

## **A Cross-contextual Analysis of EFL Learners' Perceptions of Classroom Activities**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims at exploring English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' perceptions of classroom activities across three different milieus of English learning in Iran, namely, high schools, universities, and language institutes. It also seeks to examine the role of age and gender in students' perceptions. To measure these perceptions, the study employed the Persian version of the Gentry and Gable's (2001) Students Perceptions of Classroom Activities scale translated and validated by Ghanizadeh and Jahedizadeh (2015). The scale measures four perceptions, interest, challenge, choice, and joy. The results indicated that there were significant differences in most perceptions across the three contexts. In particular, it was found that there is a significant difference between interest level of students at universities and institutes. Concerning challenge, significant differences were found between university and school students as well as university and institute students. As far as choice is concerned, it was found that school and university students as well as university and institute students differ in their perceptions. For joy, nevertheless, no significant difference was found among the three groups. Moreover, it was found that there is a significant relationship between age and perception of challenge. In terms of gender, males were found to perceive their classroom activities more challenging with more opportunities for choice than females did.

**Keywords:** Perceptions of classroom activities, high school, university, language institute, age, gender

## INTRODUCTION

The world around us consists of various kinds of physical energy. By the process of perception, one can receive and interpret information and react to different levels of energy. Many factors influence what and how someone perceives something. In the domain of education, teachers' and students' perceptions of classroom activities are vital areas to consider. The classroom environment consists of combined physical, emotional, social and intellectual climate in which students learn. Fouts and Myers (1992) claimed that although teachers may not have control over choosing their classroom, they do have control over the kind of instructional practices they use and classroom climate they construct. The classroom environment shapes students' relationships with each other and with their teachers. Consequently, the perceptions regarding classroom environment and its vital components, i.e., the activities are significant factors in building rapport. These perceptions are shaped by both teachers and students. Many researchers investigated the significance of teachers' perceptions of their classroom environment. Mucherah, and Frazier (2013), for instance, conducted a study to examine teachers' perceptions of classroom climate and their goal orientations in high school biology classrooms in Kenya. They concluded that, gender is a predictive factor in examining teachers' perceptions; male teachers perceived themselves to be more innovative and supportive and female teachers were observed to be better organized and innovative. Besides teachers' ideas, students' perceptions play an important role in the field of education. Learners who are interested in the activities done in their classroom and have positive perceptions toward classroom environment can develop intrinsic motivation, adapt mastery goal orientation and as a result succeed in their learning. On the other hand, if students perceive their classroom as unsupportive and unenjoyable or feel marginalized, they will develop extrinsic motivation and adapt performance-avoidance goal orientation (Ghanizadeh, & Jahedizadeh, 2014). The students' perceptions comprise four main parts: interest, challenge, choice and joy. Furberg (2010) introduced four key variables of learners' perceptions regarding university education; learning, responsibility, engagement and satisfaction. He believed that all these perceptions change over time. These variables are as follows:

1. Perceptions of learning: Learning perceptions appear to change over time. Students in the beginning of their education want to understand theoretical matters for a limited period of time, while at the end of the program, they want to understand how to put the theories into practice for the whole life. As a result, when students' progress in their learning, they see the importance and need of understanding for life rather than for a short period of time (Eklund-Myrskog, 1998). As it can be seen students' perceptions are dependent on the level of education as well as individual factors.

2. Perceptions of responsibility: As with learning perceptions, perceptions of responsibility can change over time. Low level students try to help fellow learners, value interacting and working with others and have a more collective view of responsibility. On the other hand, high level students, focus on themselves, value their own

performance and have an individualistic view of responsibility. It is proved that as learners develop their education, they become more responsible for their learning.

3. Perceptions of engagement: As with learning and responsibility, the students' perceptions of engagement can change too. Most of the time, low level students engage in all courses, try to do their best and maintain a high level of engagement. Then, as they progress through their education, they would turn toward disengagement or sometimes more engaged.

4. Perceptions of satisfaction: Unlike the three previous perceptions, satisfaction does not change over time. Low level students may have a positive idea toward the classroom activities which satisfy them. High level students may be less satisfied with the class or examinations, but experience similar satisfaction as the low level students regarding university time and their choice on performance.

