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Assessing English language teachers' understanding and practices of student-centered learning in Oman

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Abstract

Student-centered learning assessment (SCLA) constitutes a major component of current educational initiatives at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS). However, little research has been conducted on English teachers' understanding and practices of SCL assessment. Therefore, this study seeks to explore English teachers' understanding and practices of SCL assessment at UTAS in Oman. The findings could provide information regarding teachers' understanding and practices of SCLA. The findings may contribute to how English teachers define SCLA, what SCL-related activities they conduct, and how often these are conducted. Sixty-one teachers participated in the study with an average of 24 years of experience. A series of interviews and questions were used to elicit data from the participants. A questionnaire was used to explore teachers' understanding of SCLA. Interviews were used in conjunction with the questionnaires to obtain more detailed information from the participants. The findings of this study showed that each of the English teachers has their definitions and understandings of SCLA; however, it was difficult to understand teachers' definitions of SCLA due to the lack of a common definition for this term in the literature. Teachers should be encouraged to empower students by working in mixed groups on the basis that the advanced students each head up separate groups. The implication is to allow less able students to mimic and imitate their peers and improve their comprehension, pronunciation, and vocabulary in and out of the classroom. Future research could be enhanced by other stakeholders, such as students and administrators, involvement.

Keywords: Assessment, EFL, Problem-based learning, Student-centered assessment, Student-centered learning, Student involvement, Teacher-centered learning

Introduction

Assessment, as Rowntree (1977) has defined, is about getting to know our students and the quality of their learning. Quality of assessment is one of the main features of effective teaching. Setting appropriate assessment tasks should question students in a way that requires evidence of understanding. It is also vital to employ a variety of techniques for discovering what students have learned. More importantly, knowledge and understanding are assessed through a combination of unseen examinations and assessed in-course assignments including quizzes, essays, presentations, reports, and

problem-solving-based assessments. Intellectual skills are assessed via a combination of unseen written examinations, and coursework related to engineering, which requires analysis and problem-solving. Practical skills are assessed through a combination of continuous formative assessment, summative assessments, and objective structured and/or practical examinations. Transferable skills are assessed via a range of assignments built into the curriculum, including coursework reports, oral presentations, and research exercises (Akter et al., 2022).

Learning outcomes assessment is a critical part of a program's success. It can influence a program's reputation, enrolment, funding, and even its continued existence. Therefore, it is essential to get useful assessment data without creating an overwhelming burden for busy faculty members.

Usually, data are collected and reported, but what is being done with them? You need to do something with the results. So, often assessment is focused on improving students' learning, but there is also an opportunity to indicate what a department or program is doing as well. It could be used to help improve the learning opportunities for students. It could also be used to promote the program to incoming students. It is important, according to Morel (2021), that faculty work collaboratively to define learning outcomes so that they are all on the same path. Sometimes with assessment initiatives, just having the conversation is valuable. Assessment helps faculty see how their course is connected to the overall program. At another level, it may help faculty to aid students to understand why they might need a particular course as part of their program.

Effective assessment needs to include direct evidence of student learning—what skills, abilities, knowledge, and attributes are they exhibiting as a result of participating in the program? There can be a combination of direct and indirect evidence, which is typically measured by certain techniques such as surveys and an exit questionnaire.

Student-centered learning assessment (SCLA) embodies sound assessment practices that can be incorporated into any educational setting but are especially critical in SCLA contexts, where active engagement in learning and responsibility for the management of learning are core assumptions (Komatsu et al., 2021). In this report, we begin to paint a picture of SCLA by discussing existing classroom-based assessment practices in terms of their role in a comprehensive system and how well it represents our defining characteristics of SCLA. The picture that emerges includes a blend of classroom-based assessments, such as student self- and peer assessments, formative tests, and portfolios. Computer-based assessments are also featured, which hold special promise in a balanced system (Matsuyama, 2019; Rahman et al., 2021a). While all the assessments we discuss play a valuable role, some are more student-centered than others, according to the definition used for the Students at the Center project. It is intended to point out some of the challenges faced by each type of assessment and outline possibilities for advancements.

Definition of Student-Centered Learning Assessment (SCLA)

Like any good assessment, SCLA articulates appropriately challenging and developmentally appropriate learning targets. It also provides feedback to students, teachers, districts, and states about how to deepen learning. It is valid and reliable for the given context, and it is practicable and efficient (Abdigapbarova & Zhiyenbayeva, 2022; Rezai et al., 2022).

The first and most obvious feature of SCLA is that it is individualized. Indeed, how could it not center on individual students' strengths, needs, and interests and still be student-centered? Individualizing assessment involves differentiating learning targets, assignments, and tasks, providing focused feedback on students' learning (whether they are working alone or in groups) and adjusting teaching and learning processes as needed (Rahman et al., 2021b; Vadivel & Beena, 2019).

SCLA also focuses on learning and growth. That means it does more than measure and report student learning or the lack thereof—although it does those things as well. SCLA promotes learning and growth by providing useful feedback to the students themselves, their teachers, and others about what the students need in order to progress toward the learning target. This quality of SCLA echoes modern conceptions of formative assessment in that assessment is a moment of learning, not just grading, ranking, or sorting.

SCLA involves the active engagement of students in setting goals for their learning and growth, monitoring their progress toward those goals, and determining how to address any gaps. Also called self-regulated learning, the ability to manage one's own learning and growth is a key type of expertise needed for 21st-century college, and career success. Classroom assessment practices such as self-assessment, peer assessment, and portfolios have the potential to not only help students learn core content knowledge and skills but also to develop important self-regulatory habits (Akter et al., 2022; Vadivel et al., 2021).

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of our definition of SCLA is that it is motivating. Many people associate being evaluated with mild to moderate anxiety, not motivation, and research has shown that grades can be associated with decreased motivation and lower achievement. However, recent studies have shown that formative assessment—particularly detailed, task-specific comments on student work—can activate interest in a task and result in better performance. Recent studies have shown that formative assessment—particularly detailed, task-specific comments on student work—can activate interest in a task and result in better performance (Mingorance et al., 2019).

Finally, SCLA is informative and useful to a variety of audiences. Gravett et al. (2021) have said that American students are the most tested and the least examined students in the world. We have test scores coming out of our ears, but we do not yet do a very good job of using assessment information to adapt curricula and instruction. SCLA provides useful information that stakeholders at all levels, including students, teachers, administrators, parents, districts, and states, can use to support learning. For an example of an assessment that is informative at the local level, consider public exhibitions of student work, which engage an audience from the community in discussions of the quality of student work and learning, and of the education students are getting (Liu et al., 2021; Morel, 2021).

Considering the aforementioned issues related to the role of assessment in SCLA, this study seeks to explore English teachers' understanding and practices of SCLA at the University of Technology & Applied Sciences (UTAS) in Oman. UTAS greatly emphasizes SCLA in educating students, as reflected by its inclusion in the university's mission statement. The success of any educational reform, e.g., the implementation of SCLA, depends greatly on how teachers understand and practice such reforms (Ghahderijani et al., 2021; Wedell, 2003). Despite the abundance of literature on SCLA, few studies have been conducted on how teachers in general and English teachers, in particular,

understand and practice SCLA. Therefore, this study seeks to add to the literature on English teachers' understanding and practices of SCLA.

