

EFL TEACHERS' AND LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE PRINCIPLES OF INSTRUCTED LANGUAGE LEARNING: CONFLICT OR CONSENSUS?

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Abstract

The developmental nature of second language acquisition research has resulted in various and at times seemingly contradictory theories, methods and approaches. In 2005, Rod Ellis published his “Principles of Instructed Language Learning,” which he considered to be a set of teaching “generalisations” that could stimulate debate and reflection among teachers in the “post-methods era” (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The purpose of this study was to investigate Ellis’s principles in terms of their perceived relevance and applicability in an adult EFL learning environment. In order to achieve this aim, a mixed methods research approach was utilised. Separate questionnaires were administered to seventy-one students and eight teachers employed in the English Language Department of a Training Institute in Doha, Qatar. Additionally, thirteen students participated in two – single sex – focus group sessions. The results revealed consensus between students and teachers regarding the importance they placed on some principles, but not others, particularly the contentious issue of *meaning* vs. *form*. Furthermore, while both groups emphasised the importance of *interaction*, many students nonetheless felt uneasy interacting in English with other Arabic speakers. A further key finding was that neither party clearly understood the concept of the learner’s *built-in syllabus*. The principal conclusion is that the best way to deal with the aforementioned anomalies involves experimentation with task-based approaches as these allow for a focus on meaning, opportunities for interaction, and a retrospective focus on form via corrective feedback, which takes into account the learner’s built-in syllabus.

Keywords: Instructed language learning; meaning; form; interaction; built-in syllabus; task-based approaches

Introduction

The field of second language acquisition (SLA) has always stimulated heated debate, not only among theorists themselves, but also, and arguably more importantly, among the front-line practitioners who attempt to actualise these theories, methods, and approaches. Language learners do not make up a homogeneous group; instead, they are individuals affected and shaped by different

variables including age and culture as well as their previous language learning experiences, which often influence their present language learning preferences. Accordingly, what works for one group of learners, or indeed one individual, might not work for another. Yet, historically, we have witnessed a succession of “one size fits all” teaching models, including the Grammar Translation and Audio-lingual methods, which have attempted to universally address the age old question of how best to teach a language.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged in the early 1970s, resulting in a shift in focus from purely linguistic competence to the broader concept of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972), which consists of both grammatical and sociolinguistic competence, and thus emphasises the importance of both a focus on form and meaning. Although CLT can be considered a hybrid approach as it incorporates some of the better elements of the methods that preceded it, its staunchest proponents, in a similar vein to those of its predecessors, have had a tendency to be dogmatic. This false “our way or the highway” dichotomy has arguably led us towards post-method thinking (Kumaravadivelu, 1994), and ultimately the post-methods era (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), one that recognises teachers’ freedom not only to select, reject and adapt the various methods and approaches, but also to develop their own.

It is against such a backdrop that Rod Ellis formulated his ten Principles of Instructed Language Learning (2005a). The rationale behind these principles was “to provide teachers with a basis for argument and for reflection, and not as a set of prescriptions or proscriptions about how to teach” (Ellis, 2008, p.1). The principles, therefore, attempt to go beyond specific theories and methods, and the debates which have arisen from them, to offer an over-arching set of guidelines. In the process, they aim to influence and encourage debate about instructive practices, as opposed to demanding rigid compliance. The principles are discussed in detail in following section.

Literature Review

In order to better understand Ellis’s principles, it is important to consider the theories, methods and approaches that have influenced them as well as the previous studies that have been conducted regarding them.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

CLT is a conundrum in own right, and it has left many struggling to define it accurately. Howatt (1984, p. 279) distinguishes between weak and strong versions of CLT, noting that the former is primarily concerned with “learning to use English” while “the latter entails using English to learn it.” Task-Based Learning (TBL), therefore, which is described as an approach that engages with “language as a meaning-making tool” rather than an as object to be taught and learnt (Ellis, Skehan, Li, Shintani, & Lambert, 2020, p. 1), is clearly more aligned with the strong version. Cook (2016) outlines a similar division using different terms, namely the mainstream EFL style (weak) and the communicative style (strong). The former is eclectic in nature and uses the rationale that “if the student doesn’t benefit from one part of the lesson, then another part will help” (Cook, 2016, p. 294). An important

aspect of the difference, therefore, is seemingly one of flexibility versus rigidity in interpretation, which in turn is often related to whether CLT is considered an approach or a method. Ellis et al. (2020, p. xiv) make a distinction between the two by stating that an approach, contrary to a method, is “based on a set of general principles,” “not prescriptive,” not monolithic, and adaptable to diverse learning and teaching contexts. Likewise, O’Neill (1999) alludes to the fact that once pedagogical thinking becomes fixed within an institution, the opportunities for individual interpretation and expression can be stifled. Yet, this should not be the case with CLT as it has no fixed methodology (Berns, 1990). Instead, it requires “pragmatic” (Harmer, 2001, p. 97) or “principled eclecticism” (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 352) on the part of the teacher.

According to Ellis et al. (2020), TBL grew out of the strong version of CLT, and he specifically mentions this approach in principle 2 as being “perhaps the best way of achieving” a focus on meaning (Ellis, 2008, p.1). Indeed, the whole concept of TBL is based on the assumption that “out of fluency comes accuracy” (Willis, 1996, p. 45). TBL, therefore, essentially turns the PPP model (Presentation – Practice – Production) on its head with its alternative three stage procedure (Pre-Task – Task Cycle – Language Focus). In doing so, it allows greater freedom to use and explore language, while offering opportunities for peer and teacher-led corrective feedback, all of which should help teachers and students achieve the ultimate goal of communicative competence.

Ellis’s (2005) Principles

Ellis’s (2005) principles are influenced by a number of different theoretical perspectives, and it seems that he attempts to find a balance between them in order to arrive at what he refers to as his list of “generalisations.” However, as Ellis (2005a) himself acknowledges, the principles are primarily based on the computational model (Lantolf, 1996), which as the name suggests, “views language learning as analogous to the way a computer processes information; that is in terms of input processing, an internal programme and output” (Ellis, 2005b, p. 47). The computational model not only “provides a solid foundation for developing a set of principles,” but “also constitutes a metaphor that teachers can easily relate to” (Ellis, 2005a, p. 222). At the heart of this process, as will be highlighted in the principles that follow, is the student’s *built-in syllabus* (principle 5), which determines the rate and manner of their “interlanguage” development (Selinker, 1972).

1. Principle 1

Instruction needs to ensure that learners develop both a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence.

In this principle, Ellis highlights the importance of “formulaic expressions” and the potential that they have for wider language development. This principle seems to have been influenced by the Lexical Approach, which believes that fluency results from a large store of lexical chunks that are “available as the foundation for any linguistic novelty or creativity” (Lewis, 1997, p. 15). Moreover, as Racine (2018, p.1) highlights, “communicative competence is the ultimate goal” of this approach. Yet, according to Thornbury (1998, p.12), the potential pitfall of a solely

lexical approach is that it may result in “all chunks, but no pineapple.” Thornbury, like Ellis, appears to be alluding to the point that if learners do not also develop a rule-based competence, fossilization will occur in respect of their interlanguage development.