Nijhuis, Segers, and Gijsselaers (2007) claimed that two approaches to learning; deep and surface, are affected by students' perceptions. If learners have a positive understanding of workload and assignments, educational goals, quality of teaching and engagement into independent learning, the approach is related to a deep learning strategy. Contrarily, if students have negative perceptions related to the tasks, activities, tests or the quality of teaching, they would adapt a surface learning strategy. The positive perceptions facilitate learning by helping students to learn from each other. Many studies have been conducted to prove the fact that, students' perceptions are as crucial as or in some situations more important than teachers' perceptions of classroom activities. Gentry, Gable, and Rizza (2002), for example, investigated whether differences in classroom perceptions exist for students in grades 3 to 8 and between genders. They concluded that middle school students had fewer opportunities for choice and perceived their classroom activities less frequently enjoyable and interesting. Moreover, female students found their classroom activities more enjoyable and interesting compared to male ones.

Kharrazi and Kareshki (2010) conducted a study to find the correlations among three variables; environmental perceptions, motivational beliefs and self-regulating learning, among Iranian high school students. The data showed that motivational beliefs affect environmental perceptions and self-regulating learning. In other words, a student having intrinsic motivation develops positive ideas regarding classroom environment and an extrinsically motivated student would have negative perceptions toward the learning environment. Lee, Yin, and Zhang(2009) claimed that teacher support and involvement are salient features in shaping students' perceptions which can lead to various outcomes.

To highlight these factors influencing learners' perceptions, other studies have been conducted. Brok, Brekelmans, and Wubbels (2004), for instance, reported that, students' perceptions of their teachers' interpersonal behavior is one of the main factors in explaining cognitive and affective outcomes. Their finding is in line with another study done by Hardré and Sullivan (2007). They contended that teachers' interpersonal

styles, teacher and peer support play significant roles in shaping students' perceptions regarding learning environment and these perceptions predict goal orientations and perceptions of competence.

The role of teachers in shaping students' perceptions can be seen in a technology environment as well as a traditional classroom. Stepp-Greany (2002), for example, conducted a study to illustrate the perceptions of a group of university students about language learning in a technology environment. In his study, students positively perceived their technology environment in which their listening and reading skills, cultural knowledge and their independent skills were enhanced, but attributed an important role to instructors; teachers. A longitudinal study by Young (1997) proved a significant relationship among classroom perceptions, motivational orientations, and cognitive strategy use over time.

Ozkal, Tekkaya, Cakiroglu, and Sunsur (2008) focused on constructivism which means, students construct their own knowledge by relating new information to the old one. A classroom with constructivist perspective is collaborative, interactive, inductive and learner-centered. They concluded that a constructivist learning environment predicts learning approach, however, the relationship between fixed beliefs and learning approach is not significant. Church, Elliot, and Gable (2001) carried out another study with the purpose of finding the relation among students' perceptions, their performance, their intrinsic motivation, and their achievement goals. The results depicted that goal orientations are affected by students' perceptions and these goals influence their performance and intrinsic motivation.

In a similar vein, Dickinson (1995) in a study to find the relation between students' perceptions and their goal orientations maintained that, learners with positive perceptions toward their classroom enhance their motivation by adapting mastery goals. Bryson and Hand (2007) did a survey to find the perceptions of low level students regarding their classroom activities. The students believed that they were given too much work and claimed that their teacher was unavailable which made it impossible for learners to inform their teacher about their problem, i.e., high work load. Consequently, more interactions between students and their teachers would increase students' positive perceptions regarding classroom environment.

Taken together, many studies have been done to correlate teachers' or students' perceptions with different individual and cognitive variables, but no evidence has proved the difference among EFL students' perceptions studying in three different tutorial contexts; students in third grade of high school, B. A. university students of English and English students studying in private institutes. This study aimed first, to compare the differences of perceptions among the three contexts and second, find the age or gender differences.

## THIS STUDY

The literature presented in the previous part demonstrates that studies on students' perceptions of classroom activities encompass diverse settings and contexts. Indeed, the scale of students' perceptions has been validated in different cultures and countries. The results vary according to the situation. Within each context, there are also various environments which may differ in the students' perceptions in an EFL context. In Iran, for instance, learning English can typically be pursued via three channels; official, semi-official and non-official, namely, high schools, universities and language institutes. The previous studies regarding students' perceptions have been conducted in one of the above-mentioned environments which threaten the generalizability of the results to other channels, because the methodologies and approaches in these environments are totally distinct which lead to diverse students' perceptions.