Study background

This study was conducted at the English Language Centre (ELC) at UTAS – Ibra in Oman. UTAS – Ibra is a branch of the University of Technology & Applied Sciences. UTAS – Ibra also has three other academic departments besides the ELC, namely, Engineering, Information Technology (IT), and Business. The ELC offers two major programs: a foundation program and a post-foundation program. The foundation program involves four levels of English, Mathematics, and IT. Prior to joining the university, students would have studied English for 12 years at school as part of their basic education. Initially, students are placed in the program based on their placement test results determining their level of English. Each level has specific outcomes and textbooks for all four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The post-foundation program involves English courses meant to address the needs of students in the above specialization departments. These courses involve public speaking, technical writing, and technical communication. Eighty teachers from 14 countries constitute the ELC teaching staff.

English is the medium of instruction at UTAS, and SCLA is a primary obligation in the UTAS mission statement: “To deliver high-quality student-centered education that provides competitive graduates who enter the labor market with confidence, strong technological and personal skills, and are prepared for a life of contribution and success” (Ministry of Manpower, 2016, p.6).

UTAS emphasizes the proper utilization of SCLA. Hence, it has issued the document “SCLA Strategies in the Colleges of Technology” for this purpose (Ministry of Manpower, 2016, p.6). This document discusses SCLA expectations in UTAS, strategies, and plans for achieving this mission. The document is driven by the need for designing and implementing effective learning environments, centered on students becoming responsible, active, and creative lifelong learners (Ministry of Manpower, 2016)—the goal being “to make the staff and students aware of SCL and show how this can be achieved in UTAS” (Ministry of Manpower, 2016, p.6). With this study, the researchers aim to investigate English teachers' understanding and practices of SCLA in UTAS – Ibra.

In spite of previous studies on the role of SCL in language learning and assessment, little research has been done on English language teachers' understanding and practices of SCLA. Moreover, despite the abundance of literature on SCLA (Komatsu et al., 2021), few studies have been conducted on how teachers in general and English teachers, in particular, understand and practice SCLA. Therefore, this study seeks to explore English teachers' understanding and practices of SCLA at UTAS in Oman. The findings could provide information regarding teachers' understanding and practices of SCLA. The findings may contribute new knowledge to TESOL literature on how English teachers define SCLA, what SCL-related activities they conduct, and how often these are conducted.

The rationale for the study

SCLA constitutes a major component of the current educational initiatives at UTAS. Since the introduction of SCLA at the university in 2014–2015, UTAS has been making efforts to improve SCLA implementation. As this study is the first to touch on the

practices of SCLA in UTAS, it could provide the university with information regarding teachers' understanding and practices of SCLA. In other words, how they define SCLA, what SCL-related activities they practice, and how often they practice them.

In addition, this study is the first teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) study to deal with the area of English teachers' understanding and practices of SCLA. The findings may contribute new knowledge to TESOL literature on how English teachers define SCLA, what SCL-related activities they conduct, and how often these are conducted. Based on the description of the context of the study, this study was guided by the questions in Table 1.

Literature review

From student-centered learning (SCL) to student-centered assessment (SCLA)

For many years in education, the focus has been on content with experts, i.e., teachers, delivering the content to novices, i.e., learners. In contrast to this passive, teacher-centered approach, a constructivist approach, influenced by the theories of Vygotsky (1986) and Piaget (1977), relies on active exploration by students with professors providing guidance as needed. Through his initial research with snails, then later with children, Piaget (1977) provided a basis for a theory of constructivism whereby knowledge is not something which is produced independently, but instead it adapts according to the organism's experiential world (Fosnot, 1996). Von Glasersfeld (1996) states, "Knowledge, then, could be treated not as a more or less accurate representation of external things, situations, and events, but rather as a mapping of actions and conceptual operations that had proven viable in the knowledge of the subject's experience" (p.3).

Learners must pay attention to relevant information, organize the information into logical representation, and integrate these representations with existing knowledge (Weimer, 2002a, b). The constructivist approach also emphasizes the role of intrinsic motivation which involves engaging in a behavior that is satisfying in and of itself (Schmitt & Lahroodi, 2008). Underlying this approach is the belief that individuals learn best when they are intrinsically motivated to seek out new knowledge and skills (Norman & Spohrer, 1996) and that intrinsic motivation is key to creativity (Runco, 2019).

Thus, because learners are at the center of the educational process, this approach is often referred to as student-centered. Constructivist theorists contend that students do not have to have mastery of a subject, but instead, they are "encouraged to explore it, handle it, relate it to their own experience, and challenge it whatever their level of expertise" (Weimer, 2002a, b, p.13).

Piaget along with Vygotsky and other semiotic interactionists held the idea that we as humans cannot have an objective view of reality because we continually transform and

Table 1 Research questions and the methods used to address these questions

Main question	Sub questions	Methods
What are teachers' understanding and practices of the SCLA approach?	Q1 How do teachers of English define the SCLA approach?	Questionnaire + interview
	Q2 What do teachers of English say about their practices of the SCLA approach?	Questionnaire + interview

reconstruct it and ourselves (Fosnot, 1996). However, while there has been a plethora of time and energy devoted to developing methods and techniques of student-centered teaching, not as much attention has been focused on student-centered assessment.

Definition of student-centered learning assessment (SCLA)

Student-centered learning assessment (SCLA) demands that students set their own objectives for learning and determine the resources and activities that will help them meet those objectives (Jonassen, 2000). This approach begins with a central question that creates a need for certain knowledge and activities, and learning is the result of students' attempts to respond to that question (Jonassen, 2000). Through learner-centered teaching, evaluation is used to provide a balance between generating grades and promoting learning (Weimer, 2002a, b). We set out to challenge our students to be more fully engaged in both the learning and assessment process.

Like any good assessment, SCLA articulates appropriately challenging and developmentally appropriate learning targets. It also provides feedback to students, teachers, districts, and states about how to deepen learning. It is valid and reliable for the given context, and it is practicable and efficient (McMillan, 2019). SCLA has several additional defining qualities. It is (1) individualized, (2) focused on learning and growth, (3) motivating, (4) amenable to actively engaging students in the regulation of their own learning, and (5) Informative and useful to a variety of audiences.

The first and most obvious feature of SCLA is that it is individualized. Indeed, how could it not center on individual students' strengths, needs, and interests and still be student-centered? Individualizing assessment involves differentiating learning targets, assignments, and tasks, providing focused feedback on students' learning (whether they are working alone or in groups) and adjusting teaching and learning processes as needed. SCLA also focuses on learning and growth. That means it does more than measure and report student learning or the lack thereof—although it does those things as well. Student-centered assessment promotes learning and growth by providing useful feedback to the students themselves, their teachers, and others about what the students need in order to progress toward the learning target. This quality of student-centered assessment echoes modern conceptions of formative assessment in that assessment is a moment of learning, not just grading, ranking, or sorting.