2. Principles 2 and 3

Instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning.

Instruction needs to ensure that learners also focus on form.

The predominant focus on meaning outlined in these principles is representative of the movement from solely linguistic competence to the broader concept of communicative competence. Ellis argues that a focus on meaning, and in particular pragmatic meaning, allows learners to develop not only their grammar and vocabulary, but more importantly their overall fluency.

In order to deal with meaning effectively, Ellis advocates a task-based approach, which gives learners the opportunity to focus on appropriate language in appropriate contexts. This same approach also allows learners to focus on form (Long, 1988) via corrective feedback, which mirrors their interlanguage development and is therefore more in line with their built-in syllabus. An interlanguage is a student’s “developing language system” (Cook, 2016, p. 276) and should therefore be respected by the teacher, rather than considered flawed. Consequently, in order for it to develop – or in other words to stop it from fossilizing – meaning and form should be considered as interdependent rather than independent elements. This relationship is summarised by Ellis (2016, p. 423) when he suggests we should “view focus on form as a set of procedures for attracting attention to form while learners are engaged in meaning making.”

3. Principle 4

Instruction needs to focus on developing implicit knowledge of the second language while not neglecting explicit knowledge.

Ellis believes that fluency results from the development of implicit (unconscious) knowledge and that this should consequently be the target of our instruction. Krashen (1981, 1985) links principles 2 and 4 by theorising that implicit knowledge is the natural outcome of a focus on meaning. Moreover, he claims that explicit (conscious) knowledge is only of value as a monitor and can neither be accessed readily during the act of communication itself, nor transformed into implicit knowledge (non-interface position). Yet Krashen’s view on the role of explicit knowledge, as Ellis goes on to highlight, is just one of three interface positions. De Keyser (1998) claims that with ample communicative practice explicit knowledge becomes implicit (interface position), while Ellis (1993) maintains that the acquisition of implicit knowledge has a greater chance of occurring if the learner also has explicit knowledge (weak interface position).

4. Principle 5

Instruction needs to take into account the learner’s built-in syllabus.

Corder (1967) coined the term *built-in syllabus* to describe the systematic way that students learn grammar as implicit knowledge. Studies, such as Pienemann (1989), similarly conclude that learners go through different stages of learning (or interlanguage). The point being asserted in this principle is that students will only

learn a specific point when they are developmentally ready to do so. Ellis concludes by offering suggestions about grammar teaching methods that take into account a student's built-in syllabus, including, once again, a task-based approach.

5. Principles 6, 7, and 8

Successful instructed language learning requires extensive second language input.

Successful instructed language learning also requires opportunities for output.

The opportunity to interact in the second language is central to developing second language proficiency.

These principles, by acknowledging the validity of three different hypothesis – the Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1981, 1985), the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985), and the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) – spotlight the eclectic yet overlapping and complementary nature of Ellis's guidelines.

Principle 6 calls for extensive input and works on the assumption that by maximising exposure, learning opportunities are also maximised. Krashen's Monitor Model (1981, 1985), and in particular his input hypothesis, theorises that comprehensible input 'i + 1' leads to language acquisition, which manifests itself in the emergence of speaking. Ellis (2005a) stresses that there is universal agreement that input is an essential element in the development of implicit knowledge. Additionally, he highlights the fact that L2 must be "the medium as well as the object of instruction" (p. 217).

In principle 7, Ellis highlights the need to also provide opportunities for output. The output hypothesis (Swain, 1985) centres around two key concepts: *pushed output* and *auto input*. The former advocates using communicative tasks to stretch the learner and thus aid interlanguage development, while the latter argues that output becomes a form of input as learners have the opportunity to notice gaps in their interlanguage (Swain, 1995). A logical outcome of a learner's need for both input and output is to find ways in which students can interact in the second language, with peer interaction often considered the "primary participant structure for interaction to occur" (Loewen & Sato, 2018, p. 295). Ellis points out that interaction (principle 8) is considered by computational and sociocultural theories of SLA as "the matrix in which acquisition takes place" (Ellis, 2005a, p. 219). These theories stress the importance of two similar concepts, *negotiation for meaning* (Long, 1996) and *scaffolding* (Vygotsky, 1978), which take place during interaction and allow noticing, mediation and restructuring to take place.

6. Principle 9

Instruction needs to take account of individual differences in learners.

In order to keep intrinsic motivation levels high, this principle calls for a teaching approach that is inherently flexible in nature, one that takes into account differences in respect of students' motivation, aptitude, personalities, and previous learning experiences. Accordingly, alternative approaches or new styles of teaching should not be forced upon students, but rather introduced gradually, and with respect for their existing learning style preferences. Specifically, as Ellis (2005a, p.

220) indicates, this calls for learner training in respect of experiential approaches such as TBL, as learners may have had no previous exposure to such methods.

7. Principle 10

In assessing learners' second language proficiency, it is important to examine free as well as controlled production.

This principle espouses the need for a free production element in assessment arguing that free-constructed responses such as those found in communicative tasks are “the best measure of learners’ L2 proficiency” (Ellis, 2005a, p. 221). Moreover, free production brings together some of the main threads running through these ten guidelines, namely a focus on meaning, the importance of implicit knowledge, the opportunity to interact, and the use of task-based approaches.

Previous Studies

The principles have themselves become the focus of research in recent years. Ellis himself was involved in case studies aimed at showing how the principles could assist teachers working for the New Zealand Ministry of Education (Ellis, Erlam, & Sakui, 2006), while others have been carried out by Chen and Wang (2008), Howard and Millar (2009), and Bagheri and Mehrnoush (2013).

Ellis, Erlam and Sakui’s (2006) case studies involved four teachers who were observed five times each after completing an initial background questionnaire. The researcher’s observation notes were then compared with the questionnaire and subsequent interview data to establish the extent to which expressed beliefs matched teaching and learning practices witnessed in the classroom. This research found that the teachers were having difficulty implementing a number of the principles, primarily principles 2 (meaning), 6 (input), 7 (output), and 8 (interaction). On the other hand, the use of various interface positions was observed, and there was consensus on the importance of a focus on form (principle 3). Finally, it was noted that participants did not seem to have a clear understanding of the concept of the student’s built-in syllabus (principle 5).

Chen and Wang’s (2008) study concentrates on five of the ten principles (2, 3, 6, 7, and 8) and considers their application in a distance-learning context, one that was supported by an online Synchronous Learning Management Systems (SLMS). The tutorials of seven adult students were recorded, transcribed, and then examined using Conversation Analysis methods in order to establish how and to what extent “negotiation for meaning” (Long, 1996) took place. The study concluded that it was possible to apply all of the five principles examined in a cyber-classroom.

