administered to the teacher trainees. Three data collection instruments, i.e., two questionnaires, a semi-structured interview to teacher trainers and classroom observation of teacher trainers have been conducted. The questionnaires are used to get quantitative data from teacher trainers and trainee teachers about their understanding of active learning and their actual practices. Qualitative interviews were used to get additional information about teacher trainers and teacher trainees' views concerning active learning and their practices in the classroom. Researchers (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) note that qualitative methods give complex details of phenomena that may not be obtained through quantitative methods. Moreover, qualitative responses help interpret the participants adaptations and practices of the active learning. Interpretivists (Kelliher, 2005) believe that reality is not objectively determined but socially constructed. In short, in this study, the researcher tries to capture the respondents understanding of active learning as reported by the trainee teachers, the English teachers by eliciting their notions and views through in-depth interview, focus group discussion conducted with instructors, students, as well as researchers' observation of actual classroom teaching by the English teacher.

The study participants

Population and Study Sample: This study has two sets of participants: the teacher trainers, English department instructors. Trainee teachers who teach in different Ethiopian high schools and are attending their post graduate diploma training (PGDT). The trainees are from

Table 1. Demographics of teacher trainers.

Sex	N	%	Age	N	%	Academic title	N	%	Specialization	N	%	Teaching experience	N	%
Male	28	87.5	20-30	4	12.5	Assistant Lecturer	1	3.1	TEFL	23	71.9	1to 5	6	18.8
Female	4	12.5	31-40	15	46.9	lecturer	20	62.5	Linguistics	2	6.3	6 to10	11	34.4
			41-50	11	34.4	PhD	14	34.4	Literature	5	15.6	11to 15	6	18.8
			51-60	1	3.1				Other	2	6.3	16 to20	4	12.5
			Above 60	1	3.1							More than 20	5	15.6
Total	**32**	**100**		**32**	**100**		**32**	**100**		**32**	**100**		**32**	**100**

both sexes and have varying years experience in teaching. The number of teaching staff members in English department is small; consequently all of them are taken as participant. Some staff that were on study leave could not be reached. The rest of the actively working staff, 32 teacher trainers, responded to the questionnaire on the teacher trainees' side; all English major students who were taking *English for high school teachers* course filled in the questionnaire.

Tools of Data Collection: The tools used to collect data in this study include: Questionnaire, in depth interview, and observation of lessons conducted by teacher trainers in the Department of English. The questionnaire which is a structured type has been used to elicit participant's views about teacher trainers and trainee teacher perceptions concerning active learning, particular methods used, their frequency of use, and the constraints to implementing them. A structured observation guide has been used to tick out active learning methods used by fellow teacher trainers. The researcher observed a total of six different lessons. Of these two are conducted by female teacher trainers.

As part of validity check, the questionnaire was pre-tested and some of the items modified to incorporate measurement expert views. The researcher himself nominated teacher trainers for in depth interview purposively with a view to achieve representativeness in terms of years of experience, gender, and field of speciality (Table 1). Drawing from Denzin's (1978) and Freeman's (2001) insights about data triangulation, the researcher collected data from two different sorts of participants, teacher trainers and teacher trainees. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and inferential statistics like t-test have been used to analyze the data. The qualitative data obtained from the interview and observation has been instrumental in supporting and extrapolating the main inferences from

the questionnaire data, and these are reported as thematically sorted and organized narratives. T-test has been used to check if significant difference is noted between the perceptions of teacher trainers and trainees towards active learning methods.

Data presentation and analysis

The teacher trainers consist of 87.5% male and 12.5% female respondents. About 46.9% of the teacher trainers are in middle age range of 31-40 years. 46.9% have specialized in TEFL. The majority, i.e. 71.9% of the res-pondents have an academic title of lecturer and 62.5% have a teaching experience of 6 to 10 years (34.4%).

With regard to the trainee teachers, 71.7% of the teacher trainers are males, while 26.1% are females (Table 2). The largest number of teacher-trainees (82.2%) is in the age group of 31-40 years. Only 22.7% of the trainees have teaching experience. Table 3 presents a summary of the perceptions of teacher trainers and teacher trainees towards active learning methods. Independent samples t-test is made to find out if there is statistically significant difference between the mean of teacher trainers and teacher trainees. Table 4 summa-rizes the result of independent samples t-test computed using Excel.

As could be seen from the table, the teacher trainers and teacher trainees tended to have similar perception towards active learning methods. An equal mean and very similar variance is noted between the two groups. The results also showed that teacher trainers and teacher trainees have similar variance in the mean.