SCLA involves the active engagement of students in setting goals for their learning and growth, monitoring their progress toward those goals, and determining how to address any gaps. Also called self-regulated learning, the ability to manage one's own learning and growth is a key type of expertise needed for 21st-century college and career success. Classroom assessment practices such as self-assessment, peer assessment, and portfolios have the potential to not only help students learn core content knowledge and skills but also to develop important self-regulatory habits (Dong et al., 2019).

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Finally, SCLA is informative and useful to a variety of audiences. According to Resnick and Resnick (1985), American students are the most tested and the least examined students in the world. We have test scores coming out of our ears, but we do not yet do a very good job of using assessment information to adapt curricula and instruction. SCLA provides useful information that stakeholders at all levels— including students, teachers, administrators, parents, districts, and states—can use to support learning.

Understanding of student-centered learning assessment (SCLA)

Little research has been conducted on English teachers' understanding and practices of SCLA. Din and Wheatley (2007) reviewed 28 studies on SCLA, but none of these studies were TESOL-connected. The main finding of this review indicates that SCLA takes a variety of forms and has been individually defined. Equally, in Pederson and Liu's (2003) study of science teachers' beliefs regarding SCLA, they found that teachers hold varied definitions of SCLA. In Oman, the only study touching on SCLA is Emeyeonu's (2012) study. This study focused on the challenges that deter proper implementation of SCLA in colleges of applied sciences. The study revealed that there are a number of challenges that hinder the use of SCLA, such as teachers' and students' poor perceptions of SCLA. Emeyeonu (2012) contended that for proper implementation of SCLA in Oman, an investigation of teachers' beliefs about and practices of SCLA is first needed. Hence, the current study can be seen as a response to this call and seeks to add to the body of knowledge on TESOL.

Kember's (1997) definition of SCLA asserts that there are two main teaching orientations for teachers: teacher-centered, which follows a content-oriented methodology, and student-centered, which is learning-oriented. In distinguishing between the two approaches, Kember (1997) supports authors promoting the student-centered view that student-centered knowledge is constructed by students and that the lecturer acts as the facilitator of learning rather than a presenter of information.

Burnard (1999) emphasized "choice" in the area of learning in his interpretation of student-centeredness as "students might not only choose what to study but how and why that topic might be interesting one to study" (p.244). Both Burnard (1999) and Hannafin et al. (1997) emphasized Roger's (1983) belief that students' perceptions of the world were important, relevant, and appropriate. This definition emphasizes the concept of students' choice in learning. Harden and Crosby (2000), among others, posit that "what students do to achieve this, rather than what the teacher does" is important (p.335). This definition emphasizes the concept of the students "doing." Other researchers (e.g., Morel, 2021) articulate broader and more comprehensive definitions. Lea et al. (2003) summarised the literature on SCLA to include these tenets: "The reliance on active rather than passive learning, increased responsibility and accountability on the part of the student, an increased sense of autonomy in the learner and mutual respect and interdependence between the teacher and learner" (p.322).

Summarising the above studies indicates that SCLA has been variously defined by scholars. Some scholars propose SCLA as the concept of the student's choice in their education; others see it as the student doing more than the lecturer; while others broadly define both concepts, adding the shift of power in the relationship between student and teacher.

The continuum of SCLA

The three concepts of SCLA given above—choice, doing, and power—can be used to illustrate the dichotomy that exists between teacher-centered learning and SCLA, represented as a continuum (something that continues and changes slowly over time) from the end of teacher-centered learning to the end of realizing the three SCLA concepts. Table 2, which is adopted from the study of O’Neill and McMahon (2005), illustrates the polar opposite position of these two approaches at either end of the continuum.

In reality, the situation in practice is usually a mixture of both teacher-centered learning and student-centered learning assessment, not fixed but fluid and constantly evolving requiring continual assessment within the process of moving from teacher-centered to student-centered learning assessment. In exploring the practice of SCLA in UTAS – Ibra this study will shed light on where the university stands concerning this continuum.

Ways to foster SCLA

The following sections explain ways to foster SCLA in the TESOL context.

Students’ involvement in the curriculum design

Scholars have explored the importance of students’ involvement in the design of curricula and asserted that in SCLA contexts students should be actively involved by their teachers in choosing what and how they want to study (Emenyeonu, 2012). Among researchers, Donnelly and Fitzmaurice (2005) emphasized focusing on students’ needs from the earliest stages of designing and formulating curricula. This helps students to define their learning objectives and outcomes. Pederson and Lie (2003), however, raised a question regarding the extent to which students’ choices should be considered in today’s higher education institutions. This is because, as they assert, modularisation, which was to be applied in all European Union undergraduate courses from 2006, allowed students only an element of choice, which could be considered a limit on students’ freedom of choice (Dong et al., 2019). Additionally, unrestricted choice in the curriculum is not without its difficulties, as Edwards (2001) and Simon (1999) argued regarding the dangers of individuality in the concept of social learners and how this can, in a seemingly contradictory way, affect the individuality of student-centeredness and lead to the disempowerment of students. For Simon (1999), a complete focus on the individual learner does not take into account the needs of the whole class, and he asserts that “if each child is unique, and each requires a specific pedagogical approach appropriate to him or her and no other, the construction of an all-embracing pedagogy or general principles of teaching become an impossibility” (p.42). Edwards (2001) also highlighted the dangers associated with student-centeredness, in that in empowering an individual there is a potential danger of “a person’s physical isolation from other learners” (p.42). Both Simon

Table 2 Student-centered and teacher-centered learning assessment continuum

Teacher-centered Learning	Student-centered learning
Low level of student choice	High level of student choice
Student passive	Student active
Power is primarily with the teacher	Power is primarily with the student

and Edwards go on to argue that the concept of being an independent learner, choosing one's route of learning, may drive some of the sociability out of the learning process if care is not taken to emphasize the importance of peers.

One of the forms of a student-centered approach to curriculum design is problem-based learning (PBL). This form allows students the choice of what they may study within the curriculum (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). PBL encourages students to develop their own learning goals and to fill in the gaps in their knowledge or understanding (Boud & Feletti, 1997; Toohey, 2000).

Students' involvement in the teaching and learning methods

Weimer (2002a, b) describes today's college and university students as anxious and tentative, rather than empowered, confident, and self-motivated. She recommends lecturers share power with students by involving them in the decision-making process. Empowering students develop their interaction, confidence, personality, and transferable skills (Ministry of Manpower, 2006). Other activities UTAS promotes include awareness creation (learning sessions for SCLA students; what, why, and how); modeling (demonstrating how to handle and solve problems); questioning (asking students questions measuring their understanding of a topic); reading, thinking, writing, pairing, and sharing, and online discussions (Moodle-based activities); and information gap activities (group or pair activities in which students share and exchange information on outcome-related tasks). Moodle is a free and open learning platform set to support a collaborative learning environment between students and their teachers (Oproiu, 2015).

