

An Exploratory Study of Learners' Perceptions About the Effectiveness of Active Learning Approaches

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Abstract—This study reports on the results of a mixed-methods study conducted at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman, which aimed at exploring students' overall perspectives and their perceptions of the benefits and challenges involved in active learning approaches, namely flipped instruction, problem-based learning, Socratic questioning and critical thinking, and reflective writing, employed in an English language and skills course. Results revealed that overall students valued the active learning strategies adopted in the course. More specifically, developing learners' language, academic, and 21st century skills (analysis, critical thinking and evaluation, problem solving, and synthesis), fostering learners' autonomy and metacognitive skills, and enhancing learners' motivation and engagement in the learning process were considered the main benefits of these active learning strategies. The study also indicated that novelty of active learning strategies to learners, the heavy workload, learners' inadequate academic skills, poor collaboration and communication skills in team-based tasks, and limited linguistic and technological abilities constituted the major challenges associated with these strategies. The study contributes to the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) knowledge base and has implications for the teaching and learning of EFL in the context of Oman and similar educational settings.

Index Terms—active learning, flipped learning, problem-based learning, reflective writing, critical thinking

I. INTRODUCTION

Active learning (AL), which is conceptualized as a teaching-learning approach through which learners take part in the learning process by constructing understanding and knowledge (Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2020), has recently gained momentum in educational settings worldwide. Unlike traditional teaching-learning approaches centered on knowledge transmission, AL focuses on facilitating student learning and it is participatory in nature (Kane, 2004), as under this approach, learners are not viewed as passive recipients of the teacher's knowledge but rather as active participants in the learning process (Ertmer & Newby, 2013), and the teacher is a guide and facilitator (Oros, 2007).

AL approaches are grounded in constructivist and social constructivist learning theories (Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2020). Constructivists perceive learning as a socially situated and context-specific process of meaning creation (Leondari, 2007; Stevenson & Clegg, 2011) which is sculpted through "dialogue, collaborative learning and cooperative learning" (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 292). Simultaneously, constructivists emphasize the learner's agency in this process where knowledge is constructed in the learner's mind while interacting with the environment (Perkins, 2006; Smith, 2009) and memory evolves constantly as new learning contexts are introduced (Ertmer & Newby, 2013). Constructivist principles have several implications for the design of AL activities since the learning environment is vital for learning to take place.

Researchers argue that the implementation of AL strategies in any study subject brings about several personal and academic gains. Academically, Nelson and Crow (2014) believe that AL strategies enhance the learners' higher-order thinking abilities including analysis, evaluation, and synthesis, which are considered essential 21st century skills (Al-Busaidi & Tuzlukova, 2021; Neisler et al., 2016). In addition to enhancing learners' comprehension and knowledge retention, development of life-long learning skills is also considered a major benefit of AL (Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2020). This is achieved through learner autonomy which is facilitated by the increased engagement and control over one's own learning. The utilization of higher-order thinking skills and development of life-long learning capacities positively influence learners' overall academic performance. AL also helps learners develop their oral and written communication and research skills (Oros, 2007) and improves their examination performance (Freeman et al., 2014).

Flipped learning (FL), problem-based learning (PBL), Socratic questioning (SQ) and critical thinking (CT), and reflective writing (RW) are instances of AL strategies that can positively influence students' overall learning experience. FL is used to refer to a blended learning environment where digital technologies are systematically integrated to support

traditional face-to-face instruction and the order of traditional classroom activities is reversed (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Gasmi, 2018). Along with the flexible and individualized learning experience it provides to students (Akçayır & Akçayır, 2018; Kвашnina & Martynko, 2016), this classroom design frees up class time for interactive and communicative learner-centered activities that engage learners in the learning process and enhance their higher-order thinking skills (Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2020), which ultimately enhances the learners' academic performance (Webb & Doman, 2016).

PBL has roots in constructivism and social learning theories that emphasize the role of social interaction and construction of meaningful learning experiences in cognitive development. Yew and Goh (2016) state that PBL enables learners to engage actively in meaningful problems to collaboratively problem-solve and develop self-direction. PBL supports the development of 21st century skills such as innovation, technology, and life and career skills (Berkson, 1993; Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Other researchers argue that PBL enhances critical thinking and communication skills along with cooperative learning and information synthesis (Al-Busaidi et al., 2021; Tuzlukova & Singh, 2018), and increases student motivation (Michel et al., 2002).

