International Journal of Engineering, Management and Humanities (IJEMH)
Volume 6, Issue 6, Nov.-Dec., 2025 pp: 73-78 ISSN: 2584-2145 www.ijemh.com

Exploring Undergraduate Students' Preferences for Teaching Methods in an Introductory Linguistics Course: A Needs-Based Analysis

Tan wuying[1, 2], Nalini Arumugam[1, 3]

[1] *Faculty of Business, Information and Human Sciences, Kuala Lumpur University of Science and Technology, Jalan-lkram-Uniten, 43000, Kajang, Selangor, Malaysia*

[2] *Nanchang Institute of Science and Technology, Nanchang, 330108, Jiangxi, China*

[3] *Faculty of Education, Language, Psychology and Music, SEGi University , Kota Damansara, 47810, PetalingJaya, Selangor, Malaysia.*

Corresponding Author: *Tan wuying*

Date of Submission: 14-11-2025 Date of Acceptance: 28-11-2025

Abstract: This study investigates undergraduate students' preferences for teaching methods in an introductory linguistics course from a needs-based perspective. A survey of 392 third-year English majors at application-oriented universities in Jiangxi province was conducted to examine perceptions of different instructional approaches. The results reveal that students expressed the highest preference for teacher's explanation, followed closely by project-based learning, problem-solving, and team activities, while class discussion and online-offline blended teaching received comparatively lower ratings. These findings suggest that students value a balanced instructional approach that combines clear teacher guidance with opportunities for active, task-oriented learning. Interpreted through the lens of Constructivist Learning Theory and Bloom's Revised Taxonomy, the results highlight the importance of scaffolding, experiential tasks, and collaborative learning in supporting both comprehension and application. Pedagogically, the study underscores the need to integrate teacher-led explanations with interactive, project-driven methods to enhance engagement and align instruction with learner needs.

Key words: undergraduate students; teaching method preferences; introductory linguistics course; needs-based analysis

I. Introduction

The teaching of introductory linguistics has long been regarded as a cornerstone in the academic training of undergraduate students majoring in English and related disciplines. As a foundation course, it not only provides essential knowledge of linguistic subfields but also develops students' analytical and problem-solving skills that are transferable to teaching, translation, and other language-related careers. However, while considerable attention has been devoted to determining what content should be included in such courses, comparatively less emphasis has been placed on exploring how the content is delivered—specifically, the teaching methods that best align with students' learning needs and expectations.

In recent decades, educational research has increasingly emphasized the importance of student-centered and needs-based instruction. Constructivist perspectives argue that effective learning emerges when students actively construct meaning through interactive engagement, while Bloom's revised taxonomy highlights the transition from lower-order cognitive skills, such as remembering and understanding, toward higher-order skills such as application and analysis. Despite these insights, many linguistics courses in application-oriented institutions continue to rely heavily on lecture-based approaches, often overlooking the potential benefits of participatory methods such as group discussions, problem-solving, and project-based learning. This mismatch between traditional instruction and contemporary pedagogical recommendations may limit the effectiveness of introductory linguistics teaching.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates undergraduate students' preferences for teaching methods in an introductory linguistics course at application-oriented institutions in China. Drawing on survey data from 392 third-year English majors, this research adopts a needs-based perspective to examine which teaching methods students perceive as most effective in facilitating their learning. By identifying these preferences, the

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study aims to provide empirical evidence for optimizing teaching practices in linguistics education and contribute to the broader discussion of curriculum design in language-related programs.

II. Literature Review

The question of how to teach linguistics effectively has been widely debated in applied linguistics and education research. Traditional lecture-based methods, which prioritize the transmission of theoretical knowledge, have long dominated introductory courses (AbdAlgane & Elmahdi, 2024). However, scholars have pointed out that such teacher-centered approaches often limit opportunities for active learning, which is crucial for deep comprehension and skill transfer (Hontarenko & Kovalenko, 2024).