Students' involvement in assessment practices

Black (1999) claims many universities still employ written examinations as a form of summative assessment. Results obtained through such assessment come in the form of marks and grades, and it is considered a technique of power to control students (Foucault, cited in Broadfoot, 1999). To encourage a more student-centered approach, a formative assessment emphasizing feedback is needed. Formative assessment is given to students during their course or the semester, enabling them to improve their performance. O'Neil and McMahon (2005) exemplify formative assessment as including feedback on essays, portfolios, presentations, and assignments.

Brown and Gibbs (1994) suggest that students be involved in the various assessment processes of selecting and designing assessment tasks, discussion of criteria, and self-assessment or peer feedback. Self-assessment refers to opportunities given to learners to assess their performance during and at the end of the learning experience (Andrade & Brown, 2016). Black (1999) and Poehner (2012) elucidate self-assessment as an essential activity helping students take responsibility for their learning.

Even though previous research in language assessment programs has taken into account the significance of SCLA, few, if any, studies have explored how teachers' perceptions could be shaped with regard to SCLA. It is still vague how teachers understand, and practice SCLA and put them into practice during the assessment. Consequently, this research aims to investigate teachers' understandings and perceptions of SCLA at UTAS in Oman in Ibra to observe how they would perceive the role of SCLA in language assessment. The findings of this study will definitely contribute to teachers'

understandings and practices of SCLA and help enrich the literature on teachers' perceptions and their definitions of SCLA. It will also provide fruitful information on how SCLA-related activities and the relevant assessment of which could be put into practice in language classes.

Methodology

Research design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, involving “a mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2020, p.5). Each research question was answered via two methods: a questionnaire and an interview (see Table 2), which resulted in both quantitative and qualitative data being obtained. The quantitative data resulted from the questionnaire's close-ended questions, whilst the qualitative data resulted from both the questionnaire's open-ended questions and the interview itself. The use of this combination of data helped the researchers to achieve a better understanding of the topic and to collect more comprehensive relevant information to answer our research questions (Dornyei, 2007; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Creswell (2009) states that the most commonly used type of mixed-methods design in educational research is triangulation. Triangulation has aided different types of methods (e.g., questionnaires and interviews) complement each other and leading to enhancing the study validity (Shenton, 2004). However, according to Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004), a challenge with triangulation could be related to the data analysis, because consolidating quantitative and qualitative data can be difficult for the researchers. The researchers encountered this issue during their analysis; thus, they decided to deal with each type of data separately to avoid confusion and to obviate errors in the analysis. The analysis started first with the quantitative data and then the qualitative data. Finally, the categories or patterns across different sets of data were compared (for more details on how the analysis was done, see the data analysis section of the article). Similarly, in the Findings section (see Results), the quantitative findings (the questionnaire close-ended questions) were presented first, and then the qualitative findings (the questionnaire open-ended responses and the interviews data). However, in the discussion, both the quantitative and qualitative findings were combined to answer the research questions, except when they contradicted one another.

Participants

The study was conducted at the ELC at UTAS – Ibra, Oman. This location was selected because the researchers worked in the same institution, thus providing us easy access to gatekeepers in planning for data collection. As stated earlier in the Background section, the ELC involves teachers for three core subjects: English, IT, and Mathematics. The study survey was purposeful as it only targeted English teachers (Cohen et al., 2000). Sixty-one teachers participated in the study, representing 76.5% of the English teachers at the center, and their teaching experience ranged from three to more than 24 years.

Altogether sixty-one participants consisting of 38 male and 23 female lecturers took part in this research. The participants ranged in age from 224 to 58 with an average age of 38 who had all experience in English language teaching. The participants came from various countries and nationalities including Indians, some Filipinos, a few Pakistanis,

Omanis, Jordanians, Tunisians, and Uzbeks, and very few Canadians, Egyptians, Sudanese Bangladeshi, Americans, British, Australians, South Africans, and Europeans.

Twenty teachers who participated in the survey showed interest in participating in the interview part of this study. However, due to limits of time and research scope, only ten teachers were selected utilizing stratified purposeful sampling (Cohen, 2007). The researchers chose this method because they sought to identify participants that represent each of the five different English levels assignment—specifically, Levels 1 to 4 and post-foundation—with varying levels of experience. Initially, the 20 teachers were divided according to their English level assignments, resulting in five strata. Then the strata were subdivided, based on level assignments, into two groups. One group consisted of teachers with 0–10 years of teaching experience, and the other included those with more than 10 years of experience, resulting in ten strata. A person, not associated with this study, selected one teacher randomly from each stratum, resulting in ten teachers being chosen. The ten teachers were contacted via email to arrange the interviews. This sampling strategy enabled us to maintain equal representation from the five levels and across years of teaching experience.

Research instruments

As this is a mixed-methods study, questionnaires and interviews were used to obtain the data needed to address the research questions. In this section, the researchers intend to give some background information about these tools.

Questionnaires

The questionnaire (see Appendix 1) is divided into three parts. The first part gathers information on respondents' details, including their type of English level assignment and their teaching experience. The aim was, as Munn and Drever (2004) suggest, to prepare the participants to answer the rest of the questionnaire. The second part elicits the respondents' definitions of SCLA. This explored how teachers understood SCLA. The participants are provided with eight different definitions of SCLA. The first is taken from the university document and represents the university-perceived definition of SCLA; the rest are taken from our literature review above. The third part gathers information on respondents' practices of SCLA in and out of the classroom, and it includes twelve different types of activities related to SCLA. The university suggests that teachers incorporate and embed these activities in their course delivery plans. This part aimed to see how often the participants follow the suggested activities of SCLA.

After the design stage, the questionnaire was piloted in another university branch. The aim was, as suggested by Kelley et al. (2003), to make sure that the questions and the instructions are clear and to confirm the time needed to complete the questionnaire by the participants (14–15 min in this study). The questionnaire was emailed to the head of the English Language Center at that university. He distributed the questionnaire among a group of English teachers and then scanned and e-mailed the completed questionnaires back to the researchers with some comments. These comments were generally related to the organization, language, and time spent completing the questionnaire. The questionnaire, used in this study, contained 20 items all on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree" which, by nature, provided nominal data for this study. The

questionnaire was designed and developed by the headquarters of UTAS in 2016; however, its reliability and validity were checked and measured (see below) to ascertain its appropriateness before use. Since the data collected by the questionnaires were on a nominal scale, the rating of them was done by the researchers of this study as no bias would threaten the validity of the assessment.

It is noteworthy to indicate that the reliability of the questionnaire was estimated first to ascertain this important matter before putting it into practice. According to Table 3, the reliability of the questionnaire, in whole including 20 items, was $\alpha \geq 87.7\%$ which is according to Cohen's table of effect size considered much larger than typical.

Also, to ascertain the validity of the questions, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was run, and the obtained model fit reflecting the result of CFA displayed NFI (Normal Fit Index)=0.90, CFI (Comparative Fit Index)=0.94, TLI (Tucker Lewis Index)=0.92, SRMR (standardized root mean square residual)=0.05, and RMSEA (root mean square error of approximation)=0.047. All the obtained indices indicate the goodness of the model and confirm the validity of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was adjusted accordingly (see Appendix 1 for the final questionnaire).