The syllabus in high schools is usually uniform and inflexible through three high school majors (Science, Math, and Humanities). The English learning curriculum is derived from the traditional grammar translation method which contains grammar points and lengthy lists of vocabulary. Universities as semi-official channels of an EFL context, on the other hand, are not as rigid as high schools. Although students have to complete a prescribed list of general education, they are allowed to specialize in a particular major. Consequently, most of the learners studying English at universities (Teaching, Translation, or Literature) are intrinsically motivated and are not forced to do so. Language institutes as non-official environments provide the most flexible sectors in the EFL context of Iran. They are private organizations which present courses aligned with the most recent language learning approaches and methods. Students are there because they have chosen to be there.

These prominent differences among high schools, universities and private institutes especially in the kind of activities used in the classrooms, lead to various perceptions in terms of interest, choice, and challenge from students' point of view which should be considered separately. The significance of these perceptions in shaping students' cognitive ability, motivation and goal orientation, inspired the researchers of the present study to scrutinize students' perceptions of classroom activities in each context. Moreover, it was assumed that gender and age as predictors of students' perceptions influence their conceptualization toward their classroom activities. In other words, the present study answers the following research questions:

1. Do EFL students' perceptions of classroom activities vary according to the context in which they study?
2. Is there any relationship between EFL students' perceptions of classroom activities and their age?
3. Do male and female EFL students differ in their perceptions of classroom activities?

In particular, in this study it was presumed that there are significant differences in students' perceptions (interest, challenge, choice, and joy) among three contexts.

Moreover, there might be an age or gender difference in predicting students' perceptions of classroom activities.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Three different samples comprised the participants of the present study. The first sample was selected from high school students, the second sample consisted of EFL students studying at universities, and the third sample comprised EFL learners studying at language institutes. The profile of participants of each setting is as follows:

#### ***Setting 1***

The first group of participants comprised 78 EFL learners studying at the third level of high school. They were all males whose age varied from 17 to 19 ( $M=18.17$ ,  $SD=0.60$ ).

#### ***Setting 2***

The second group of participants comprised 79 EFL learners studying at universities. They were 77 females and 2 males whose age varied from 18 to 29 ( $M=20.88$ ,  $SD=2.56$ ) and came from two universities of Mashhad with language proficiency varied from intermediate to advanced level. They were 15 ELT students, 28 Translation students, 30 Literature students of English, and 5 students did not indicate their major.

#### ***Setting 3***

The third group of participants comprised 93 institute EFL learners. They were 65 females and 28 males whose age varied from 12 to 52 ( $M=20.81$ ,  $SD=7.36$ ) and came from different private Language Institutes of Mashhad with language proficiency varied from intermediate to advanced level.

### **Instrument**

To determine students' perceptions of classroom activities, the researchers used the translated version of 'Students Perceptions of Classroom Activities' scale designed and validated by Gentry and Gable (2001) which was translated to Persian and validated by Ghanizadeh and Jahedizadeh (2015). Validity evidence for construct interpretation was investigated through confirmatory factor analysis. A chi-square/ $df$  ratio (2.38) and the RMSEA (.062) as well as the GFI (.78) were indicative of model fit. Furthermore, all items had accepted factor loadings. The Cronbach's alpha estimates for each perception ranged from .71 to .80. (interest = .86, challenge = .73, choice = .71, joy = .79).

The 'Students Perceptions of Classroom Activities' instrument contains 31 statements evaluating four dimensions (interest, challenge, choice, and joy). The scale measures the four dimensions via a 5-point Likert-type response format (never, seldom, sometimes, often, and always). The participants were provided with directions on how to complete the scale. Sample items for '*interest*' dimension included: 1) What I do in my class fits

my interests, and 2) I have an opportunity to work on things in my class that interest me. Sample items for '*challenge*' dimension are: 1) I find the work in this class demanding, and 2) I am challenged to do my best in class. Sample items include in '*choice*' dimension are: 1) I can choose materials to work with in the class, and 2) I can choose an audience for my product. Sample items for '*joy*' dimension are: 1) The activities I do in my class are enjoyable, and 2) I like the projects I work on in my class.

## Procedure

The first part of the study was undertaken in Kian high school in Mashhad, Iran. The second part of the study was undertaken at Ferdowsi and Imam Reza universities in Mashhad and the third section of the study was carried out in four different institutes of Mashhad. Convenience sampling was used for selection and all the participants kindly accepted to take part in the current study. In order to get robust results, the researchers explained the purpose of completing the questionnaire and asked the participants not to write their names. The data collection was done between October and November 2014.

## RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of EFL learners' perceptions of classroom activities among high school students (Setting 1). Throughout this study, INT stands for *interest*, CHA for *challenge*, CHO for *choice*, and JOY for *joy*.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics of Students' Perceptions of Classroom Activities in Setting 1

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
<b>INT1</b>	76	19.00	37.00	31.1711	3.65655
<b>CHA1</b>	75	21.00	41.00	33.1067	4.97717
<b>CHO1</b>	75	16.00	32.00	27.1067	3.17326
<b>JOY1</b>	78	16.00	35.00	27.4487	3.40606
<b>Valid (listwise)</b>	70				

As the table indicates, among the four tenets of students' perceptions in setting 1 (high school), *challenge* receives the highest mean ( $M= 33.10$ ,  $SD= 4.97$ ). *Choice* and *joy* obtain the lowest means: *choice* ( $M= 27.10$ ,  $SD= 3.17$ ), *joy* ( $M= 27.44$ ,  $SD= 3.40$ ) and the mean score of interest is ( $M= 31.17$ ,  $SD= 3.65$ ).

Table 2 demonstrates descriptive statistics of EFL learners' perceptions of classroom activities among university students (Setting 2).

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics of Students' Perceptions of Classroom Activities in Setting 2

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
<b>INT2</b>	75	12.00	40.00	30.1067	5.60543
<b>CHA2</b>	73	21.00	39.00	29.7397	4.26233
<b>CHO2</b>	73	12.00	32.00	23.7260	4.18084
<b>JOY2</b>	76	7.00	35.00	26.8026	5.05178
<b>Valid N (listwise)</b>	64				

According to this table, among the four components of students' perceptions of classroom activities in setting 2 (university), *interest* receives the highest mean ( $M= 30.10$ ,  $SD= 5.60$ ), and *choice* obtains the lowest mean ( $M= 23.72$ ,  $SD= 4.18$ ). The mean score of *challenge* and *joy* are ( $M= 29.73$ ,  $SD= 4.26$ ), and ( $M= 26.80$ ,  $SD= 5.05$ ) respectively.

Table 3 depicts descriptive statistics of EFL learners' perceptions of classroom activities among students of language institutes (Setting 3).

**Table 3.** Descriptive Statistics of Students' Perceptions of Classroom Activities in Setting 3

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
<b>INT3</b>	85	15.00	39.00	31.9529	4.24799
<b>CHA3</b>	87	14.00	42.00	32.7126	5.49822
<b>CHO3</b>	84	7.00	31.00	25.7381	4.76715
<b>JOY3</b>	81	14.00	35.00	27.9753	3.77152
<b>Valid N (listwise)</b>	70				

Based on this table, among the four dimensions of students' perceptions of classroom activities in setting 3 (language institute), *challenge* receives the highest mean ( $M= 32.71$ ,  $SD= 5.49$ ), and *choice* obtains the lowest mean ( $M= 25.73$ ,  $SD= 4.76$ ). The mean score of *interest* and *joy* are ( $M= 31.95$ ,  $SD= 4.24$ ) and ( $M= 27.97$ ,  $SD= 3.77$ ) respectively.

As it can be seen, students' perceptions of classroom activities are different across the three contexts. To see whether these differences are statistically significant, an ANOVA test was used. Table 4 displays the results of the ANOVA test for the three groups.

**Table 4.** The Results of ANOVA for Determining Differences among the Three Groups

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
<b>INT</b>	Between Groups	136.176	2	68.088	3.275	.040
	Within Groups	4843.735	233	20.789		
	Total	4979.911	235			
<b>CHA</b>	Between Groups	507.280	2	253.640	10.250	.000
	Within Groups	5741.018	232	24.746		
	Total	6248.298	234			
<b>CHO</b>	Between Groups	427.573	2	213.787	12.586	.000
	Within Groups	3889.905	229	16.986		
	Total	4317.478	231			
<b>JOY</b>	Between Groups	54.009	2	27.004	1.588	.207
	Within Groups	3945.285	232	17.006		
	Total	3999.294	234			

As Table 4 indicates there are significant differences among the three groups regarding three perceptions as follows: *interest* ( $F= 3.27$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), *challenge* ( $F= 10.25$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), and *choice* ( $F= 12.58$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). However, for *joy*, no significant difference was found among the three groups ( $F= 1.58$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

The ANOVA analysis revealed that among interest, challenge and choice, there is a difference somewhere among the means, but the precise location of differences is not clear. To locate the exact place of differences, a *post-hoc* comparison of the means was performed for interest, challenge and choice. In so doing, a Scheffe's test was utilized. Table 5 represents the results of Scheffe's test.