Howard and Millar’s (2009) study, on the other hand, concerned itself with the perceptions of South Korean school teachers as to the applicability of the principles in their given context. This study involved fifteen South Korean middle and high school English language teachers who, after being introduced to Ellis’s (2005) principles, completed a questionnaire and rated the extent to which they were currently using them, and also ranked them in respect of how important they considered them to be in their given teaching context. The most significant outcome of this study was that teachers did not prioritize principle 3 (form) as they felt it was already being adequately implemented in class. Otherwise, the results were broadly similar to those in case studies (Ellis, Erlam, & Sakui, 2006), with confusion once

more apparent in respect of principle 5 (the learner's built-in syllabus), especially as some teachers assumed that all course books automatically considered this.

Bagheri and Mehrnoush (2013) studied the perceptions of 40 Iranian EFL teachers as to the applicability of the principles in their workplaces, namely language institutes and high schools. In this study, which utilised Howard and Miller's (2009) questionnaire (see above), teachers ranked principle 8 (interaction) as the most important, primarily because they recognised the lack of opportunities for Iranian learners to interact and practice outside of the classroom.

Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to examine the perceived relevance and applicability of Ellis's principles in a Qatari adult EFL learning context. In doing so, it hopes to bridge the gaps of previous studies by eliciting the opinions of both teachers and adult learners regarding the principles. This being the case, the research question is as follows:

1. Is there consensus among EFL educators and adult learners in Qatar as to the relevance and practical application of Ellis's (2005) "Principles of Instructed Language Learning"?
2. What are the possible implications of the findings within a specific adult EFL learning environment?

Method

This section centres on a description of the institution where the research was carried out, the participants, the data collection tools, and the data collection and analysis procedures.

The Institution and the Participants

The study was conducted in the English Language Department of a Training Institute in Doha, Qatar. The primary objective of this state-run institute, which provides general English, ESP, and IELTS preparation courses, is to ensure that government employees have the English language skills needed to carry out their jobs effectively while interacting with the expatriate community.

This study involved the entire student body and teaching faculty of the institute. 71 adult students completed a questionnaire, out of whom 13 volunteers subsequently participated in two gender-specific focus group sessions. The student participants were Qatari and enrolled in ongoing classes at the time of the study, namely two beginners classes, one elementary, one pre-intermediate, and two IELTS preparation courses. The student population included three male and three female classes, students of different levels, students with and without a university education, and respondents in each of the listed age groups (see Table 1). A separate questionnaire was completed by the multi-national teaching staff, which consisted of instructors from the UK, America, Canada, Tunisia, Lebanon and Ukraine (see Table 2). It is felt that both groups of student and teacher participants are representative of the general population in the country. Furthermore, as all students and teachers available at the time participated in the study, it is believed that this can be considered a representative sample.

With regards to research ethics, following the suggestions of Kumar (2019), written and verbal informed consent was gained from the management of the institution, the teachers and students, and in order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the participants were not asked to identify themselves at any point during the data collection procedures.

Table 1: Student demographics

Age:	24 and under	32%
	25-35	51%
	36 and above	17%
Gender:	Male	58%
	Female	42%
Have you ever studied abroad?	Yes	13%
	No	87%
Have you ever studied at university?	Yes	39%
	No	61%
Which level are you presently studying?	Beginner	41%
	Elementary	15%
	Pre-Intermediate	17%
	IELTS	27%

Table 2: Teacher demographics

Age:	40 and under	37%
	41 and over	63%
Gender:	Male	50%
	Female	50%
Are you a native speaker of English?	Yes	37%
	No	63%
How long have you been teaching/ working in EFL/ESL?	0-7 years	25%
	8-15 years	37%
	16+ years	38%
Have you ever worked in the following types of institutions?	University	75%
	Secondary school	75%
	Primary or middle school	75%
	Private language school	75%

Data Collection Tools and Procedures

A mixed methods research approach was adopted to collect data and to compensate for the likely disadvantages of purely quantitative or qualitative research. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018, p. 4), this method of inquiry “yields additional insight beyond the information provided by either the quantitative or qualitative data alone.” Similarly, Cohen, Manion and Morrison

(2018, p. 31) argue that mixed methods approaches help to study phenomena from more than one standpoint by making use of both quantitative and qualitative data. In brief, a mixed methods approach was applied to ensure multiple perspectives and the enhancement of the validity of the inferences (Molina-Azorin, 2016, p. 37).

The seventy-one students who participated in the research completed a quantitative questionnaire (see Appendix A) which was designed to elicit their opinions about Ellis's (2005a) Principles of Instructed Language Learning. However, given the technical wording of the principles, the fifteen Likert items were written to make them as lucid and accessible as possible. A further ten items were then included to elicit their opinions on the areas in which they felt it was most important to receive instruction. Given the mixed levels of the students involved, the questionnaire was also translated into Arabic by a professional translator.

The teachers' questionnaire (see Appendix B) included both closed and open question types. After reading Ellis's (2005a) article outlining the principles, the eight teachers were asked to highlight which they were currently applying in their teaching, which they would like to apply in the future, and which they would be interested in receiving professional development on. They were also asked to rank the principles from one to five in terms of how beneficial they felt they were for Qatari adult EFL learners, and which they felt were the most difficult to apply in a Qatari classroom with adult learners. Finally, they completed ten open-ended questions which allowed them to expand on the reasons behind their initial selections.

The two focus groups (see Appendix C) were held six days after the initial student questionnaire. To minimize any unintentional influence or directionality by the interviewer and to maximize participants' self-disclosure (Krueger & Casey, 2015), the interviewer did not lead the discussion; instead, he simply asked the questions and allowed students to "spark" (McDonough & McDonough 1997, p. 185) each other into conversation. Ten questions were put to separate male and female groups that consisted of six and seven volunteer participants respectively. The focus groups were recorded and conducted in line with standard accepted practice for such activities as suggested by Krueger and Casey (2015).

Data Analysis

The quantitative data of both questionnaires was analyzed using the following procedure. First, the data was entered onto an Excel spreadsheet, which allowed individual questions to be looked at in terms of frequencies and percentages. Cross-tabulation was then used to search for significant trends before presenting the results graphically. The qualitative data, namely the teachers' open-ended questionnaire responses and the focus group transcripts, was analyzed as follows: First, all participants' responses were noted next to each individual question; second, the collective responses for each question were summarized by using a key word analysis, thus generating categories; and finally, the categories were condensed to highlight the main trends.

Findings and Discussion

This section will focus on the principles which elicited the most illuminating responses regarding relative consensus, or lack thereof, between teachers and students. The remaining principles (1, 4, 9 and 10) lacked detailed qualitative responses.