Paul and Elder (2007) describe SQ and CT as a disciplined, systematic, and deep questioning used to pursue thought for various purposes such as analyzing concepts, exploring complex ideas, and uncovering assumptions. They believe that students learn this type of questioning to critically understand and assess their own thinking and that of others and its implications, and to reason complex issues. With the development of questioning minds, deep learning can be cultivated as both SQ and CT share a common end which is pursuing meaning and truth.

Reflection is generally defined as a "process or means by which an experience, in the form of thought, feeling, or action, is brought into consideration while it is happening or subsequently" (Brockbank & McGill, 1998, p. 56). More specifically, this study conceives of reflection as "the deliberate and purposeful act of thinking which centers on ways of responding to problem situations" (Khemlani & Kochappan, 2006, p. 1). Engaging learners in RW practice boosts their thinking abilities (Beed et al., 2005) and their writing skills, specifically content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and writing mechanics (Sani et al., 2017).

In the Omani educational context, AL is still in its infancy as a learning-teaching approach, and consequently, research investigating the possible applications and implications of AL strategies for various study fields in higher education institutions including English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is relatively scarce. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap and to explore students' viewpoints about the implementation of AL strategies, specifically FL, PBL, CT, and RW in the teaching of an English Language and Skills course at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. The study also seeks to examine the benefits and challenges the students associate with the afore-mentioned AL techniques.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The study participants were recruited using purposive sampling, a technique that is widely used in EFL research. Purposive sampling is considered an effective means of obtaining rich data that helps address the study's research questions (Gray, 2014). Consequently, only prospective Master's students who have taken the English Language and Skills course were approached. An invitation letter explaining the research purpose and assuring the confidentiality of the collected data was sent to all potential participants (n = 116). Forty-four students (38%) agreed to take part in the study.

B. Research Design

The study collected both quantitative and qualitative data in a mixed-methods approach to achieve breadth and depth of understanding and corroborate the results (Johnson et al., 2007). This particular design helps to obtain substantial data that result in well-validated findings (Creswell, 2009). The study adopted a concurrent triangulation design where quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, and the findings were mixed in the interpretation stage. The sources of data were a questionnaire, students' reflections, and focus group interviews.

First, the study utilized a self-report questionnaire to collect data about the participants' overall impressions about the course and the perceived gains related to the afore-mentioned AL strategies. The questionnaire consisted of six main sections with eight questions each. While the first section aimed to collect data about the students' views about the course in general, the next four sections aimed to gather data about students' perceptions of the learning gains associated with the four AL strategies. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree' was used to measure the questionnaire items in the first five main sections. The last section of the questionnaire comprised of demographic questions about gender, age, nationality, study mode, study field, employment status, social obligations, and English language proficiency. Along with the self-report questionnaire, students' written reflections were used to collect data about the course, the perceived benefits, and the challenges of using FL, CT, and PBL as major learning strategies. The reflections were written at two different stages in the semester, specifically in the middle (Week 8) and in the end of the academic semester (Week 15). In order to obtain a comprehensive overview of students' opinions and an in-depth understanding of their perspectives and the reasons behind them, the study utilized focus group interviews where the questions focused on the benefits, challenges, and preferred AL strategies.

III. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The first question the study posed related to students' overall impressions about the English Language and Skills course. Results from the quantitative data analysis showed that the mean score of items in the subscale ranged from 4.00 (SD=1.03) to 4.36 (SD=.94). See Appendix A for all descriptive statistics. Analysis of the item mean scores and standard deviations indicated that students perceived the course positively and reported CT writing as the most useful AL strategy the course employed (M=4.36, SD=.94). FL and PBL were reported as the next two AL strategies that influenced students' learning positively (M=4.32, SD=.77; M=4.32, SD=.83). The qualitative data analysis of the participants' interview responses and student reflections indicated similar results, as all the participants valued their course learning experience. They described the course as "good", "useful", "helpful", and "beneficial" and considered it a great "learning opportunity". In the reflections, students described it as a "valuable", "exciting", and "interesting" course. Some of the interviewees viewed it as "different" from any other courses they took at the undergraduate level and considered it "the most enjoyable course" they have ever taken (NRF159). Some of the interviewees also perceived it as an extremely useful course for students who have been away from college for a long time and described it as a "bridge" and a "refreshment station" (AHF7) that equips them with the language and skills required to pursue their Master's studies. The students' reflections emphasized several skills the course helped them develop including "confidence", "self-reliance", and "independence" among others that will be discussed in the next sections in relation to each AL strategy the study focuses on. When asked about their most preferred AL strategy, and although some students preferred certain strategies to others, the majority reported that each technique was valuable and equally important for their learning. One interviewee emphasized this saying, "I believe every component had its advantage...I believe that every component helped us in something. They were all great and useful for me" (NBF2).