**Table 5.** The Scheffe's Test for Comparing Perception Means by Context

Dependent Variable	(I) education	(J) education	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
INT	school	university	1.06439	.74210	.359
		institute	-.78189	.71980	.555
	university	school	-1.06439	.74210	.359
		institute	-1.84627*	.72232	.040
	institute	school	.78189	.71980	.555
		university	1.84627*	.72232	.040
CHA	school	university	3.36694*	.81788	.000
		institute	.39402	.78382	.881
	university	school	-3.36694*	.81788	.000
		institute	-2.97292*	.78957	.001
	institute	school	-.39402	.78382	.881
		university	2.97292*	.78957	.001
CHO	school	university	3.38064*	.67763	.000
		institute	1.36857	.65476	.115
	university	school	-3.38064*	.67763	.000
		institute	-2.01207*	.65948	.010
	institute	school	-1.36857	.65476	.115
		university	2.01207*	.65948	.010

The results of the *post hoc* Scheffe's test indicated that, at the level of 0.05 there was a significant difference between interest level of students at universities and institutes; however, no significant differences were found between interest level of students at schools and institutes as well as schools and universities. Concerning challenge, significant differences were found between university and school students as well as university and institute students; institute and school students did not differ in their perceptions of challenge. As far as choice is concerned, it was found that school and university students as well as university and institute students differ in their perceptions. School and institute students, nevertheless did not differ in their perceptions.

To see whether there is any relationship between students' perceptions of classroom activities and their age, Pearson Product Moment Correlations were run. Table 6 displays the results of the correlation.

**Table 6.** Correlation between students' perceptions and age

Perceptions	Age
INT	0.021
CHA	0.165*
CHO	0.131
JOY	-0.053

As the table shows, age does not correlate with *interest* ( $r=0.021, p<0.05$ ), *choice* ( $r=0.165, p<0.05$ ), and *joy* ( $r=-0.053, p<0.05$ ). However, *challenge* positively and significantly correlated with age ( $r=0.165, p<0.05$ ).

To answer the last research question aiming at examining whether students' perceptions differ significantly between genders, an independent-samples *t*-test was used. Table 7 presents descriptive statistics of perceptions across males and females.

**Table 7.** Descriptive Statistics of Perceptions across Males and Females

	gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
INT	male	104	31.3750	3.48419	.34165
	female	132	30.9091	5.32666	.46363
CHA	male	105	33.0571	4.54217	.44327
	female	130	30.9923	5.46660	.47945
CHO	male	105	26.6476	3.46405	.33806
	female	127	24.6378	4.74537	.42108
JOY	male	106	27.6321	3.14211	.30519
	female	129	27.2481	4.80402	.42297

As the table indicates, the mean differences of the four perceptions are different for males and females. In the case of interest, the mean and standard deviation for males are ( $M=31.37, SD=3.48$ ) and for females are ( $M=30.90, SD=5.32$ ) and in the case of challenge ( $M=33.05, SD=4.54$ ) for males and ( $M=30.99, SD=5.46$ ) for females were found. The mean and standard deviation of choice for males are ( $M=26.64, SD=3.46$ ) and for females are ( $M=24.63, SD=4.74$ ) and concerning joy ( $M=27.63, SD=3.14$ ) for males and ( $M=27.24, SD=4.80$ ) for females were found. Table 8 displays the results of the independent-samples *t*-test among the participants of the three groups.

**Table 8.** Independent-Samples T-Test Displaying the Results of Gender Differences in Three Settings

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
INT	.771	234	.441	.46591	.60409
CHA	3.101	233	.002	2.06484	.66587
CHO	3.615	230	.000	2.00982	.55590
JOY	.708	233	.480	.38401	.54254

As can be seen, there is a statistically significance between the two groups regarding their second perception, i.e., *challenge* ( $t=3.101, p<0.05$ ). The same finding was also obtained for *choice* ( $t=3.61, p<0.05$ ). In other words, males are significantly higher in their perceptions of challenge and choice. However, for interest and joy no significant differences were found.