Interviews

Interviews were used in conjunction with the questionnaires, as suggested by Scott (1996) and Creswell (2014), to obtain more detailed information from the participants. Semi-structured interviews were used, in which the structure of the interview was not fixed in advance (see Appendix 2). Whilst the interviews allowed flexibility, transcribing those interviews was time-consuming. In addition, analyzing those interviews and categorizing the data into appropriate themes was also not easy. This was because not all the interviews followed the same structure.

Each interview lasted 12–15 min and was audio-recorded. This enabled the researchers to concentrate on the interview process and engage in appropriate eye contact with the interviewees (Baxter & Gray, 2001; Nias, 1991). Because audio recording does not record non-verbal communication, the researchers notated the events they considered helpful in interpreting the data. After transcribing the interviews, the transcripts were given to the participants to read. The emphasis was on whether the participants considered that their words matched what they intended. This process was aimed at enhancing the research credibility (Mann, 2011; Shenton, 2004).

The perspective is that SCLA is a favorable approach and its implementation could enhance the learning and teaching process in UTAS. Nonetheless, the researchers assumed that teachers' constructions of the use of SCLA would not necessarily coincide with theirs. The researchers were careful during the interviews with colleagues not to express their own views, to allow teachers' alternative voices to be presented as authentic realities. To avoid inappropriate data analysis and ensure coding reliability, a colleague's assistance was requested to maintain intercoder agreement (Lombard et al., 2002). The researchers also

Table 3 Reliability statistics of the Social Class Questionnaire

Cronbach's alpha	N of Items
.877	20

employed critical subjectivity, resisting the temptation to look for data that confirmed their positions.

Procedure of the study and ethics considerations

Cohen and Manion (1994) defined ethics as “a matter of principled sensitivity to the right of others” (p.359). Therefore, the researchers sought the permission of the dean of UTAS – Ibra before conducting this study, and after her approval, all English staff was emailed and were invited to participate. The questionnaire was attached to the study’s information sheet, which made it clear that participation was voluntary and that participants’ identities would be protected. For the interview, only those who were interested in participating were involved, and all the sessions were conducted in a quiet room at the university. Before each interview session, the purpose of the interview and the research as a whole were explained to the participants and they were assured that the information they provided would be kept confidential and anonymous. The participants were also informed that the interviews would be recorded, with which they all agreed. Each participant signed a consent form. To safeguard their anonymity, pseudonyms and codes were used (1–61 for the questionnaires and 1–10 for the interview participants). These codes were used when referring to the participants during the analysis and presentations of results, rather than using the name of the participants.

Data collection and analysis

After all the 61 questionnaires were fully completed, for analysis, the questionnaires were first organized by numbering them 1–61. Then, the researchers took a blank questionnaire and converted the responses into numbers, saving time and reducing the risk of errors. It also enabled the researchers to produce an accurate and systematic description of data (Munn & Drever, 2004). For the Likert scale used in the questionnaire, a numerical value for each answer was given. Higher values were given to more positive answers and lower values to negative answers. For “yes” and “no” questions, 1 was allocated for “yes” and 2 for “no”. Next, the closed responses were coded by constructing grids using the software Microsoft Excel. It should be reiterated that in order to make sure about the reliability and the data collected and the validity of the questionnaire, they were analyzed quantitatively using Cronbach alpha for reliability and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for construct validity. The outcomes of the measure of reliability and validity will be given in the findings section of the study.

To identify categories, the questionnaires were photocopied. Here, the relevant question data from the ten questionnaires were copied together on a separate sheet of paper. Then, the data were labeled with the number of the questionnaires to know from which respondents they came. After the data were thoroughly reviewed and cross-checked to identify common themes. Different colored pens were used to highlight the data for the different themes. For example, data related to “students’ freedom to choose what to learn” were highlighted with red pens. After highlighting, three blank sheets of paper were used according to the number of categories, and all the data related to each of these categories were copied together. When the categories were defined, short descriptions were written of what each category refers to, and these were used to check the coding against that definition. When that was done, the anonymized transcripts and

the descriptions were given to one of our research colleagues to find out if he would obtain similar results. The colleague came up with nearly the same categories; hence, the researchers decided to continue and use the identified categories. Finally, all responses were reviewed once again and the rest of the questionnaires were coded against those categories.

The open-ended responses to the participants' definitions in the questionnaire were analyzed qualitatively with interview data. For the participants' definitions, it was decided first to work out the categories from the literature; however, the researchers discovered that the data did not fit within the definitions mentioned in the literature. Therefore, they decided to work out the categories from the data themselves to avoid imposing their interest in the data and being restricted to what the participants said (Munn & Drever, 2004). For the rest of the interview data, some categories were defined from the literature and by the guidance of the research questions, whereas the rest were defined from the data themselves. When that was done, the anonymized transcripts and the descriptions of categories were given to one of the research colleagues to find out if he would obtain similar results. The colleague came up with nearly the same categories; hence, it was decided to continue and use the identified categories. The Findings section contains the description of these themes.

Results

The research findings are presented regarding the research questions of this study in two sections. The first section presents the quantitative findings; whereas, the second presents the qualitative findings. Key emerging issues are highlighted and illustrated with evidence from the study data.

Quantitative data results

The section deals with the findings of the close-ended part of the questionnaire only and is presented according to the questionnaire's order. As mentioned before, 61 teachers participated in the study, representing 76.5% of the English teachers at the center. The questionnaire respondents were of various nationalities, including many Indians, some Filipinos, a few Pakistanis, Omanis, Jordanians, Tunisians, and Uzbeks, and very few Canadians, Egyptians, Sudanese Bangladeshi, Americans, British, Australians, South Africans, and Europeans. Most participants were master's degree holders. However, some held bachelor's degrees, and others had doctorates. Both male and female teachers participated in the questionnaire. Of the teachers who participated, 39% had less than 16 years of experience teaching English outside and inside Oman, while the majority (61%) had 16 years or more. The participants represented all the five levels of English at the ELC (levels 1 to 4 and post-foundation), and the highest number of the participants were from those who taught level 3 (21 teachers) and the lowest from level 1 (8 teachers). This is because the number of teachers assigned to teach level 3 is more than that of other levels due to the large number of students at this level. It is noteworthy mentioning that due to the nature of the questionnaire used in this study, non-parametric data were obtained. Thus non-parametric measures were used to analyze the data.

Understanding of SCLA

In Part 2 of the questionnaire, teachers were first asked to express their views about the particular definitions of SCLA. Overwhelmingly, as evidenced by Table 4, all teachers' generally agreed with the definitions. The vast majority (96.72%) agreed that SCLA was an approach in which students' role is to actively engage in the process. Comparatively, only a few (1.64%) disagreed. Even at the lowest end of the scale (67.05%), teachers agreed that SCLA is an approach in which students decide autonomously how they learn. Definitions 1 and 8 show the highest median (5); comparatively, the rest definitions show the lowest (4). These findings seemingly vary with the interview findings, in which each teacher gave their definition of SCLA and what it meant to them, which will be presented in [Qualitative data results](#) section and discussed later in [Discussion](#) section.