The second question this study addressed related to the perceived benefits and challenges associated with the AL strategies, specifically FL, PBL, CT, and RW. As far as FL is concerned, the quantitative data analysis showed that the mean score of the items in the subscale were between 4.07 (SD=.93) and 4.25 (SD=.84). Data analysis revealed that development of analysis and evaluation skills was considered the most important benefit students gained from the FL approach (M=4.25, SD=.84), while enhancement of students' study skills and communication skills were respectively reported as the second and third most important benefits (M=4.23, SD=.86; M=4.20, SD=.93). In contrast, helping students to plan and manage their time effectively was not perceived as a primary benefit of FL (M=4.07, SD=.93). The qualitative data analysis showed comparable results. The qualitative data analysis showed that many participants viewed FL as a novel approach that "was different from other courses [taken] before at the Bachelor's degree level", as stated by one interviewee (AHF7). In the reflection, a student compared flipping to traditional approaches saying, "During my experience in the past years, my college was following the traditional way of teaching. They gave students hand-outs only, and the student attended the class without any preparation" (ZMF3).

One of the perceived benefits is the opportunity FL provided to prepare prior to class by reviewing the various printed and audio/video resources available on the Moodle LMS. According to many interviewees, pre-class preparation enabled them to have a good understanding of the topic (SYF2) by analyzing and evaluating the presented material and searching for additional information (MSM4), and enhanced their active engagement in class discussions (NBF2).

FL enabled the utilization of other AL techniques like questioning, discussion and peer instruction through which learners were engaged in the learning process. The students reported that engagement in class discussions involved asking and answering questions, explaining ideas and communicating with each other and with the instructor. One interviewee stated, "Everyone had a chance to present what they understood" (NBF2), which led some students to feel that class was "more attractive and interesting" (ZMF3).

Second, although the questionnaire respondents did not report developing an ability to learn independently as a major benefit of FL, many students highlighted it as an immediate benefit in the interviews and reflections alike. One of the interview participants emphasized that FL "did develop a sense of self-learning, which is so important, especially when you are a postgraduate student" (MMM5). Another interviewee added, "It was a good idea to use with Master's students... You should not wait for the instructor to teach you" (AHF7). Another student further explained writing, "I think it is an excellent way for postgraduate students to teach them how to be self-reliant by researching and investigating new terms found in the course" (SYF2).

Alternatively, the analysis showed that FL involved several challenges. Most of the participants reported time constraints as a major hindrance. They stressed that pre-class preparation was not always possible due to family and work commitments, which negatively influenced their class engagement. One student explained the effect of coming to class unprepared saying, "When I attended the first class, I did not read the text and I felt difficulties understanding and collaborating with my teacher" (ZMF3). While this approach constituted a challenge for students taking many courses concurrently, others found the requirements manageable and clarified in the reflection that they got familiar with this learning approach as time passed (SYF2).

Another challenge students reported in the interviews and reflections related to technology limitations. For example, a student complained that the LMS was not user-friendly and accessing the learning materials was difficult, which had a negative impact on their involvement (AMM5). Furthermore, one interviewee emphasized that having a good bandwidth and regular access to the Internet is essential if FL is to be adopted in any course. She said, "The flipped approach is bad for me when Internet accessibility fluctuates. A flipped classroom requires Internet access outside of

the classroom. The Internet is not always easily accessible for me” (ZMF3). Limited access to the Internet might negatively affect students’ engagement with the learning materials and with class discussions.

The PBL component also had benefits and challenges. The quantitative data analysis indicated that the mean item scores of the PBL subscale ranged from 4.32 (SD=.80) to 3.91 (SD=.80). These results show that whereas the questionnaire respondents perceived development of critical thinking skills as a primary PBL benefit, life skills development (e.g., flexibility) was considered the least important benefit. Developing communication and problem-solving skills and enhancing research and study skills were reported as the second and third most important benefits respectively (M=4.27, SD=.79; M=4.23, SD=.83; M=4.23, SD=.71). Findings from the qualitative data analysis were comparable. The study participants considered PBL a beneficial course component as it provided an opportunity to develop a number of key 21st century skills. For instance, one interviewee explained that the PBL tasks helped them develop “communication skills, solving problems skills, [and] the ability to think in a critical way” (AKF1). Another interviewee stressed that “It helped learn to make presentations, communication, give information and discuss it, also help us give the presentation in a creative way” (AKF1). In the reflection, a student (SSF107) wrote, “... One of the positive things that happened during cooperation was brainstorming and thinking from multiple perspectives and allowing each person to speak and be heard”.