## DISCUSSION

As stated before, the present study sought to examine whether EFL students' perceptions of classroom activities vary according to the context in which they study in three different channels of EFL learning in Iran, i.e., high schools, universities, and

language institutes. Previous studies have been done in one context to examine students' perceptions, but the prominent differences of the three contexts of learning stimulated the researchers of the present study to examine various perceptions toward official, semi-official, and non-official contexts of learning. The results demonstrated that, students' perceptions of classroom activities are different across the three contexts, i.e., there are significant differences among the three groups regarding three perceptions; interest, challenge, and choice.

Significant differences were found between interest level of students at universities and institutes in which university students were more interested in their classroom activities than institute learners. However, no significant differences were found between students' interest at schools and institutes as well as schools and universities. For challenge, it was found that, university learners perceived their classroom activities more challenging than high school and institute students. No significant difference was found between students of institute and school regarding challenge. Students' perception of choice was found to be different among university students compared to school and institute learners.

It is reasonable to expect such results given that these milieus of language learning are strikingly different in various respects, such as implemented methodology, teachers' and learners' roles, and teaching materials. In the official EFL context of Iran, the classes are usually crowded with heterogeneous students. They are expected to learn the grammar as well as reading comprehension with little emphasis if any on mastering their communication in English. Such syllabi are presented by the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, all students must complete a specific plan of study (English is one of the main courses) to graduate, i.e., these courses are mandatory to pass in order to graduate and ultimately get diploma. In the official context of high schools, teacher is the authority who has the central role. Learners are considered as imitators, listeners, and receivers of information with no special role in teaching process. The only material used is usually English textbook which doesn't provide enough chance for the learners to enhance their speaking ability or communication. Students have to learn English to get good marks. In fact, they are forced to study English; otherwise, they cannot enter universities. The method of teaching involves a passive form of learning where learners are not required to examine their own emotions and understandings in response to the subject material. Such features of an official context can lead to negative ideas regarding challenge, interest, choice, and joy tenets of perceptions for EFL students. On the other hand, high school students' cognition is shaping at this stage. i.e., the challenges and developmental needs for educating adolescents must be taken into account in examining their perceptions. Consequently, making high school students interested in classroom activities is a tough job. They are not free enough to choose the kind of classroom activities which leads not to perceive such activities as challenging and demanding. In a similar vein, a study conducted by Mayahipour, Behjat, and Kargar (2014) revealed negative attitudes and perceptions of high school students toward their classroom environment which influenced their proficiency as well.

According to the results, a pure non-official context cannot provide the best condition for EFL learners of Iran to learn a foreign language as far as their perceptions are concerned. An informal situation of institutes does not mean an interesting and challenging environment which provides learners opportunities to choose among various options. The classes in institutes are less crowded than the other contexts. A plethora of inspirations can cause attending language institutes, including, being interested in English, improving general knowledge of English, facilitating access to technology-based information resources, providing better educational opportunities inside the country, offering the prospect of living abroad, comprehending western movies, music, magazines and newspapers or scientific texts, getting a degree to find a related job and earning more money. CLT (communicative language teaching) and TBLT (task-based language teaching) are the two most common methods used in language institutes. The principal features of these L2 teaching methods provide communication (whole-class, group, or pair-work), learners' personal experience, active engagement of the students and discovery learning. In classes conducted by these teaching methods, teachers and learners work together, and their relationship is not as formal as classes conducted at schools. This interaction leads to shaping a good rapport between teachers and their students. Language classes in institutes are learner-centered in which making errors is considered to be natural and a sign of learning. Learners are not usually concerned with getting good marks, but improving their English as much as possible. The students are more motivated to learn and engage in classroom activities, but many reasons can cause institute learners not to be really interested in the activities which are not demanding in their point of view with little chance to choose their own projects. Students, for instance, cannot choose their teachers and teachers are not free enough to choose their preferred methods and activities. Institute supervisors in Iran usually impose their opinions to teachers.