Principles 2 (Meaning) and 3 (Form)

The results indicated significant disagreement between teachers and students regarding principles 2 (meaning) and 3 (form). The teachers were asked to select the five most beneficial principles for Qatari adult learners (figure 1). While teachers deemed form the least beneficial principle for Qatari adult learners, students ranked it the second most important principle (figure 2). Indeed, in response to the questionnaire Likert item on this principle (figure 3), of the 71 student respondents, 44 strongly agreed and 25 agreed, “it is important to be taught grammar.” Meaning, on the other hand, was considered the joint most beneficial principle by teachers (together with principle 8 – interaction), and it was also the only principle they universally applied in their teaching (figure 4). Notably, while most teachers stressed the importance of principle 2 (meaning), they also acknowledged having difficulty in attempting to implement it (figure 5). Comparatively, students placed significantly less emphasis on this principle, with an aggregated total of 285 compared to 326 for form.

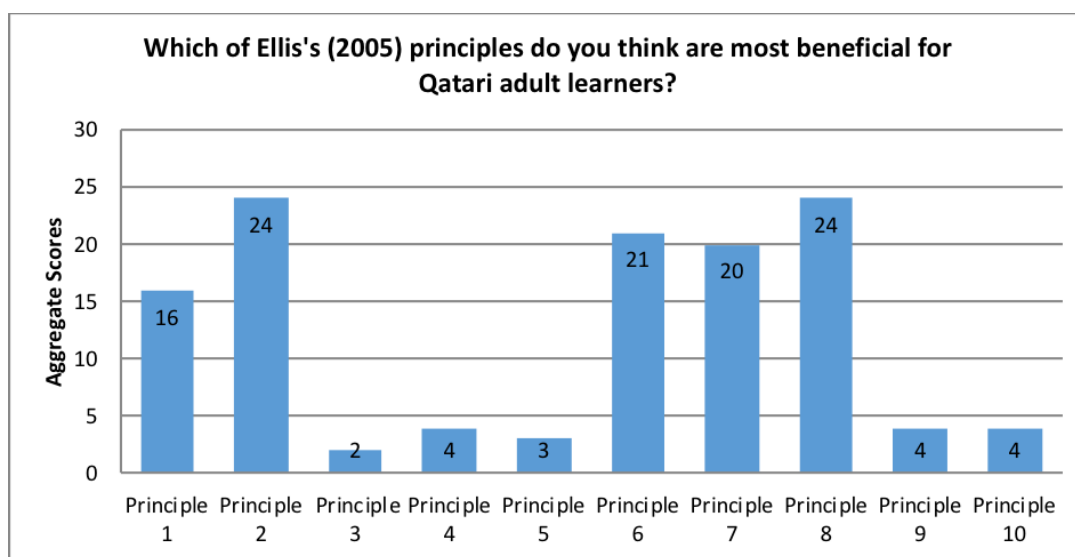


Figure 1. Teachers’ aggregated rankings of the principles (in respect of how beneficial they believe them to be for Qatari adult learners).

Aggregate scores were calculated by awarding 5 points for the principle they ranked number one, going down to one point on a sliding scale for the principle they ranked number 5.

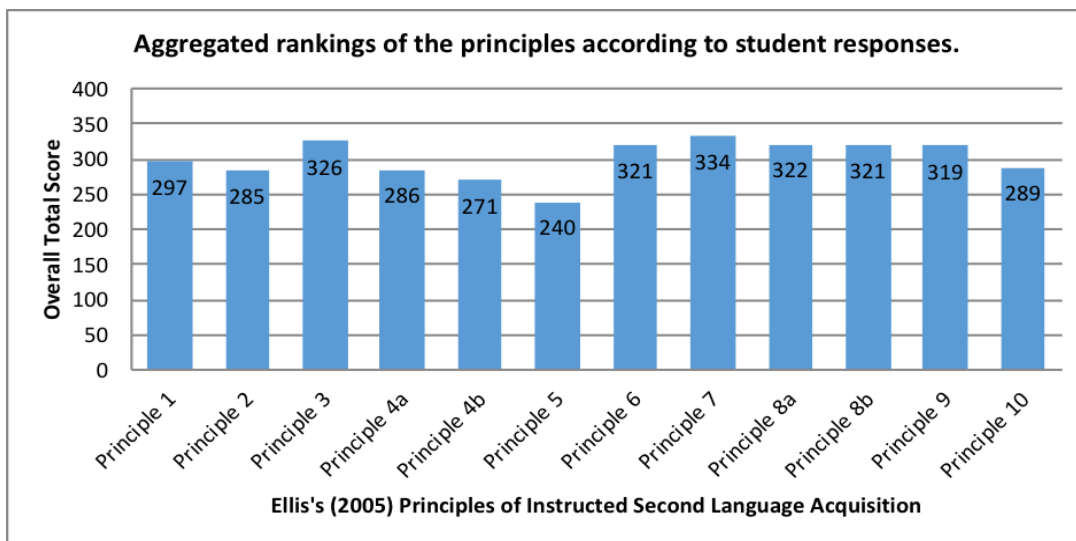


Figure 2. Students' aggregated rankings of the principles.

The aggregated rankings were arrived at by awarding the same Likert scale score for each principle related response given by all students.

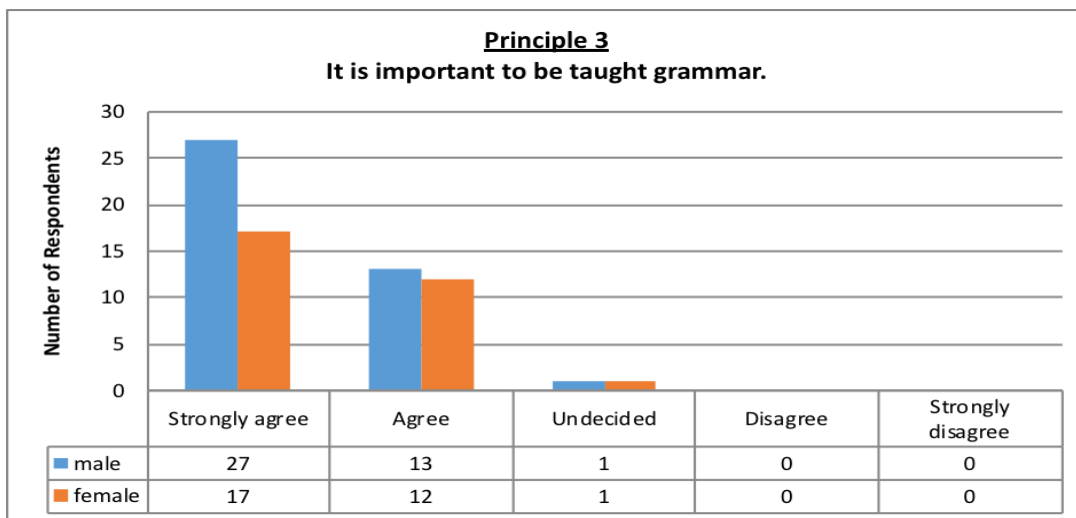


Figure 3. Students' Likert responses regarding the importance of being taught grammar (Principle 3).