The raw scores do not indicate if the difference between the two groups is statistically significant or not. Using independent samples t-test, the t-observed is found to be -0.2. With a degree of freedom of 46, and significance level of 0.05, the value of t-calculated or t-stat is 0.2 while the t-critical is 2. Accordingly, the value of t-observed which is 0.2 is less than the t-critical, 2.0.

Table 2. Demographics of teacher trainees.

Sex	N	%	Age	N	%	Teaching experience (in years)	N	%
Male	33	71.7	20-30	0	0	none	33	73.3
Female	12	26.1	31-40	37	82.2	1-5 years	7	15.6
			41-50	6	13.3	6-10 years	2	4.4
			51-60	1	2.2	11-20		
			Above 60	1	2.2			
						More than 20 years	1	2.2
Total	45	100	**Total**	45	100	**Total**	45	100

Table 3. Teacher trainers and teacher trainees perceptions towards active learning methods.

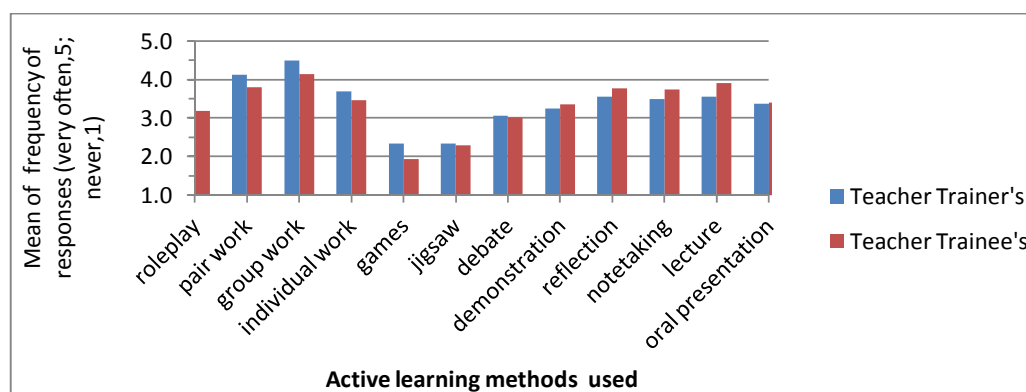| Active learning(methods)	Teacher Trainers		Trainee Teachers	
	Mean	Std. Devia.	Mean	Std. Devia.
are meaningful	4.7	.5	4.5	1.0
are communicative	4.7	.5	4.7	0.6
are practical	4.5	.7	4.9	3.0
are participatory	4.5	.6	4.8	0.4
are liked among students	3.8	.9	3.9	1.0
are effective	4.0	.8	3.8	1.1
are enjoyable	4.1	.8	4.1	1.0
are goal oriented	4.3	.6	4.3	1.0
are easy to implement	3.0	1.2	3.6	1.2
are liked by teachers	3.5	1.0	3.8	1.1
accommodate learners of differing ability	4.1	.8	4.1	1.1
keep learners lively	4.3	.8	3.8	1.1
are flexible	4.2	.8	4.8	2.7
emphasize learning process more than learning outcome	3.6	1.2	3.2	1.6
emphasize student's role for their own learning	4.3	.7	4.2	0.9
engage students in higher order thinking like analysis and synthesis	4.2	.8	4.4	0.8
do not accommodate learner diversity	2.1	1.0	1.8	1.2
can be implemented in large classes	3.6	1.1	2.2	1.1
enhance student performance	4.2	.6	4.5	0.7
enhance students retention of what they learn	4.0	.7	4.0	1.1
the learner is just a facilitator than a doer	2.1	1.2	2.8	1.6
introduce variety to learning experience	4.2	.9	4.5	0.6
make evaluation difficult	2.4	1.0	2.3	1.4
promote surface rather than deep learning	1.8	.9	2.2	1.3
Valid N (list wise) Trainers (32) Trainees(44)				
(Minimum response value, 1 ; Maximum, 5)				

Thus, since t-calculated is less than t-critical, there is no significant difference between teacher trainers and teacher trainees in their perception towards active learning. In other words, we cannot reject the null hypothesis that there is no difference between the two groups in terms of teacher trainers and trainees. The t-test indicates that teacher trainees perception towards active learning methods is very similar to that of the teacher

Table 4. Two sample t- test.

	Teacher trainers mean	Teacher trainees mean
Mean	3.8	3.8
Variance	0.7	0.8
Observations	24.0	24.0
Pooled Variance	0.8	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0.0	
df	46.0	
t Stat	-0.2	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.4	
t Critical one-tail	1.7	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.9	
t Critical two-tail	2.0	

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Equal Variances.