A semi-official context (universities) was found to exhibit the most positive students' perceptions, i.e., among the three contexts, university students perceived their classroom activities positively in terms of interest, challenge, and choice. University learners choose English as their major and as a result, have positive perceptions toward the related issues of their major. University students have two or more opportunities to choose the time and the teacher of a particular course. Learners have easy accessibility to their professors which can share their interests and ideas with them. Students have more freedom in building their schedule. They might have one or two classes on some days and have more time to study or search out of the university. Teachers give more responsibility to students. The professors have the role of facilitators, because learners are mature enough to be autonomous. Learners can usually choose their projects and challenge the material. As a result, they can develop their communicative abilities which are the main tenets of learning a foreign language. Such results can be seen in general education as well as an EFL/ ESL context. Bigdeli, Pakpour, Aalaa, Shekarabi, Sanjari, Haghani, and Mehrdad (2015), for instance, found positive perceptions toward clinical teaching environment among nursing students in university of medical sciences.

No significant difference was found for the last perception, i.e., joy, among the three groups which means students of the three contexts had the same level of enjoyment regarding the classroom activities. As mentioned before, to the best knowledge of the present researchers, no study has been conducted to find the differences among various contexts to maintain here.

In terms of age, the results of the present study showed that challenge positively and significantly correlated with age while interest, choice, and joy did not correlate with this variable. In other words, the age of EFL students affects their perceptions in terms of challenge.

Regarding gender differences, there was a significant relationship between the two groups in their perceptions of challenge and choice, i.e., males were found to be significantly higher than females in their perceptions of challenge and choice. However, for interest and joy no significant differences were found. In a similar vein, Gentry, Gable, and Rizza (2002), conducted a study to investigate whether differences exist in students' perceptions of classroom activities regarding gender. They concluded that female students perceived their classroom activities more interesting and enjoyable than males did. These varying results relate to different contexts in which the studies have been investigated.

## CONCLUSION

Taken together, the findings of the current study put forward the prospect of developing a multidimensional understanding of students' perceptions of classroom activities in three diverse contexts. As Kern (1995) contended, the knowledge of learners' beliefs about language learning is a crucial concern in order to predict student frustration, lack of motivation and interest, and even quitting foreign language learning. It has also been posited that learning and teaching activities are conspicuities of an approach used in the language classroom (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The present study highlighted the role of EFL contexts of Iran in having noticeable bearings on students' perceptions regarding the activities used in the classroom. According to disparate methodologies and approaches used in official, semi-official, and non-official channels of learning, i.e., high schools, universities, and language institutes, the researchers of the current study decided to scrutinize learners' perceptions in each context separately and concluded that, different perceptions were found among the three contexts where university students perceived their classroom activities more interesting, challenging, and with more opportunities to choose their projects than school and institute learners. Consequently, a semi-official environment provides positive perceptions of EFL students in the context of Iran. Moreover, in terms of age and gender, it was concluded that, age affects perception of challenge and males perceive their classroom activities more challenging with more chances to select their favorite tasks or projects.

The results of this study, in accordance with previous research in terms of students' perceptions in three different contexts of EFL learning, revealed that these perceptions are significantly different among the three channels. Considering the primary

differences of students' perceptions in each context separately, teachers can adapt suitable methodologies to shape positive perceptions among learners especially high school students. Positive perceptions lead to intrinsically motivated students whose aim of learning English is to master the communicative ability and enjoy the learning process. Such achievements are accessible when motivated teachers and authentic materials are investigated. Negative perceptions, on the other hand, are detrimental which cause students to lose their motivation and interest toward language learning and become passive learners whose aim is to pass a prescribed course. Although shaping positive perceptions among all EFL learners is a tough job, it is possible to encourage students to learn English by emphasizing on communicative aspects of learning, adapting tentative methods and approaches, utilizing authentic or semi-authentic materials (interest), empowering students by providing opportunities to select an appropriate option among various choices (choice), creating challenging activities in learner-centered classes which improve students' critical thinking (challenging), and providing a relaxed and enjoyable environment for students (joy). The implications mentioned here are practical altogether if the ultimate objective of English teachers and Ministry Education in case of high schools is to nurture motivated, interested, and active learners.

The present study was carried out to explore different students' perceptions in three EFL contexts of Iran. Some suggestions can be made for future research. First, sample sizes in each channel larger than those presented in this study are recommended to ensure the validity and generalizability of the results. Second, the data collection was carried out in one city in Iran. Consequently, future research is suggested to incorporate data from various parts of the country. Third, no qualitative method such as interview was utilized to collect data. So, other approaches can be operated to collect more reliable data. Finally, more demographic variables such as; students' gender, achievement, and proficiency in addition to their age can be considered to delve into students' perceptions of classroom activities in more details.

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