Developing teamwork skills was also reported as another gain from PBL. One participant reported, “It developed our teamwork, how to share our ideas, how to contact with each other...and at the end how to manage everyone, what she should do” (NBF2). Actually, many participants believed that differences of team members’ backgrounds helped develop their communication and collaboration skills. For example, KAM108 explained, “An additional skill that I found helpful was communication with team members and learning from them and their ideas... Studying PBL was interesting and fun and working in a team had implications for everyone”. Many interviewees also claimed that this component enabled them to engage in collaboration, relationship, creativity, project management, task management, and team members’ management by following their progress and empowering them (AHF7). This was facilitated by some members’ qualities as described in the reflections such as “intelligence, helpfulness, collaboration, and respect” (ZHF110).

Moreover, many participants reported developing time-management, life and coping skills, multitasking, and prioritizing tasks to juggle through life and academic hoops as benefits of PBL. In the reflections, one student emphasized that hard work, respect, and readiness to work on any task and handing it in time despite other commitments were the reasons for their success as a team (ZAM106). One interviewee (MSM4) also stressed the importance of time management and prioritization with “positive thinking” and “positive attitude”.

For some participants, enhancing leadership skills constituted another gain. For instance, one interviewee stated that the PBL component enabled them to engage in “leadership, flexibility when discussing specific conditions, supervisions, monitoring and follow-up of the project progress” (AMM5). ZHF110 clarified that through PBL they learned how to take on a leadership role, take ownership of their contribution, work as a key team player, and distribute roles equally to ensure the team’s success.

Alternatively, the study revealed four main challenges related to PBL. First, most of the interviewees believed the workload was the major challenge “because it was group work” (NBF2). The reflections stressed the idea that life and work responsibilities were a challenge for some team members (TMF103). Lack of time-management skills during the COVID-19 pandemic when learning was online could also be a reason for this challenge, as one student stated in the reflection that “time management was poor... [and it] was a bit difficult for us to work in a group for research” (ZAM106).

The second challenge reported by the majority of the participants was lack of leadership and disputes among team members due to the unequal distribution of roles and differences in opinions. In the reflection, a student explained, “We did not correctly distribute roles among the members at the start of work, and we did not designate a leader to manage the members, which caused the work to progress in the opposite direction” (SSF107). Similarly, one interviewee reported, “lack of commitment from the other participants in the group; this is because of lack of leadership... It could result to adverse outcomes...” (AMM5).

The third challenge related to the team members’ individual differences such as “language level”, “learning speed” and other “individual differences in terms of habits, commitments, and delivery of results” (KAM108). This was heightened by some members’ rigidity in accepting others’ viewpoints, as one interviewee reported, “There was a member who imposed her opinion, did not accept any other opinion, and did not cooperate with us” (MGF109). In the reflection, a student described a member who “obstructed the flow of work” (SSF107), which had a negative effect on the output.

Lack of topic familiarity among some team members coming from diverse academic backgrounds was reported as the fourth PBL challenge. One interviewee clarified, “Team members weren’t in the same college; one from medicine, another from agriculture...so different ideas different perspectives... To choose a topic out of our interest so all of us should work ... It was a challenge” (MSM4).

The current study also highlighted several learning gains and challenges linked to the CT course component. The quantitative data analysis revealed that the mean item scores in the CT subscale were between 4.23 (SD=.80) and 3.95 (SD=.75) indicating that the participants considered writing skills’ improvement the most important benefit of the CT

writing. The enhancement of reading skills was reported as the second most important benefit ($M=4.20$, $SD=.82$), while the third reported benefit was students' active engagement in course content ($M=4.09$, $SD=.80$). Alternatively, helping students to question perspectives was not perceived as a primary benefit of CT ($M=3.95$, $SD=.75$).