In contrast, student-centered pedagogies, such as collaborative learning, project-based learning, and problem-solving activities, have been shown to enhance learners' engagement and critical thinking. For example, Kozanitis and Nenciovici (2023) demonstrated that active learning strategies promote higher academic achievement and retention compared to passive lectures. Similarly, Nunan (2004) argued that task-based approaches allow students to engage with authentic problems, thereby fostering both language development and analytical skills.

Constructivist perspectives further reinforce the value of participatory teaching methods. According to Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), learners benefit most when instruction provides scaffolded support that bridges the gap between what they can accomplish independently and what they can achieve through guided interaction. In the context of introductory linguistics teaching, methods such as class discussions and group projects can serve as scaffolding mechanisms, enabling students to construct knowledge collaboratively.

Recent empirical studies conducted in Asian EFL contexts also highlight students' growing preference for interactive and blended teaching approaches. For instance, Zhang & Ma (2023) and Song et al. (2024) found that project-based learning significantly improved EFL learners' analytical abilities and motivation. In Chinese universities, blended teaching combining online and offline activities has been reported to increase students' satisfaction and adaptability (Fang, 2024). These findings suggest that students' learning needs extend beyond mastering linguistic theory; they also require pedagogical formats that align with their cognitive and professional development goals.

Taken together, the existing literature underscores a shift from content-oriented to needs-based pedagogy in linguistics instruction. Nevertheless, few studies have systematically examined undergraduate students' explicit preferences for teaching methods in introductory linguistics courses. This gap justifies the present study, which adopts a needs analysis framework to investigate students' perspectives and provide evidence-based recommendations for curriculum design.

III. Methodology

This section outlines the research design, participants, instruments, data collection procedures, and analytical methods employed in the study.

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a **quantitative survey-based design** to identify and analyze undergraduate students' preferences for teaching methods in an introductory linguistics course. A structured questionnaire was developed based on the principles of needs analysis in English for Specific Purposes (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) and student-centered pedagogy (Nunan, 2004). The questionnaire items were designed to capture learners' perceived usefulness and importance of different instructional approaches.

3.2 Participants

The participants consisted of 392 third-year undergraduate students majoring in English at application-oriented universities in Jiangxi province, China. All participants had just completed the required introductory linguistics course, which enabled them to form informed opinions regarding the effectiveness and suitability of different teaching methods. Prior to this course, they had primarily studied core English language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). The sample reflected diverse academic performance levels, thereby enhancing the representativeness of the findings.

3.3 Instruments

The questionnaire included six items specifically targeting students' preferences for teaching methods in an introductory linguistics course. These items covered:Class discussion, Teacher's explanation, Team activities, Problem-solving, Project-based learning and Blended learning

Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not important at all*) to 5 (*extremely important*). The questionnaire was piloted with a

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smaller group of 50 students before formal distribution, and minor revisions were made to ensure clarity and reliability.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

The final version of the questionnaire was administered in class with the consent of instructors. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. The survey was conducted over a two-week period in the Spring semester of 2024.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard error, minimum, maximum, and sum) were calculated to provide a clear overview of students' preferences for each teaching method. The analysis emphasized the relative ranking of methods based on mean scores, which reflects students' collective prioritization. These descriptive results were then interpreted with reference to relevant educational theories, including Constructivist Learning Theory, Bloom's Taxonomy, and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

IV. Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of students' preferences for teaching methods in the introductory linguistics course. Six items were included in the survey: class discussion, teacher's explanation, team activities, problem-solving, project-learning, and online–offline blended teaching.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of teaching method preferences

Item	N	Mean	Std. Error	Minimum	Maximum	Sum
Class discussion	392	3.88	0.041	1	5	1522
Teacher's explanation	392	4.06	0.039	1	5	1590
Team activities	392	3.95	0.037	2	5	1548
Problem-solving	392	3.96	0.037	1	5	1554
Project-learning	392	4.04	0.040	1	5	1582
Online–offline blended teaching	392	3.88	0.040	1	5	1521

The analysis indicates that teacher's explanation (M = 4.06, SE = 0.039) and project-learning (M = 4.04, SE = 0.040) were rated the highest, suggesting that students strongly value both structured guidance from instructors and opportunities for project-based, experiential learning. These results highlight a balance between traditional teacher-centered instruction and innovative student-centered approaches.