Teachers' practices of SCLA

In Part 3 of the questionnaire, respondents were asked how often they practiced particular SCLA activities. Their answers are summarised in Table 5. For each of the 12 activities listed, teachers relayed whether they performed these activities in every class, most classes, some classes, rarely, or never. The majority of the activities (9 out of 12) were practiced by the participants in most classes. The largest proportion (59%) utilized

Table 4 Teachers' understanding of SCLA

No	SCLA is an approach in which the students:	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total	Median
1	Are encouraged to become creative learners	57.38% 35	37.70% 23	1.64% 1	0.00% 0	3.28% 2	61	5
2	Are encouraged to solve authentic problems	31.15% 19	62.30% 38	4.92% 3	0.00% 0	1.64% 1	61	4
3	Are exposed to activities that intend to address their learning needs and interest	42.62% 26	47.54% 29	8.20% 5	0.00% 0	1.64% 1	61	4
4	Are doing more than the teachers	32.79% 20	40.98% 25	14.75% 9	6.56% 4	4.92% 3	61	4
5	Decide autonomously how they learn	19.68% 12	47.54% 29	19.67% 12	9.84% 6	3.28% 2	61	4
6	Are actively constructing knowledge by themselves	31.15% 19	45.90% 28	16.39% 10	4.92% 3	1.64% 1	61	4
7	Select and negotiate for themselves their learning environment goals	22.95% 14	45.90% 28	19.67% 12	8.20% 5	3.28% 2	61	4
8	The role is to actively engage in the learning process	54.10% 33	42.62% 26	1.64% 1	0.00% 0	1.64% 1	61	5

Table 5 Teachers’ practices of SCLA

No	Frequency of teachers’ usage of SCLA activities in their classes:	Every class ^a	Most classes	Some classes	Rarely	Never	Total	Median
1	Awareness creation (sessions with students on SCLA; what, why, and how)	16.39% 10	55.74% 34	19.67% 12	8.20% 5	0.00% 0	61	4
2	Self-development sessions (sessions on developing confidence, personality, and transferable skills)	13.11% 8	55.74% 34	21.31% 13	8.20% 5	1.64% 1	61	4
3	Modeling (demonstration of how to handle and solve problems)	27.87% 17	49.18% 30	21.31% 13	1.64% 1	0.00% 0	61	4
4	Simulations (activities that inspire critical thinking)	22.95% 14	55.74% 34	19.67% 12	1.64% 1	0.00% 0	61	4
5	Problem-solving (problem-based activities that can be done individually or by group)	22.95% 14	50.82% 31	24.59% 15	1.64% 1	0.00% 0	61	4
6	Questioning (asking students probing questions to measure their understanding)	59.02% 36	32.79% 20	6.56% 4	1.64% 1	0.00% 0	61	5
7	Reading, thinking, writing, pairing, and sharing	39.34% 24	50.82% 31	09.84% 6	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	61	4
8	Classroom discussion (group discussions)	16.39% 10	68.85% 42	13.11% 8	1.64% 1	0.00% 0	61	4
9 ^a	Online discussion (Moodle-based activities)	3.28% 2	18.03% 11	31.15% 19	34.43% 21	13.11% 8	61	3
10	Role-playing (asking students to play the role of a facilitator or a peer-tutor)	11.48% 7	31.15% 19	42.26% 27	9.84% 6	3.28% 2	61	3
11	Information gap activity (a group or pair activity to allow students to share and exchange information on an outcome-related task of the course)	9.84% 6	59.02% 36	22.95% 14	8.20% 5	0.00% 0	61	4
12	Brainstorming and reflections (asking students to brainstorm ideas on a certain outcome-related task; then each group leader reflects on the approach for handling or solving problems)	31.15% 19	50.82% 31	16.13% 10	1.64% 1	0.00% 0	61	4

^a NB. Activity 9 is a daily activity that would not normally take place in the classroom, as the student connects with the teacher online, from home, after normal school hours. Hence, this activity should be read as per day instead of per class as the participants were accustomed to this practice

questioning activities; whereas, only 1.64% rarely applied such a technique. For most classes (68.85%), teachers stated that they held classroom group discussions. For some classes (42.26%), teachers stated that they practiced role-playing activities periodically. Of concern is that online discussion was rarely (34.43%) conducted by the teachers and,

more tellingly, was never done by a minority (13.11%) of the respondents. Combining the two (always and most) categories shows a combined percentage of 21.31% only. Further combining the percentages of rarely and never shows a combined 47.54%, which is nearly half of all teachers who rarely or never performed such activity. Questioning activity shows the highest median (5), whereas online discussion and role-playing show the lowest (3).

Qualitative data results

This section presents the qualitative findings from the questionnaire and the interviews. As mentioned before, 10 teachers were selected from the ones who were surveyed and showed interest to be interviewed. Teachers 1, 6, 7, 9, and 10 had less than ten years of experience, and at the time of the study, they were teaching in levels 2, 3, 1, and 4, and post-foundation, respectively. In addition, Teacher 7 was in his first year in Oman. Teachers 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8 had more than ten years of experience and had taught at different levels before. It is noteworthy to indicate that all the interviews were done at UTAS, Ibra, Oman, and all were done in English as a medium of communication throughout the university due to the multicultural nature of the academic setting.

Teachers' definitions of SCLA

When asked whether they had heard about SCLA, all teachers said they had heard and knew this approach. However, when asked to define SCLA, their definitions varied greatly, as each teacher gave his or her definition. Despite this variation, the following three categories were identified from the open-ended responses and the interview data: students' freedom of choice, students responsible for their learning, and students as autonomous learners. Table 6 illustrates how these categories emerged.

Types of activities

This section presents the study findings regarding the types of activities teachers use and the frequency of their usage. When asked about the activities used to promote SCLA, all

Table 6 Categories identified from teachers' definitions of SCLA

Examples from teachers' definitions of SCLA	Categories
In SCLA, students are encouraged to make their own <i>choices as to the content</i>	Students' freedom of choice
SCLA is an approach in which <i>learners choose</i> not only what to study but also how and why	
In SCLA, the teaching is planned around the students' <i>needs and choices</i>	
SCLA should increase <i>responsibility</i> and accountability on the part of the students	Students responsible for their learning
In SCLA, students should be more active and <i>responsible</i> for their learning	
In SCLA, the teacher prepares activities in a way in which students take <i>responsibility</i> for their learning	
SCLA is about creating <i>autonomous learning</i> within the student	Students as autonomous learning
SCLA promotes <i>independent and self-learning</i> in students	
SCLA encourages the students to become value-driven learners and helps to <i>gather knowledge by themselves</i>	

interviewees provided several examples of their classroom activities. These examples were categorized into five main activities: group work and pair work, brainstorming, role play, problem-solving, and reflective journals. The first four activities mentioned by the teachers have been discussed in the literature (see [Literature review](#)). The last activity was identified from the data.

Group work and pair work

Most teachers stated they use group work and pair work in most of their classes, as one teacher illustrated: “The students discuss the picture in their groups. One student at a time. They comment on the picture and then pass the picture to the next student, and each student discusses the picture. Collectively, they tell a story about the picture” (T.5).