The reflections and interviews' analysis showed slightly different results as most of the participants emphasized the enhancement of reasoning skills, particularly the development of deep thinking, analysis and evaluation skills, and the ability to question ideas and perspectives as the major benefits of CT writing. In the reflections, one participant wrote, "The CT questions have strengths like determine the importance and relevance of arguments and ideas; identify inconsistencies and errors in reasoning, and approach problems in a consistent and systematic way" (ZHF46). Likewise, one interviewee described how the CT component helped them develop the ability to "analyze; thinking on the topic critically; ability to identify the argument..." (AMM5). Another interviewee reported that CT "makes us think clearly, systematically, also learn how to express ideas...and we can criticize systematically, so it's useful" (AKF1). Another student wrote, "Critical thinking is not just learning, but an experience for life.... I can say that CT improves my skills to accept the fact that I am not always right. Most of us do not accept this fact, which holds us back from thinking critically" (OKM37).

Another benefit the study participants highlighted was developing autonomous thinking and self-confidence. One student wrote, "By answering critical thinking questions, I gained independence in my thinking...I trusted myself when I write about critical thinking questions" (YHF44). This was achieved by reading more on the given topics and thinking deeply about the CT questions, as one student explained in the reflection, "This course has improved my experience of writing responses to critical thinking questions by encouraging me to read more about the topics, so I gather enough information before starting to solve the questions" (RSF39).

Many participants also reported that the CT component helped them develop their reading and writing skills. This was explained in the reflection, "One of the positive aspects of this experience was that I learnt a new skill...it helped me to improve my skills in writing and reading" (SSF40). Similarly, one interviewee (MSM4) clarified that engaging with the CT task improved their writing skills based on the input ideas in the reading articles.

Many students equally valued transferability of the developed CT skills to other academic, workplace, and personal situations. One reflection shed light on this, "One of the good things that went well during this experience that I learned a new skill that will help me in my Master's studies which require such activities to read large articles" (ZHF46). Likewise, one interviewee stated, "CT is essential for the workplace setting...in analyzing contractual proposals received at the workplace...It did provide me with a proper strategy on how to reflect on the argument... frame up a strategy that will help both parties" (AMM5).

Along with the benefits, the study identified three major challenges associated with CT writing. The first challenge relates to task complexity and the required linguistic proficiency to complete it successfully, especially given the novelty of this type of task for students. One interviewee complained, "It's complex and requires a lot of practice and my challenge is the language, it must be a high level to be able to criticize and to convince and do thinking in a critical way" (AKF1). Others added, "... the problem is how to write the ideas, how to get the ideas" (AKF1) and "it was challenging how to write it because... it was for us for the first time" (NBF2).

Similarly, many students stressed the unfamiliar topics as another challenge, as some were considered irrelevant to students' specialization fields and consequently were difficult to comprehend. One interviewee explained that CT requires "perfect understanding of the topic itself. Some of the topics were not related to my field, which was a challenge for me to understand especially the new terminology" (AMM5). The reflections also emphasized this challenge, as one student wrote, "I faced some problems.... One [is understanding] topics that are far from my scientific specialization. I can consider it as one of the weaknesses. Therefore, I had to read the article more than 3 times to know the general idea" (ZHF46).

The last challenge linked with CT writing is time management. One student wrote, "One of the challenges we faced was that solving questions required me to read a lot about the topics, and this meant that we needed to spend time on this course, sometimes more than other courses I have had this semester" (RSF39). ZBM45 also clarified in the reflection that doing CT tasks required "a lot of time to understand and to read" to be able to write.

Compared to FL and the other AL strategies the study focuses on, the quantitative data analysis revealed that RW was reported as the least beneficial strategy ($M=4.16$, $SD=.78$). The most important perceived benefits of RW were the improvement of students' writing skills ($M=4.36$, $SD=.81$) and the development of critical thinking skills ($M=4.14$, $SD=.91$). The study participants reported less impact on their capacity to apply reflective skills in their current studies, to express their opinions and feelings, and to address their learning weaknesses ($M=3.89$, $SD=.84$; $M=3.93$, $SD=.82$; $M=3.98$, $SD=.88$). The qualitative data analysis; however, showed slightly different results as most of the interviewed students highlighted the ability to identify weaknesses and to overcome them through deep thinking about past actions and events, analyzing and evaluating them, and drawing conclusions accordingly as the major benefits of RW. One interviewee described this saying, "Several skills were developed; for example, the ability to identify problems, ability to analyze the problem and evaluate it critically, and you synthesize after the evaluation step, and then write conclusions based on your analysis" (AMM5). Another interviewee considered it the most challenging but most rewarding course component since it taught them how to "think critically about past experiences and actions" (NBF2). This benefit was equally emphasized in the reflections. For instance, one student wrote, "I am taught how to think about past

circumstances and processes to understand them and do good plan for the future” (KBF145). Another student stated “it strengthens my [ability] to reflect on my past situations or experiences, then how to react in a better way if such a situation arises again in the future” (GGM137). In fact, few students stressed the value of these skills beyond their academic life, as one student wrote, “Sometimes in our life, we have to think critically about our actions, to analyze them and learn lessons from our mistakes” (MNM153).