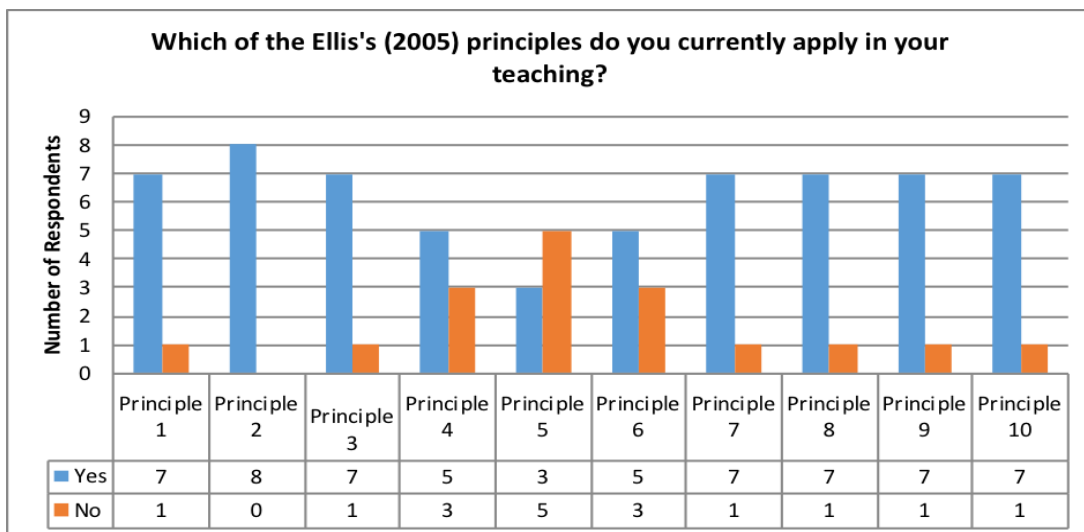


Figure 4. The principles teachers currently apply in their teaching.

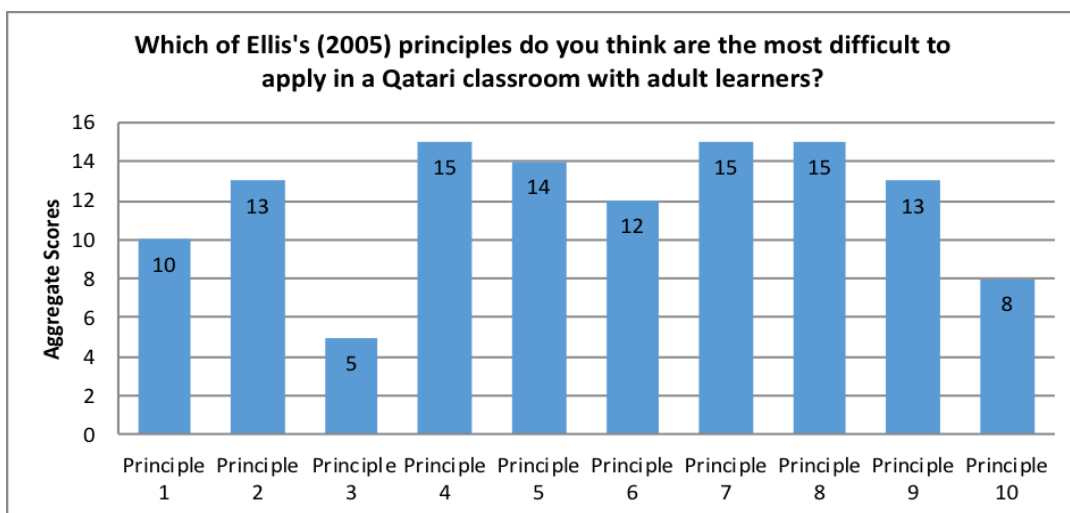


Figure 5. Teachers' perceptions regarding which principles are most difficult to apply.

Aggregate scores were calculated by awarding 5 points for the principle they ranked number one, going down to one point on a sliding scale for the principle they ranked number 5.

The qualitative data generally reinforced these contrasting standpoints. When students were asked during the focus group sessions if it was more important to be understood or to be (grammatically) correct, the consensus was that both were important. However, male student C, who favoured being correct, made the following unequivocal comment: "If you're correct, you can always send your information. If you're not correct, people might laugh at you. Better not to learn English if you don't speak correctly!" When asked directly if grammar was important, there was unanimous agreement among the students. Female student F emphasised, "If we don't understand the grammar rule, we won't be able to speak

correctly. Understanding grammar rules is essential if you want to speak correctly.” This student viewpoint was acknowledged by teacher 3, who stated, “Qatari adult learners come to class expecting grammar explanation; not taking the students’ expectations into consideration might result in resistance and frustration.”

Principle 5 (Built-in syllabus)

Meanwhile, principle 5, which considers the learner’s *built-in syllabus*, was one that left both groups somewhat confused. As figure 4 highlights, the majority of teachers were using most of the principles on a regular basis, yet only three of the eight, based on their understanding of principle 5, were implementing it at the time. Figure 6 demonstrates that students were similarly uncertain about this principle and its potential impact on their second language learning. Although the majority of students agreed on its importance (41 from 71 surveyed), this principle received the greatest spread of Likert responses, and it was consequently ranked the lowest of all the principles by students (figure 2). Overall, both parties appeared uncertain about the concept of the learner’s *built-in syllabus*, and this was reflected in their responses. Nevertheless, teachers’ qualitative responses singled out this principle when asked about how informative they had found Ellis’s principles. Its importance is summarised by teacher 7, who stated, “It is a natural mechanism of learning that the students already have and we as teachers should use to introduce what they can grasp first.”