Problem-solving (M = 3.96, SE = 0.037) and team activities (M = 3.95, SE = 0.037) also received relatively high ratings, reflecting students' recognition of the importance of collaborative and analytical learning opportunities. These preferences align with active learning strategies that encourage critical thinking and peer interaction.

In contrast, class discussion (M = 3.88, SE = 0.041) and online–offline blended teaching (M = 3.88, SE = 0.040) were rated slightly lower, although still within the "agree" range. This may suggest that while students appreciate interactive learning formats, they perceive greater benefits from structured explanations, projects, and problem-solving activities than from open-ended discussions or hybrid learning modes.

As shown in Figure 1, teacher's explanation and project-learning were rated the highest, followed by problem-solving and team activities. Class discussion and online–offline blended teaching received comparatively lower, though still favorable, ratings. The figure visually reinforces the descriptive statistics in Table 1, highlighting the overall balance between structured instructor guidance and active, student-centered methods.

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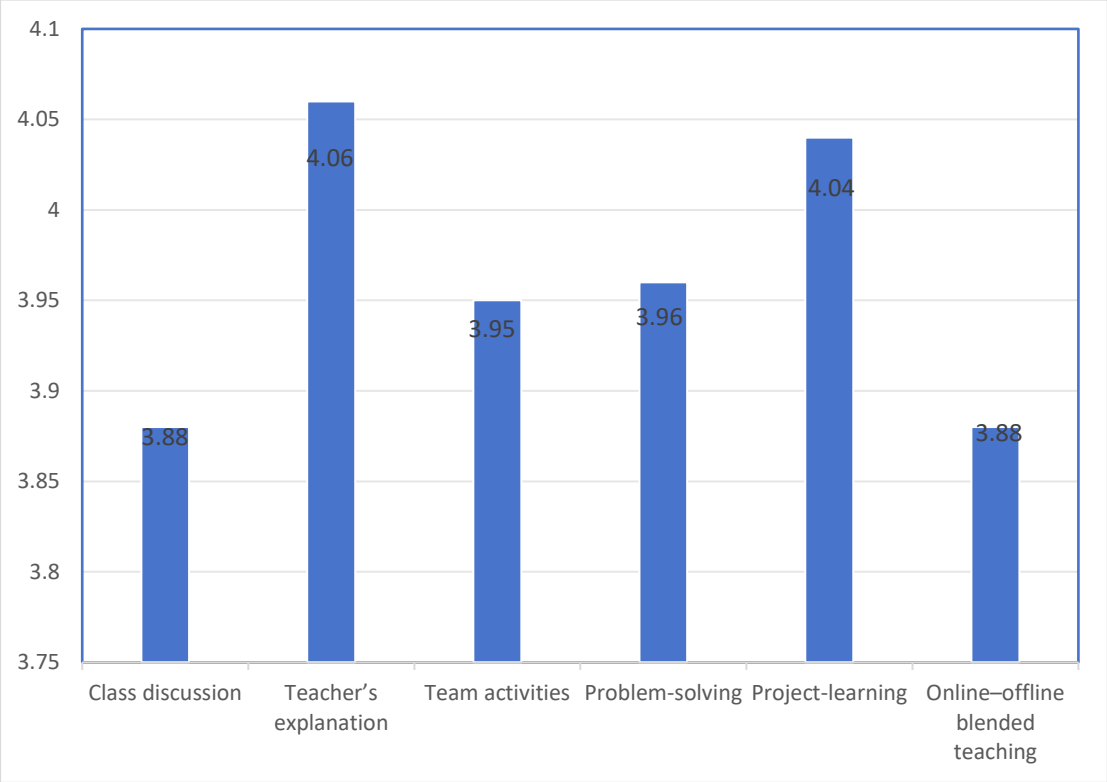
Figure 1. Students' preferences for teachingmethods



Overall, the findings demonstrate a clear preference for methods that combine structured instructor input with active, task-based engagement, indicating that students desire both authoritative guidance and opportunities for practical application in their linguistics learning.

V. Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into undergraduate students' preferences for teaching methods in an introductory linguistics course. The results suggest that students favor a combination of teacher-centered guidance and student-centered, active learning approaches.

5.1 Theoretical Interpretation

From the perspective of Constructivist Learning Theory, students' preference for teacher's explanation indicates the importance of scaffolding, whereby learners rely on structured input to build a conceptual foundation (Vygotsky, 1978). At the same time, their high ratings for project-learning, problem-solving, and team activities highlight the constructivist emphasis on active engagement and knowledge co-construction (Damşa, 2013).

According to Bloom's Revised Taxonomy(Riyanda et al., 2024), project-learning and problem-solving correspond to higher-order cognitive processes such as application, analysis, and creation. This suggests that students are not only seeking to understand linguistic theories but also wish to apply them in meaningful, task-based contexts. Meanwhile, teacher's explanation supports lower-order cognitive processes (remembering and understanding), which remain necessary for grasping abstract linguistic concepts before advancing to higher levels of thinking.

In terms of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the preference for collaborative methods such as team activities and problem-solving reflects students' reliance on peer support and teacher guidance to achieve learning outcomes beyond their independent capacity. These findings confirm that a balance between structured explanation and collaborative exploration aligns with effective scaffolding practices in linguistics education.

2. Comparison with Existing Literature

The results are consistent with prior studies in English language education that report students' preference for a hybrid instructional model combining traditional explanation with interactive methods. For example, Luchini and Galante (2024)

emphasized that multimodal and student-centered approaches enhance autonomy and self-regulation in pronunciation training. Similarly, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) noted that needs-based curriculum design in ESP should integrate both input-oriented and task-oriented activities to maximize learner engagement.

However, the relatively lower rating of class discussion and blended online–offline learning contrasts with research that highlights the motivational benefits of interactive digital platforms (Sharma al., 2022). This divergence may reflect contextual factors, such as students' limited exposure to blended instruction or their preference for more structured, tangible activities like projects and problem-solving tasks.

3. Pedagogical Implications

These findings carry several implications for the design of introductory linguistics courses at application-oriented institutions:

Balanced Instruction: Teachers should combine clear, structured explanations with opportunities for applied, project-based learning.

Task-Oriented Activities: Incorporating problem-solving and team activities can help students bridge theory and practice, developing analytical and collaborative skills essential for linguistics and beyond.

Scaffolded Progression: Instruction should follow a progression from foundational knowledge (via explanation) to higher-order tasks (via projects and problem-solving), in line with Bloom's Taxonomy and ZPD principles.

Selective Use of Digital Tools: While blended learning was rated lower, carefully integrating online resources with classroom activities may gradually enhance student acceptance and motivation.

VI. Conclusion

This study explored undergraduate students' preferences for teaching methods in an introductory linguistics course at application-oriented universities. The findings reveal that while students highly value teacher's explanation as a foundation for understanding abstract linguistic concepts, they also show a strong preference for student-centered, task-based approaches, particularly project-learning, problem-solving, and team activities. In contrast, class discussion and blended online–offline teaching received relatively lower ratings, suggesting that students may still be adapting to these methods or perceive them as less effective in achieving learning outcomes.

Theoretically, the results align with constructivist principles, Bloom's Taxonomy, and the Zone of Proximal Development, highlighting the importance of balancing foundational input with opportunities for higher-order thinking and collaborative learning. Pedagogically, the findings suggest that introductory linguistics course should adopt a hybrid instructional model that combines structured explanation with applied, interactive activities. Such an approach not only fosters deeper understanding but also enhances learners' engagement, autonomy, and readiness for future academic and professional tasks.

Future research could examine whether these teaching method preferences differ across institutional types, year levels, or linguistic subfields, as well as how digital tools can be better integrated to support student engagement. Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on linguistics education by emphasizing the role of needs-based pedagogy in optimizing teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes.

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