Like the quantitative data analysis, the qualitative analysis indicated that the development of writing skills was one of the positive impacts of RW. These skills include the ability to clearly identify ideas to include in each part of the reflection (AHF7), to order ideas and link them in a creative way (AKF1), and to use a better writing style (MSFF155). One of the interviewees explained that developing one’s writing capacities is essential to succeed as a postgraduate student. For this reason, they considered the RW tasks a valuable opportunity to enhance their writing skills (MSM4). Another student stated in the reflection, “It helped me to reflect my thoughts and ideas in an organized and structured manner, so I can learn the best from every experience I go through” (ABF114). Another student (MSF155) claimed becoming “a more efficient writer” thanks to the regular writing practice in the course.

In addition to enhancing their thinking processes and writing skills, the study showed that RW improved the participants’ ability to express their opinions and feelings. In fact, one interviewee stated that this learning strategy was “helpful and enjoyable” and enriched their personality, and clarified, “I learned new important skills, for example, how to express feelings, which is important not only for academic writing, but also for our own life” (AHF7).

RW resulted in several learning gains but was also linked with two major challenges. The most important challenge was the initial difficulty the students faced to clearly describe events, actions, and experiences, since most of them had no experience with this AL strategy. One interviewee clarified, “I did not know how to start. It was the most difficult thing for me” (NBF2). Another interviewee further explained that the difficulty was to differentiate between the various stages in the Gibbs’ reflective cycle and to include relevant ideas in each part of the reflection, as stages like analysis, evaluation, and synthesis were quite similar for them (AHF3).

The second challenge of RW related to the topics. One interviewee emphasized that understanding the topic well is essential to write a good reflection; therefore, the topics should be selected carefully to ensure students perform well (NRM6). Another interviewee suggested providing students with a list of topics to choose from in order to overcome these challenges, and eventually enhance students’ performance (AKF1).

IV. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study revealed that several academic skills are gained through the four AL strategies implemented in the course, namely FL, PBL, CT and RW. First, AL strategies enhance students’ language skills such as reading and writing. This finding is similar to that reported by Sani et al. (2017) and can be explained by the extensive writing practice that students are involved in through FL, PBL, CT and RW tasks. Second, similar to results from Oros (2007), this study showed that the above-mentioned AL strategies improved students’ oral communication, presentation, and research and study skills, especially through their involvement in the PBL component, pre-class preparation, and in-class discussions. Furthermore, students’ thinking capacities, specifically higher-order thinking skills including analysis, critical thinking, problem solving, and creation are enhanced by engaging in FL, PBL, CT and RW practice. This study result aligns with findings from Al-Busaidi et al. (2021), Beed et al. (2005), Neisler et al. (2016), and Trilling and Fadel (2009) who indicated that AL approaches, particularly PBL, foster the development of 21st century skills or employment readiness skills (Berkson, 1993). A key implication of this finding is the significance of carefully designing tasks that bring together a package of skills under one umbrella task like a PBL project component.

Another major finding of the current study is that, at a personal level, students developed autonomy, self-reliance, independence, and metacognitive skills when completing FL, PBL, CT and RW tasks. In fact, the positive impact of PBL in fostering learner autonomy has been emphasized in the literature especially that which focuses on the Omani context (Tuzlukova & Singh, 2018). Likewise, other studies including Al-Busaidi and Tuzlukova (2021) have stressed the value of developing metacognitive skills through explicit instruction and elicitation of learning strategies to promote students’ problem-solving and critical thinking skills. A major implication of this finding for the language classroom is to assign learning tasks that require learners to work independently and be responsible for their contributions to teamwork, to reflect on their learning processes, and to devise action plans to improve their performance.