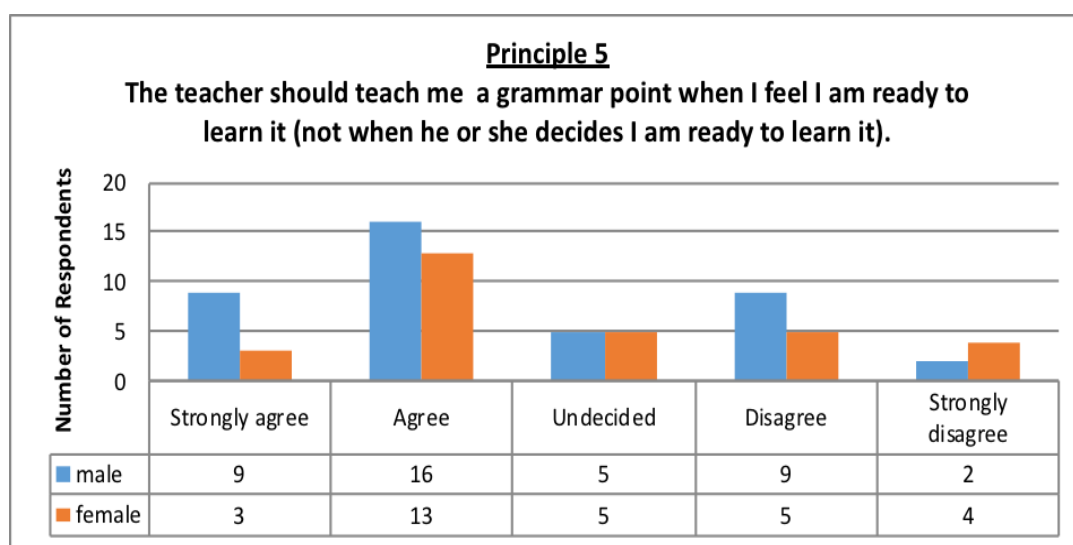


Figure 6. Students’ Likert responses regarding their built-in syllabus (Principle 5).

Principles 6 (Input), 7 (Output), and 8 (Interaction)

Regarding the perceived importance of principles 6 (input), 7 (output) and 8 (interaction), there was broad consensus among students and teachers. Principle 6 (input) was deemed the third most beneficial principle by teachers while almost all students surveyed (66 from 71) agreed or strongly agreed that learners need extensive exposure to the language both inside and outside the classroom. Although principle 7 (figure 7) had the greatest agreement of any single principle among

students, with 51 strongly agreeing on the importance of opportunities for output, it was principle 8 (interaction) that produced arguably the most revealing results. In their Likert responses, the students agreed almost unanimously that *interaction* was important with other students and with the teacher (figures 8 and 9), yet 44 of the 71 respondents either agreed or were undecided when asked if they felt uncomfortable using English in pair or group work activities with other Arabic speakers (figure 10). The teachers, on the other hand, considered interaction the joint most beneficial principle (figure 1) as well as, conversely, the joint most difficult to apply (figure 5).

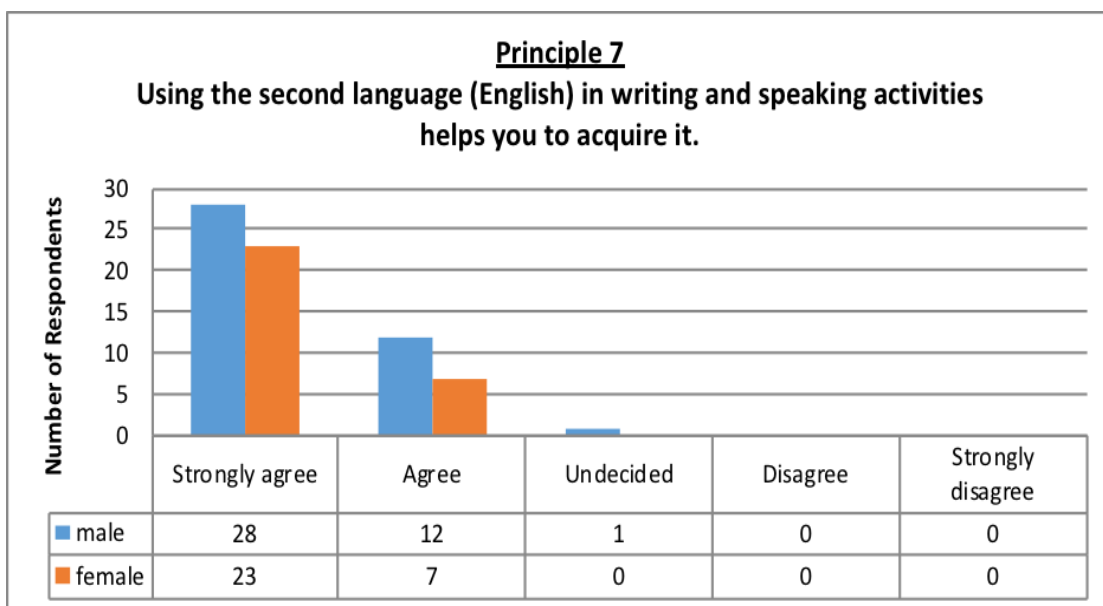


Figure 7. Students’ Likert responses regarding the importance of opportunities for output (Principle 7).

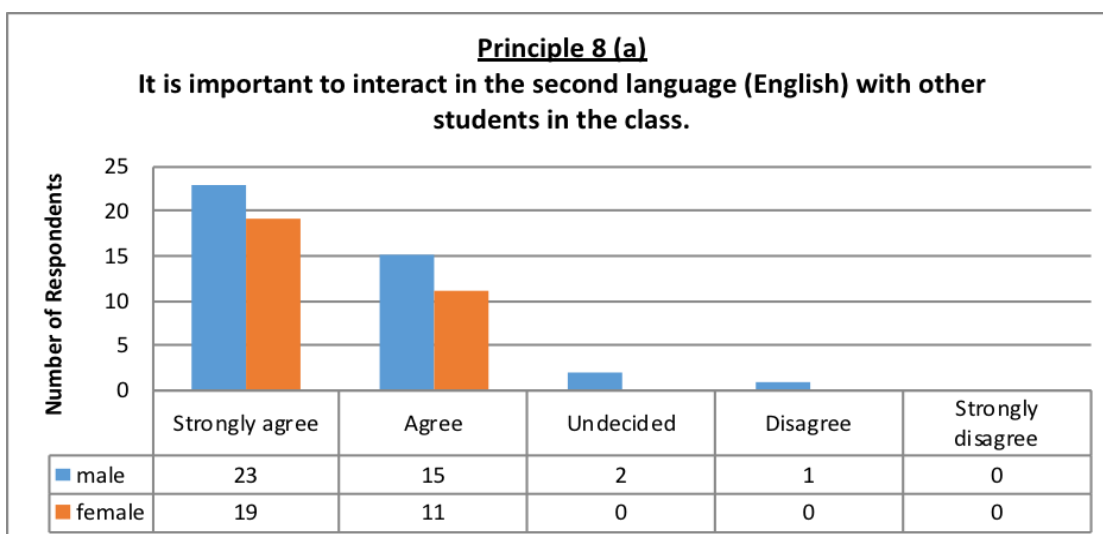


Figure 8. Students’ Likert responses regarding the importance of interaction with other students (Principle 8).