Brainstorming activities

A group of teachers stated they also ask their students to brainstorm ideas on a certain topic and ask individual students or the group leader to articulate these ideas, as one teacher explained: “One of the activities I often use at the beginning of reading and writing classes is brainstorming. I first ask my students to brainstorm their ideas on a particular topic individually and then discuss them in groups. I then ask individual students or the group leader to present the ideas” (T.4).

Reflective journals

Some teachers expressed the idea of reflective journals, which seems an activity most teachers do at the ELC, particularly in level 4: “Other activities I always do like you know asking them to write reflective journals. It is a reflective process... they do a presentation after writing their journal and listening to their classmates. My students enjoy this and keep their reflections in the portfolio” (T.8).

Role play

Four of the participants said they use role-play by asking high-level performers to play the role of facilitators or peer tutors, as one teacher stated: “...Also, the teacher may ask one of the students to be a teacher, a student can behow to say that.... a student–teacher, a teacher to his or her peers. He can be a facilitator or a student–teacher to his group, especially to help weak students” (T.3).

Problem solving

Some teachers stated that they also use individual and group problem-based activities, as one teacher explained: “I’m trying to make them [the classes], to focus them on the students, so that the students produce the content. For example, I give them the task, where... I give them a problem, where they have to make the solutions themselves. Speaking... like, talking to each other themselves, in English” (T.7).

Online discussion (Moodle-based activities)

The questionnaire findings indicated a large group of English teachers rarely use online discussion (Moodle-based activities) compared with other SCL-related activities. One of the reasons for not using Moodle mentioned in the interviews was a

“Lack of knowledge of how teachers create tasks and tests and assign them to students” (T.3).

How often do teachers conduct SCLA activities?

Concerning the above activities, some of the interviewees were asked how often they conducted these activities. Most said they always conducted SCL-related activities, but this varies from one class to another. One teacher stated, “actually, each teacher has to use them in every class in my opinion, but they may not be the same every day. For example, if I use group activity today, I may use pair activity the next day or I may ask one student–teacher...” (T.2).

Other findings

While analyzing the interview data, other important issues related to SCLA were also identified. The researchers decided to include them in this section. These are students’ involvement in the curriculum and assessment practices.

Students’ involvement in the curriculum

During the interviews, two teachers pointed out that the element of student involvement and choice on what to learn and how to learn is considered only to the extent of topics and what to learn on a particular day or a class and not to the level of the modules and learning objectives/outcomes, as explained by one teacher: “...if I have a set of learning outcomes, they have a certain autonomy to decide what they can learn on a particular day, but they cannot deviate from that set of outcomes” (T.4).

Students’ involvement in assessment practices

A group of teachers discussed the extent of students’ involvement in assessment practices. Students’ involvement in the assessment process is generally absent. Students are neither involved at the stage of setting the assessment tasks (e.g., choosing the assessment tasks or discussing the criteria) nor at the completion of the tasks (e.g., making self-assessment or peer assessment comments). The only element of involvement for students is in the choice of essay topics during the “Writing” examinations for some of the levels, as one teacher described:

The assessment system here is standardized and centralized among all the university branches, and we are not allowed as teachers to give choices to students and agree on what tasks or method of assessment is appropriate for them... but in some writing exams, students are provided with two topics of essays, for example, and they are given the choice on which topic to write on (T.3).

Some teachers also discussed the practice of assessment methods in ELC, particularly, what they called ‘continuous assessment’ (formative assessment). However, these methods focus on grades rather than written comments. In addition, these grades are also added to the end of semester final results, as one teacher stated:

We use different formative assessments – quizzes, assignments, projects, and mid-term exams, all with marks. For all these, we rarely give written feedback, and if

given, not very detailed. Final exam, summative. Students get only grades, and for the final grade, overall marks of CA (all the formative assessments) are calculated with the marks of the final exam (T.2).

One of the findings is that of self-assessment. A group of teachers said that self-assessment exercise is given in textbooks used but is not considered, as one teacher stated: "A self-assessment page is provided at the end of each unit of the textbook. Students are supposed to answer the questionnaire. Unfortunately, no importance is given to this exercise" (T.1).

Discussion

This section of the article provides the interpretation of the data in relation to the findings of previous research in the related literature. The results indicated that the key processes associated with SCLA are:

1. Setting the criteria for assessing student learning in accordance with the learning outcomes
2. Ensuring a shared understanding between staff and students of the assessment criteria
3. Selecting the evidence that would be relevant to judge against these set criteria
4. Ensuring students understand the nature of evidence to be provided
5. Making a judgment about the extent to which the assessment criteria have been met
6. Ensuring transparency of these judgments
7. Communicating assessment outcomes to students
8. Providing useful feedback to the students on the assessment outcomes.

How do teachers of English define the SCLA approach?

This question was approached based on the findings of part two of the questionnaire and question two of the interviews. The findings of this study showed that each of the English teachers has their definitions and understandings of SCLA; however, it was difficult to understand teachers' definitions of SCLA due to the lack of a common definition for this term in the literature (Kember, 1997). This finding suggests that teachers do not all define this term in the same way, which suggests that SCLA can mean different things to different people. This finding is consistent with Pedersen and Lius's (2003) finding. The findings are in line with that of O'Neill and McMahon (2005) who justify this inconsistency by stating that SCLA is widely used in the teaching and learning literature and many terms are associated with it, such as flexible learning, experiential learning, and self-directed learning.

However, this study showed through the survey findings that most English teachers agreed with the different definitions and tenets of SCLA presented in the literature. Most significantly, the majority of the teachers have a common understanding of SCLA, and 96.7% of the teachers agreed that students should be actively engaged in the learning process. This outcome matches the findings of the research by Emenyeonu (2012) who found similar understandings of the concept of SCLA by the teachers teaching in academic settings in Oman. This agreement may indicate English teachers realize the

importance of the active engagement of their students in the whole learning process through different methods, e.g., group work, projects, and presentations.

This variation between the questionnaire results and the interviews could also be ascribed to the individual nature of the interviews establishing personally how individual teachers verbalized their description of SCLA, which differed from the questionnaire in as much as in the questionnaire the definition set out the official definition of what the ministry expected to be implemented regarding SCLA. Consideration should also be given to other influences that may have affected teachers' responses, e.g., the social desirability of the benefits of SCLA and the university's official policy requirements. If one examines the issue of students' choice in the curriculum, wherein the standing instructions have been that students are to be empowered to choose what they wanted to study, one finds that, in reality, the university imposed the syllabus and curriculum that had to be studied, and the students had no say in deciding what topics they wanted to study. As one teacher remarked, the only choice she could give her students was the topic they wanted to study on that particular day in that particular period of class. Hence, in effect, the students had very little jurisdiction over how, what, when, and where they wanted to study. The conundrum was that this process effectively disempowered the students from the desired benefits of SCLA and paid only lip service to its tenets. The researchers were well aware of this at the start of their investigation as most of the staff had privately expressed their concerns over this matter with the researchers and the other colleagues on many occasions before.