This study also showed that these four AL strategies enhanced student engagement in the learning process, as they were involved in class oral discussions and out-of-class written tasks that promoted their motivation and increased student-student interaction in the AL environment. This finding is congruent with that of Michel et al. (2002) who argue that student motivation increases, especially through FL and PBL projects. Several other researchers including Ertmer and Newby (2013) and Oros (2007) have also emphasized engagement as a key feature of learner-centered AL approaches where learners participate actively in the learning process. Thus, it is essential for EFL academicians to create similar learning opportunities that promote student engagement, which is considered a prerequisite for learning (Reeve, 2012).

Along with the benefits discussed above, this study highlighted five major challenges that should be overcome to benefit from the AL strategies of FL, PBL, CT and RW in the current context. First, the novel aspect of these teaching-learning techniques was initially considered a major challenge that negatively affected students’ performance, as most

of the participants described the difficulties they faced when writing their first RW assignments, which reflected their limited ability to engage in deep thinking and resulted in superficial descriptive accounts of their experiences. Furthermore, the complexity of the CT component was equally challenging since it required students to reconsider their long-held beliefs and revisit their preconceived ideas to make sound judgments. The unfamiliar topics added to the challenge since identifying relevant ideas to argue for or against a certain topic presented a challenge. FL was also considered a novel technique that raised several issues, especially in terms of pre-class preparation which was unfamiliar to many of the participants who were used to traditional teaching methods. Likewise, although some students were accustomed to the PBL approach, the kind of project topics they needed to explore and the stages they had to go through to complete the project were considered a challenge. This study result aligns with findings from previous studies which showed that any novel teaching technique may cause learners to feel “apprehensive” and anxious unless they have a “clear enough sense of the purpose behind [it]” (Kane, 2004, p. 283). Furthermore, according to Lane-Kelso (2014) and Nguyena et al. (2006), the implementation of AL approaches in a traditional educational context could initially be challenging due to cultural conflicts and mismatches. Thus, instructors should thoroughly explain to students the reasons behind employing a certain instructional method and the outcomes they are expected to achieve not only to ensure they buy-in to the method, but also to benefit from it (Garver & Roberts, 2013). This study also showed that as students progressed in the course, they were able to overcome initial challenges and dealt with the course components more comfortably, which is congruent with results from Garver and Roberts (2013) who concluded that getting accustomed to a new teaching pattern is required in order to enjoy it. Crouch and Mazur (2001) and Strayer (2012) added that learners need a period of adjustment before they become familiar with a novel instructional method and benefit from it. Consequently, instructors should be patient when they implement a new non-traditional instructional approach in their respective classrooms.

The second challenge the study identified was the heavy workload involved in the implementation of the AL strategies of FL, PBL, CT and RW. Considering the fact that 63% of the participants were employed and had social obligations, coping with the demands of the four course components in terms of pre-class preparation, teamwork involvement, and post-class assignments was difficult and put the participants under pressure. This result is similar to that reported by Oros (2007) who pointed out that AL involves “greater activity on the part of the student” (p. 295). This characteristic of AL could be counterproductive if learners are incapable of self-regulating their learning, which is indispensable for students’ academic success (Evseeva & Solozhenka, 2015). Furthermore, according to Oros (2007), the systematic movement from the traditional lecture to an AL approach requires careful planning and monitoring. Consequently, the type, number, and frequency of weekly assigned AL tasks should be carefully considered to ensure learners both complete and benefit from them while maintaining a degree of flexibility (Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2020).

Lack of appropriate academic skills to cope with the course demands also constituted a major challenge. First, students’ lack of awareness of various cognitive thinking processes limits their ability to analyse, evaluate, and synthesize information to successfully complete CT and RW assignments. A pertinent study carried out in the same context by Tuzlukova and Prabhukanth (2018) indicated that only 55% of the students they surveyed were positive about their ability to use the afore-mentioned skills to make value judgments. This finding can be attributed to the possibility that higher-order thinking skills are not taught explicitly in the Omani educational context considering their inherent complexity (Abasaid & Ferreira, 2022). Therefore, explicit CT instruction is required to enable students to develop these essential 21st century skills and use them confidently. Furthermore, lack of time management and planning skills added to the difficulty students faced. This finding could be explained by the fact that many learners in this course were not only adult working people with social commitments, but also had stopped studying for a while before they decided to pursue their postgraduate studies, which indicates that they started the course with limited self-regulatory strategies. Therefore, there is a need to teach students to use such self-regulatory strategies to help them approach their learning better (Zimmerman, 1990).

