

Low-competence Learners' Expectations in English Classes

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Abstract

This study investigated low-competence learners' expectations and their behaviours and challenges when studying in English class. Five low-competence learners in a private English school in HCM City (Vietnam) were investigated qualitatively. Through non-participant observation and in-depth interview methods, the results revealed that these students had a number of expectations about their learning activities, the teacher, and the other learners that related closely to what they had experienced in the past. They had big problems with understanding English and had to deal with feeling of being left behind and losing motivation in every lesson. Besides, their learning styles were reflected through highly passive and nervous behaviors most of the time.

KEYWORDS: low-competence learners, learning expectations, learning behaviors, learning challenges,

INTRODUCTION

Understanding learners' expectations is essential for effective teaching and learning as those expectations are likely to have a strong influence on their language learning process (Bordia *et al.*, 2006; Trejo, 2007). Although there have been a number of researches on students' language learning expectations (Bordia *et al.*, 2006; Kandiko & Mawer, 2013; Brindley, 1984; Nunan, 1988a; Peacock, 1997), very few of them have focused on investigating what and how low-competence language learners want to learn. More interestingly, in practice, most English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes are crowded and multilevel, and the number of such lower learners is usually much fewer than the average and higher ones. As a result, it would be hard for any teacher to pay much and special attention on such a small group of learners in class. Therefore, a study on expectation of low learners in class is definitely significant to both of the literature and practice.

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate low-competence students' expectations from their English class. We explored learning activities that these learners expected to do; we also examined what happened while they were learning, we checked if there were any challenges and looked for possible factors that made them unsatisfied when learning in class. Theoretically, this study contributes to the current literature by relating low competence students' expectations and their ongoing practice. Practically, our study's outcome can help teachers with some new experience on low-competence students, bring a careful consideration into their teaching methods, look back their

teaching process, and recognize their possible shortages. Our study aims to facilitate teachers who are worried about their low-competence students, want to give their students the hands full of care and opportunities for their improvement and development.

The three general questions of this study are:

1. What expectations do these learners hold about their class?
2. What are their learning behaviors?
3. What are challenges of these learners when learning in class?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The sample and fieldwork

The site of this study is ALIS, a private English school in HCM City, Vietnam. Reasons for choosing this school related to the purposes of our study and the research questions. First of all, learning in a private school is not compulsory to learners and they have to pay a much higher fee compared to that in public sector. Secondly, satisfying learners' expectations is likely the main goal of the schools since the focus in private schools is on teaching for business rather than teaching and learning for tests.

Gilbert (1998) defined competence as an entity of theoretical knowledge, ability, application knowledge, behavior and motivation structured in mastering a specific situation. Barnett (1994) argued that competences should be described in term of well-expressed behaviors in classroom. Therefore, we defined low-competence learners as a group of learners whose abilities, knowledge and skills of English are performed much worse than others in class. Based on these criteria, we chose five learners at the age between 15 and 18 in the 3 different classes. In this way, they were coded as A, B, C, D, and E respectively.

- Student SA was 18 years old. She had studied English in her public school since 2008 and gone to ALIS since early 2014.
- Student SB was 16 years old. She had studied English in her public school since 2010 and went to ALIS in late 2013.
- Student SC was 15 years old. She had studied English in her public school since 2011 and gone to ALIS since late 2012.
- Student SD (15 years old) studied English in her public school since 2011 and went to ALIS in middle months of 2013.
- Student SE (15 years old) joined ALIS's class the first time in June 2013.

Their syllabi focused on communication skills comprehensively with a special emphasis on listening comprehension, fluent speaking, accurate pronunciation, grammar, reading, and writing.

Data collection methods

The data was collected during June and September. As expectations influence how individuals react, respond and experience an environment, to infer what students expected, non-participant observation was employed as a technique to investigate classroom events, informants' learning behaviors and challenges when studying in class. The reason for adopting in-depth interview method came from the interplay among

expectations, experience, challenges and behaviors. In-depth interviews gave in-sight into learners' thoughts and behaviors, they can also be allowed to make explicit and articulate the expectations from teaching and learning in real contexts.

Data collection procedures

All of the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to make possible for the low-competence learners to understand the questions and express what they thought thoroughly.