Figure 2. Teacher trainers vs teacher trainees rating of their frequency of use of active learning methods.
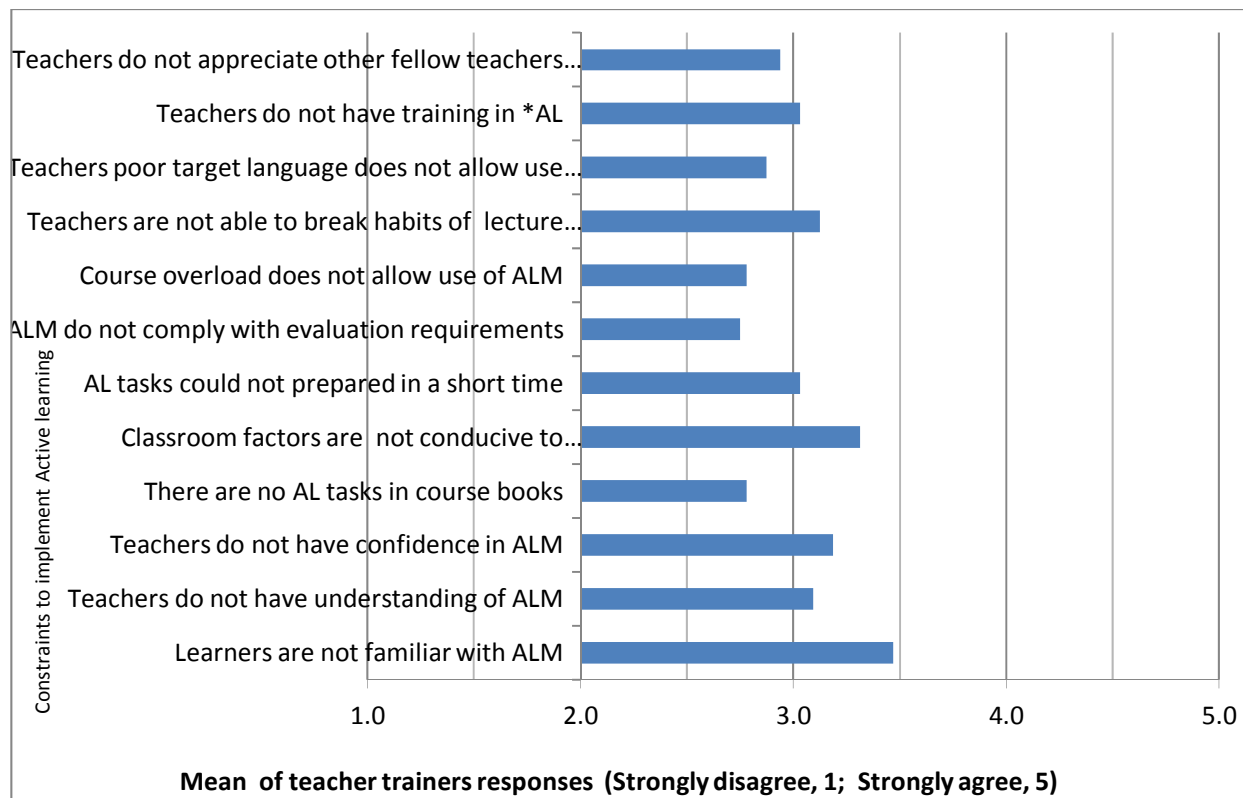
trainers.

Figure 2 sketched based on the mean frequency of responses shows that group work, pair work, and individual work are the active learning methods teacher trainers use from most to least frequency. For the teacher trainees, the three most frequently used active learning methods in a descending order include group work, lecture, and reflection. Researcher's observations of lessons conducted by teacher trainers confirm finding from the questionnaire that showed pair and group work as most frequently used methods. However, observation showed whole class discussion as a method teacher trainer's use widely.

The difference in perception between trainers and trainees may be linked with the number of students in a class (class size). In the Ethiopian situation, the average student number in the high schools is greater than the average student number in a class that teacher trainers teach at the university. The smaller number of the students allows the teacher trainers to use pair work, group work, and individual work more easily, while train-

ees teaching in high schools used group work, lecture, and reflection possibly because these are more practical options for a crowded and larger class size. Language, games, jigsaw and debate are the least frequently used active learning techniques both for the teacher trainers and teacher trainees. The rest of the active learning techniques lie somewhere between the most and least frequently used. Overall, the responses indicate that both teacher trainers and trainee teachers make use of active learning methods, the extent of their usage differing according to the actual context of teaching, for instance, number of students in the class.