The fourth challenge identified by the study was poor communication and limited collaboration skills, which negatively influenced students’ performance in the PBL component and led to “disputes”, “conflicts”, and “tension” as described by some study participants. This finding aligns with results from Al-Busaidi et al. (2021) who argued that several factors might interfere with the success of PBL in the current educational setting such as lack of collaborative learning skills, inability to take responsibility of one’s own learning, and lack of contribution and participation in the group work. Consequently, enhancing students’ positive attitudes towards collaborative learning and developing a classroom culture that encourages inquiry, collaboration and independence can help address this issue.

Finally, the study revealed that limited linguistic and technology skills were a challenge. Although about 89% of the participants claimed that their English language proficiency was either good or very good, they emphasized the difficulties they faced understanding the reading articles and writing their CT responses. This finding could be attributed to the fact that students had different study backgrounds and might have their own reading preferences, so it is advisable to vary the reading and discussion topics to elevate students’ interest and address the challenge. Moreover, accessing learning materials, submitting assignments, and receiving feedback and grades through the LMS was initially considered a challenge. Hence, as recommended in Kim et al. (2014), it is essential to help students navigate the course page and give them sufficient practice especially during the first weeks to familiarise them with the LMS.

V. CONCLUSION

This study examined students' overall perspectives on the benefits and challenges of four active learning strategies implemented in their English Language Skills course, namely flipped learning, problem-based learning, Socratic questioning and critical thinking, and reflective writing. The study revealed several benefits as well as challenges associated with the implementation of these strategies. This study's findings contribute knowledge to the EFL field and to the wider educational context, and they have implications for the teaching and learning of English in the context of Oman and similar educational settings.

It is recommended that future research thoroughly examine the implementation of the afore-mentioned strategies in other educational settings with different age groups. An overall framework for implementing active learning strategies should also be developed considering the outcomes of relevant evidence-based research, and practical propositions concerning the implementation challenges should be offered for practitioners to help overcome such challenges.

APPENDIX. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Descriptive Statistics			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Overall Impressions about the Course			
The CT writings were useful	44	4.36	.94
The flipped approach was effective	44	4.32	.77
The PBL project was engaging	44	4.32	.83
Course enhanced my learning experience	44	4.20	.85
Course involved me in learning	44	4.18	.84
The reflective assignments were helpful	44	4.16	.78
Course is useful for the future studies	44	4.05	.99
Course prepared me for the current studies	44	4.00	1.03
Flipped Learning			
Flipping helped analyze and evaluate info	44	4.25	.84
Flipping enhanced study skills (annotation...)	44	4.23	.86
Flipping helped improve communication skills	44	4.20	.93
Flipping helped learn independently	44	4.18	.87
Flipping helped develop language skills (read, writing)	44	4.16	.86
Flipping helped engagement in class discussions	44	4.11	.75
Flipping helped think more deeply about topics	44	4.09	.86
Flipping helped manage time to learn effectively	44	4.07	.93
Reflective Writing			
Reflections helped improve writing skills	44	4.36	.81
Reflections helped develop CT skills	44	4.14	.91
Reflections helped be more engaged	44	4.11	.81
Reflections helped develop evaluation and analysis skills	44	4.07	.90
Reflections helped reflect on strengths and weaknesses	44	4.02	.93
Reflections helped address learning weaknesses	44	3.98	.88
Reflections helped express opinions and feelings	44	3.93	.82
Reflections helped apply reflective skills in current studies	44	3.89	.84
Critical Thinking			
CT helped improve writing skills	44	4.23	.80
CT helped improve reading skills	44	4.20	.82
CT helped engage actively in course content	44	4.09	.80
CT helped express thoughts and views	44	4.05	.83
CT helped analyze and evaluate issues critically	44	4.02	.79
CT helped apply CT in studies	44	4.02	.88
CT helped develop argumentative skills	44	4.00	.92
CT helped question ideas and perspectives	44	3.95	.75
Problem-Based Learning			
PBL helped develop CT skills	44	4.32	.80
PBL helped develop communication	44	4.27	.79
PBL helped develop problem solving skills	44	4.23	.83
PBL helped enhance research and study skills	44	4.23	.71
PBL helped become self-directed and independent	44	4.20	.77
PBL helped develop creativity and innovation	44	4.07	.76
PBL helped develop technology skills	44	4.02	.73
PBL helped develop life skills (flexibility, etc.)	44	3.91	.80

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