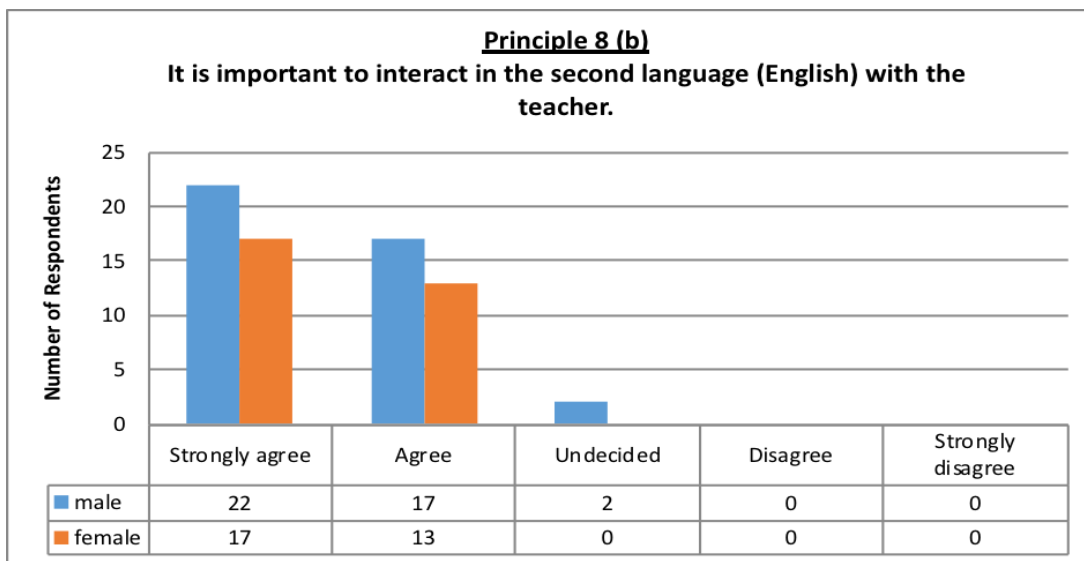


Figure 9. Students’ Likert responses regarding the importance of interaction with the teacher (Principle 8).

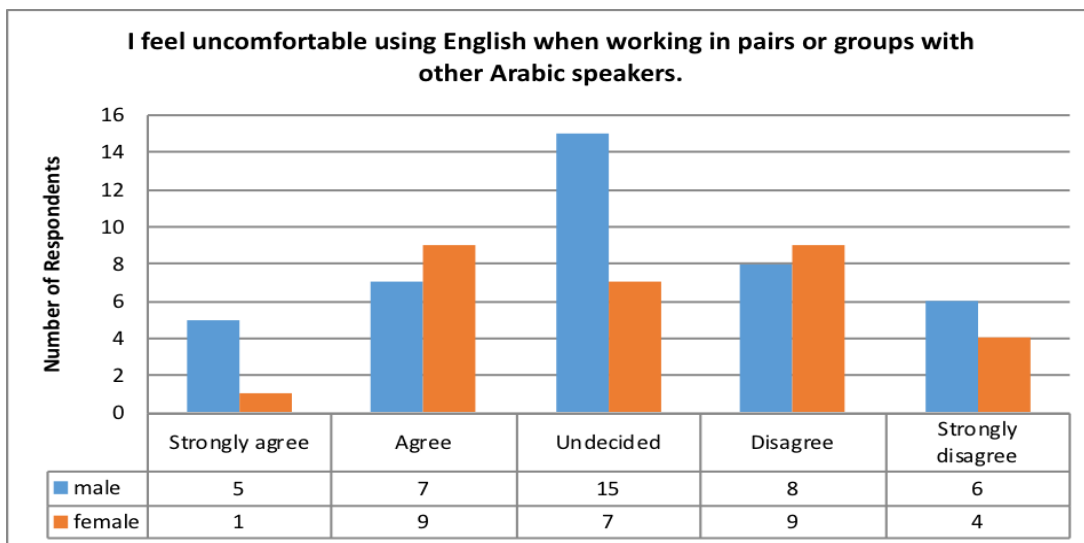


Figure 10. Students’ Likert responses regarding interaction with other Arabic speakers.

In their qualitative responses to question eight: *Which is more important: reading or listening to English or using (practising) it?*, the students clearly favoured using/ practising the language (6) to reading/ listening to it (1). These responses were therefore broadly in line with the Likert scale results, namely that the students felt that principle 7 (output) was the most important, closely followed by principle 8 (interaction) and principle 6 (input). The importance of *interaction* for Qatari adult learners was highlighted by teacher 4, who stated, “Most learners have a clear objective: learn English for effective communication.”

Overall, therefore, students and teachers were in broad agreement regarding the importance of *input*, *output* and *interaction* while displaying considerable differences in terms of the relative importance they placed on *meaning* and *form*.

Discussion

The extent of the division between students and teachers on principles 2 and 3 (meaning vs. form) makes this issue arguably the most important finding to arise from the study, yet it is important to bear in mind the wording of these principles. Ellis believes that learners should focus predominantly on meaning, but that they should also focus on form. It appears, therefore, that teachers are placing too little emphasis on form, while students do not fully grasp the potential benefits of a focus on meaning. The South Korean study (Howard & Millar, 2009) and the New Zealand case studies (Ellis, Erlam & Sakui, 2006) both found that while teachers attempted to implement principle 2 (meaning), they often faced difficulty doing so, especially at lower levels. The South Korean study also found that as most teachers were already implementing principle 3 (form), it was not prioritised as one they sought to apply in their teaching. Consequently, there are clear similarities between the teachers in these studies. All place importance on meaning (principle 2) and attempt to implement it, yet acknowledge the potential difficulties in doing so. At the same time most claim to be implementing principle 3, but not prioritising it. This negative feeling towards form may be explained by what Zhang and Yang (2010, p. 33) refer to as the “stigma” attached to grammar teaching in CLT, particularly that of the explicit nature. Many of the students in this study, however, seem to attach themselves more to the words of O’Neill (2000, p. 6), who stated, “Grammar is not separate from meaning. It is an integral part of it.”

It is likely that previous learning environments and experiences are to some extent responsible for these different perspectives. It is also likely that most teachers have trained and worked in the CLT era and consequently place emphasis on meaning and interaction over form. The students in this study, on the other hand, are in many cases the product of a state education system which emphasises the importance of form. Thus, similar to the situation in the South Korean schools, the washback effect of examinations and other such issues clearly influence the way that students are taught, and thus their learning experiences.

The concept of the built-in syllabus (principle 5) essentially tells us that students will only be able to learn a linguistic point when they are developmentally ready to do so. Yet the issue of how to implement this principle is altogether more difficult. As was found in this study, many of the teachers interviewed in the South Korean study (Howard & Millar, 2009) and the New Zealand case studies (Ellis, Erlam & Sakui, 2006) admitted they did not fully understand the concept of the student’s built-in syllabus. Consequently, teachers in the South Korean study did not deem this an important principle to apply, rather like how the teachers in this study felt it was one of the least beneficial for learners. Evidently, this is an area of theory that teachers need to be more grounded in if they are to implement it properly.