Figure 3 shows that many of the potential constraints drawn from the wider literature and incorporated in the questionnaire constrain teacher trainers from implementing active learning. In a descending order, the factors that impede teacher trainers from using active learning include learner's unfamiliarity to the approach, lack of a conducive classroom environment (class size or number of students in a class, fixed chairs and crowded classroom space, etc.) and inability to break from the

Figure 3. Teacher trainers' responses with regard to potential constraints to active learning.

lecture method. Course overload and evaluation require-ments are among the least encountered constraints. In depth interviews indicated that time constraints are among the most salient. In this connection, a senior staff said, "even if I want to use pair work, group work, role play, I am very worried about covering the expected syllabus in time. I skip some activities in order to cover the expected course content." Thus, both teacher trainers and teacher trainees encounter constraints to implemen-ting active learning methods.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study sought to understand teacher trainers' and teacher trainees' perceptions towards active learning, the extent of active learning use in the classroom, and the constraints to using it. The findings indicated that both teacher trainers and trainees have positive attitude towards active learning methods. The responses show that the trainers have slightly more favourable attitudes than do the teacher trainees. Trainee teachers used more lecture, reflection and note taking than did the teacher trainers. Since high schools where trainees teach have large student number, using lecture, note taking, and reflection may be more convenient to the high school

teachers than using pair work and group work. In addition, although not more than teacher trainers, teacher trainees use individual work to a higher extent. Debate is used to a lower extent in both cases.

The findings from this study differ from that of Betel (2011). Betel found that English teachers at high school did not use active learning methods. In this study, both teacher trainers at university and trainees who teach in high schools use active learning methods. However, the methods that trainee teachers who teach in high schools use differ from that in university.

The findings from this study differ from the findings of a study by Derbessa (n.d) who found lecture method to be a dominant educational method. In addition, the findings from this study differ from the previous studies in that it helped to see the implementation of active learning methods by teacher trainers and trainee teachers, comparatively.

The unfamiliarity of learners with Active learning methods and their own fossilized lecture habits constrain their use of Active learning considerably. For the teacher trainers, course overload and evaluation requirements are rated the least constraints to implementing active learning. For trainers, however, these were important constraints. In this regard, a teacher trainer whom the researcher interviewed said, "I am sometimes forced to

overlook some tasks if I think it has little link or relevance for the expected assessments and tests, and would take much of the time and energy I badly need to cover course load I handled". In general, in a response scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicates strongly disagree and 5 represents strongly agree, the level of agreement to which teacher trainers encounter constraints to implementing active learning to be above the expected mean response of 2.5. This indicates that most teacher trainers accept the constraints to using active learning methods listed in the questionnaire as actual obstacles to using Active learning methods.

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study on teacher trainer and teacher trainee perceptions, practices and perceived obstacles to implementing active learning helped to tap in the issues underlying current attitude towards and the state of use of active learning methods. Both teacher trainers and teacher trainees' responses from the questionnaire revealed that the majority of respondents have positive perceptions towards active learning methods. Interview with respondents gave results that support the questionnaire. The study findings revealed that teachers' own pedagogic perceptions and the particular curriculum in place influence their practice. Learners interpret tasks in ways that are meaningful and personal to them. Their interpretation of tasks is influenced by their beliefs about language learning, the perceptions they have towards the teaching methods, the learning environment, and tasks that mediate the pedagogic interaction between them.

One of the findings from observation is that teachers' corrective practices somehow interfere with students practices of speaking. The researcher observed that during question and answer exchanges, teachers interrupt students in mid speech in order to give them correction. The researcher also observed that most of teachers used oral questions, and methods like asking learners to give reflections about previous lessons, note taking etc. that involve students in copying short notes and summaries of the lesson's major points. The teacher trainers used lecture occasionally, when dealing with sections of the lessons that require discussing specific grammar points.

The researcher observed lessons offered by English teachers. The observation revealed that they use whole class discussions frequently. Their response showed that teachers use one method over and over rather than varied active learning approaches. Teachers' responses concerning constraints to implementing active learning methods showed that lack of interest from teachers and students, large class size, lack of appropriate learning tasks and essential material resources impede the implementation of active learning.

The researcher thinks that information about teacher trainer and teacher trainees' perceptions toward active learning methods designers can be a useful input for curriculum as well as university and English textbook writers. It enables them design English language learning tasks better suited to meeting learner needs. Future studies that involve a larger sample from a cross section of departments would lead to more generalizable findings. The findings from this study are not intended to be generalized. Yet, they have implications to teacher trainers and trainees that participated in the study.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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