What do teachers of English say about their practices of SCLA?

The findings indicated that teachers' practices of SCLA are in line with their positive understanding of SCLA. A high number of SCLA activities were practiced by English teachers. The study also showed teachers use those activities in most classes, indicating a high commitment from teachers toward SCLA. This is confirmed by the findings of the research formerly conducted by Farrington (2020) demonstrating a positive understanding of teachers' SCLA. A large proportion of teachers (e.g., 68.85% for the questionnaire) reported using group discussion and pair work to produce more negotiated interaction, a strategy recommended in second language teaching (Kumaravadivelu, 1994; Morel, 2021) and fostering SCLA strategies (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005; Pederson & Liu, 2003). Questioning activities were the most commonly used in all classrooms, as this technique helps teachers measure their students' understanding of a topic. However online discussion (Moodle-based practices), which was promulgated by the university document as the best medium for students to interact with and receive immediate feedback from teachers outside classrooms, was the only activity rarely used by English teachers. Teachers' justifications for this varied, but the main cited reason was teachers' lack of knowledge in using Moodle. Therefore, to accentuate the importance of online discussion and its use thereof, awareness training sessions must be conducted for both teachers and students (Gravett et al., 2021).

Referring to students' choices on what and how to learn, the study illustrated that students' involvement in the curriculum was limited to only what topics to select on any particular day, and not the level of modularisation. This selection was even restricted by the teacher's decision. However, in terms of the individual lesson learning outcomes,

how they were written reflects the shift to SCLA, in which emphasis is placed on the student, rather than the content covered by the teacher, aligned with the tenets of SCLA presented in the literature (e.g., Donnelly & Fitzmaurice, 2005).

Regarding students' involvement in assessment, this study revealed no negotiation of assessment between teachers and students. The assessment procedure was centralized and imposed on students and teachers, neither exercised a choice. This concurs with the study of Al Mamari (2011), who discovered that in one higher education institution in Oman, teachers' and students' voices were absent from decision-making regarding matters of assessment approach and design (Islam et al., 2022). This result approves the ones obtained by Write (2011) who asserts such practice defeated the proper implementation of SCLA and should be eradicated. Additionally, although formative assessment methods were used in UTAS – Ibra, such as quizzes and portfolios, they were only used to provide grades and not feedback on students' future learning. Their results were linked to the end-of-semester grades. This technique is considered by Broadfoot (1999) as a form of power to control students. Therefore, for proper implementation of SCLA, teachers, and students should decide together on the content and assessment methods and criteria as required in SCLA. Assessment methods should be aimed to inform teaching, not only to measure students and filter them.

Referring to the student-centered and teacher-centered continuum presented in [Definition of Student-Centered Learning Assessment \(SCLA\)](#) (Table 2) and the extent to which it is operational in UTAS, students' choice is the prime consideration. Emerging from the above discussion, the level of student choice is limited at best to the choice of daily topics only. At worst, it is not practiced at all, as the syllabus is imposed on both teachers and students, resulting in the students being passive and uninvolved in choices from inception. This situation does not align with SCLA tenets presented in the literature (e.g., Lea et al., 2003). The positive side evolves with the teachers unanimously engaging students in their teaching methods and activities related to SCLA (e.g., group work, mixed groups, research, projects, and presentations). The question of the balance of power is fraught with challenges as the curriculum, outcomes, and assessment are predetermined by the university, thus obviating choice by either the teachers or students. Although limited by the curriculum, teachers still find exercise choices in activities and topics.

Conclusion, implications, and suggestions for further research

This study showed that English language teachers have their definitions and understandings of SCLA; however, it was difficult to understand teachers' definitions of SCLA due to the lack of a common definition for this term in the literature. This finding suggests that teachers do not all define this term in the same way, which suggests that SCLA can mean different things to different people. Most English teachers agreed with the different definitions and tenets of SCLA presented in the literature. Most significantly, the majority of the teachers have a common understanding of SCLA and agreed that students should be actively engaged in the learning process. This agreement may indicate English teachers realize the importance of the active engagement of their students in the whole learning process through different methods. The findings also indicated that teachers' practices of SCLA are in line with their positive understanding of SCLA. The

study also showed teachers use those activities in most classes, indicating a high commitment from teachers toward SCLA.

This study was carried out to understand English teachers' beliefs about and practices of the SCLA approach. Based on the findings, teachers are overwhelmingly positive about the use of SCLA. In the main, SCLA appears to be successfully implemented by English teachers. However, it is important to highlight that there are areas that need a thorough review to improve the overall effectiveness and application of SCLA in UTAS.

Based on this research, the followings are recommended to accelerate SCLA in UTAS. The implication is that primarily the solutions to the resistance of students to SCLA should be the introduction of and the induction program for all new influx of students. The better to make them aware of the shift of responsibility in their future studies as opposed to their prior learning being essentially pedagogical. They must be made aware of the reasons for their instructions in English as being in their interests, and ultimately for the goal of their future studies and employment in a global economy.

Concerning the language level, at the outset, students had better be encouraged to work autonomously and study hard. The implication is to develop the habit of reading, writing, and speaking English outside of the classes. Additionally, teachers should be encouraged to empower students by working in mixed groups on the basis that the advanced students each head up separate groups. The implication is to allow less able students to mimic and imitate their peers and improve their comprehension, pronunciation, and vocabulary in and out of the classroom. To this end, they should use the learning resources outside of the classroom as well. These include media, library, and the self-access center facilities.

To accentuate the importance of online discussion and the use thereof, awareness training sessions must be included for both teachers and students. Regarding the joint involvement of students and teachers in the curriculum and assessment process. They should be deciding together on the content and the assessment methods and criteria. Assessment methods should not end with grades only but include comments that improve students' future learning under SCLA.

This study collected data through a survey and interviews on SCLA. Teachers claim their classes are student-centered, but, when observed, their sole activities proved to be merely teacher-centered (e.g., Farrington, 2020). Therefore, future research could adopt observation for this issue. Reliance on teachers only as a source of information for this study could be considered a threat to its reliability. Future research could be enhanced by other stakeholders, such as students and administrators, involvement. This study focuses on English teachers at UTAS- Ibra only. Accordingly, the findings may not apply to other departments' staff (e.g., Engineering, Business, and IT) as well as other university branches. Future research should encompass all branches and include all departments enabling a comparison or generalized ability.

Abbreviations

CFA	Confirmatory factor analysis
ELC	English Language Center
IT	Information Technology
PBL	Problem-based learning
SCA	Student-centered assessment
SCL	Student-centered learning

SCLA Student-centered learning assessment
 TESOL Teaching English to the Speakers of Other Languages
 UTAS University of Technology and Applied Sciences

Supplementary Information

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Additional file 1: Appendix 1 and 2.

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Authors' contributions

Salim Said Bani Orabah collected the data and prepared the literature review for this study. Houman Bijani did the data analysis and wrote the discussion section. Seyed M. Ismail wrote the conclusion and revised the paper at the end. The author(s) read and approved the final manuscript.

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