Second only to the meaning vs. form debate, it is the concept of interaction (principle 8) that provides the most interesting data from the study. Similar to the

findings of Bagheri and Mehrnosh's (2013) study in Iran, the teachers in this study believed it was the most beneficial, yet they also highlighted the difficulties of applying it in a Qatari classroom with adult learners. Teacher 5 gave the following reasons for this viewpoint: "Qataris do not like to interact with each other and feel they can only learn when communicating with the teacher." Students, meanwhile, felt that interaction was the third most important principle overall. Moreover, they believed that interaction was equally as important between students as it was between students and the teacher. The belief that the teacher should be an active participant in the process of "negotiation for meaning" (Long, 1996) is in line with the thoughts of O'Neill (1994), who argued that it should not be a matter of "how much," but rather "what kind" of teacher talk is used in the classroom. Nevertheless, the mantra 'minimise TTT' (teacher talk time) remains prevalent on many teacher-training courses. On the other hand, many students were clearly uncomfortable at the prospect of having to work in pairs or groups with other Arabic speakers. Yet, as Ellis (2005a) had highlighted the problem of excessive L1 usage in monolingual groups, this finding is unsurprising.

The South Korean study (Howard & Millar, 2009) and the New Zealand case studies (Ellis, Erlam & Sakui, 2006) both found that teachers were having difficulty in attempting to implement this principle. The New Zealand study, for example, noted that while they had witnessed teachers "scaffolding" (Vygotsky, 1978) the students' production, they had found "little evidence of any negotiation for meaning in any of their classrooms" (Ellis, Erlam & Sakui, 2006, p. 41). In all these studies it seems that the teachers are aware of the importance of interaction between students, but they also understand the potential breakdown that can occur when students fail to carry out the interactive tasks as planned. Students, on the other hand, appear to expect more direct teacher assistance in the form of scaffolding. Time constraints, however, can limit the extent to which this principle can be fully operationalised. Teachers often feel under pressure to produce immediate results in the classroom, and perhaps unfairly project this pressure onto their students by expecting them to produce language and interact before they feel comfortable doing so. However, as O'Neill (1994) points out, "learners typically go through silent periods" so forcing them to speak can be "de-motivating" and "counter-productive." Finding an appropriate balance regarding interactive tasks is therefore essential.

Although the study attempted to be as professional and thorough as possible, the generalisability of its findings is inevitably subject to its limitations. These include concrete issues such as time constraints and limited sample size, as well as more abstract ones such as the possible effect of 'face' concerns (Lee and Renzetti, 1993) on the results.

Overall, the results seem to suggest that the teachers generally favour what Howatt (1984) referred to as the 'strong' version of CLT while students are more inclined towards the 'weak' version. In other words, the students seem to favour a more eclectic approach, such as the mainstream EFL style (Cook, 2016), which may include more traditional methods such as explicit grammar teaching, while teachers prefer a meaning-based interactive approach that encourages students to learn the language by using it.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the level of consensus between EFL educators and learners in Qatar regarding the relevance and practical application of Ellis's (2005a) Principles of Instructed Language Learning, and to consider the possible implications of the findings for the institution in which it was conducted. While previous studies (Ellis, Erlam & Sakui, 2006; Howard & Millar, 2009) involving Ellis's principles had focused on the views of teachers working in middle and high schools, this one shifted the spotlight to an exclusively adult learning environment, and was equally concerned with the opinions of the students. It is hoped that the insights gained from this study, particularly those regarding the students' perspectives, will benefit not only the teachers and the institution, but also those working in similar contexts in the region. Moreover, it is believed that Ellis's principles can serve as a basis for continuing professional development, either directly or as a platform from which teachers can critically evaluate their own language teaching (Howard & Millar, 2009).

The implications of the study can be considered on two levels. Firstly, in respect of the Institute and similar contexts, a balance needs to be struck between the conflicting views of students and teachers regarding the relative emphasis they place on the importance of meaning and form. Furthermore, greater opportunities for producing and encouraging interaction need to be provided while taking into account the learner's built-in syllabus. One way of doing this, as Ellis himself advocates, is to experiment with using a task-based approach to supplement the existing curriculum. This encourages a focus on meaning and interaction while providing opportunities to focus on form via corrective feedback, which, by not predetermining linguistic content, takes into account the learner's built-in syllabus. In other words, a focus on form is deemed an integral part of the lesson, but "should be subordinate to meaning and, for this reason, should come after rather than before a task" (Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 20). Nevertheless, given the previous learning experiences of the students, the implementation of such an approach would require time and patience, as well as a more learner-centered outlook that truly took into account their needs and wants. In addition, there are clear opportunities to build upon Ellis's principles through professional development training, especially in relation to principle 5 (the learner's built-in syllabus), as well as in the field of task-based learning.

Secondly, the findings of the study can be considered in terms of their wider relevance and value. Overall, when compared to previous studies (Bagheri & Mehrnoush, 2013; Ellis, Erlam & Sakui, 2006; Howard & Millar, 2009), the findings appear to indicate that Ellis's (2005) principles can be more readily implemented in adult learning environments, primarily because they are less likely to be subject to the perceived restrictions of middle and high schools, which include issues such as the washback effect of examinations. On the other hand, although the learners may be more mature, their prior learning experiences cannot be ignored. Darling-Hammond et al. (2019, p.16) highlight this issue in the following way:

Part of successful teaching is learning what students already know, where they already demonstrate competence, and how they can bring that knowledge into the classroom context....In addition to building on students' prior knowledge, teachers may also need to confront prior knowledge to address misconceptions.

Consequently, we should respect the learners' present preferences and introduce new methods and techniques with sensitivity. Moreover, by enfranchising the students, we allow them to become active participants in the future direction of their own language learning.

The most obvious direction for future research is the replication of this study on a larger scale. This could involve multiple adult-learning institutions, which in turn would mean a larger, more representative sample of both teachers and students. A further option would be to do a comparative study between two countries. For example, a comparison between Qatar and the UK might provide some enlightening findings, as it would also contrast mono and multilingual classes. In such a study, the effect of the different class dynamics could help to shed light on the issue of how universally applicable Ellis's principles actually are. On a smaller scale, teachers could conduct their own action research studies on individual or interrelated principles, such as 2 and 3 (meaning and form). This would allow teachers to select their own areas of interest and use the principles for experimental and developmental purposes, as they were intended.

In conclusion, this study has revealed that there is broad consensus between students and teachers regarding the majority of Ellis's principles. What is more, the anomalies that have surfaced provide opportunities for change and development for both parties. Indeed, they serve as a reminder that teachers must not allow their teaching practices to stagnate. Instead, they need to be pro-active in respect of their continuing professional development, as well as being responsive to their students' needs and wants while respecting their present learning preferences. Moreover, it is essential to bear in mind that the applicability of any given principle will be dependent on the specific teaching and learning context. It is, therefore, necessary to accept the principles in the spirit in which they were formulated, namely as a platform for discussion, development, experimentation and reflection.

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