In the first stage, the subjects were given a list of learning activities. Using the given activities, the interviews focused on what the students had done in their previous language classes, and the learning activities that they evaluated as useful for their own learning, or felt familiar or easy to get on with. The participants were also encouraged to add more activities if they liked. After that, the participants were asked to evaluate each learning activity and reported how it benefited or deterred them in language learning. This step provided rich qualitative data of expectations.

Then the observations were carried out with twenty lessons in each class. Taking the role of non-participant observers, we observed each sign of classroom activities and noted them down carefully for the sake of getting live data which determined the validity and reliability of the research later on. We paid a very deep attention on both difficulties and challenges that participant students were facing in class. To get prepared for in-depth interviews, we jotted detailed notes down at some particular points that we predicted would be interesting and significant to examine students' behaviors and actions which might lead us to the reasons why they had done or reacted like that.

Finally, from the first interview results and data collected in two months of observing, we selected and designed the questions for the second interview. The same procedures were repeatedly conducted with all individual participants. Adapting the guide of Boyce and Neale (2006), we firstly started the interview with some general questions to help the learners to be gradually in tune with the stream. Then we discussed the main questions with them and stimulated them to give reasons for their answers or opinions. Each interview usually took about 30 minutes. To get the most and rich data from the learners, we tried to make the participants comfortable and appear interested in what they were saying. Effective interview techniques such as avoiding yes/no and leading questions, using appropriate body language, and keeping the interviewee's personal opinions in check were always adopted during the interviews.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The expected and unexpected classroom activities

The results showed that these students have a number of priori expectations about their learning activities. These expectations were very specific and closely related to what they have experienced in the past.

The most common expected classroom activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visual aids such as pictures, diagrams, realia - Games, songs - Whole class discussion
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Small-group work, and pair work (no speaking) - Grammar correction from teachers
The most common un-expected classroom activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Watching films - Role-playing in front of group or whole class - Listening to CDs - Working individually

Table 1: The most common expected and un-expected activities of low-competence learners

The students placed funny activities with different kinds of visual aids like pictures, realia, music, games as the most preferred tasks in class. They revealed that their previous and current classroom contexts in public schools could not satisfy them with such learning activities. Hence, when coming to a private school, they put a high expectation on the teachers to employ more visual aids and active learning activities. According to the respondents, the activities should be interesting so that they could study and play at the same time; and only in that way, can their language competence be improved. They also expected to have more whole class discussion and group work than individual works. Interestingly, their reasons were that if they worked individually, they did not know whether their work was correct or not, and that they felt safer in group work as there were always some body else to take the responsibility of completing the task for the whole group. They argued that group activity was a comfortable, beneficial, and safe way of learning for them. There, however, should be no discussing activity in group work as they would not know much to share with their group members. It could be inferred that for low competence learners, lessons and knowledge were likely resources to exploit; a successful lesson was based on how much knowledge they gained. This expectation may explain well for why they particularly expected for as much teacher's correction as possible in class. They insisted that corrections from teacher were the most reliable and helpful English resource for them. Although being criticized in front of class was very uncomfortable and embarrassed, the learners expressed that their teachers' corrective feedbacks on their work could help them move forwards in their learning, especially with unique activities for classroom contexts such as listening and pronunciation. To explain for this, they noted that for the reliability of knowledge, learners should not self-correct. In their reasons, although they paid much money for private English school to learn with more interesting and active ways, real learning always meant studying from errors, and thus whether in a public or private class, teacher's correction was always valuable.

Noticeably, although the participants all particularly like watching film, they did not expect to spend their class time for this activity. They argued that this way of teaching was only suitable for higher competence learners. In contrast to "good" learners, they were afraid that their listening skill was not good enough to grasp the audio part of the movies. For example: "I don't expect to watch films because I cannot understand what they are saying" (SE.II.25) and "when watching a film, but we don't understand, then we don't know its content as well as what they are saying, so it's useless" (SD.II.54). In addition to movies, CD listening was also not a high-expected activity, and the reasons were also

related to poor level of comprehension.

They were especially contradictory when giving comments on role-playing activities. For the benefits, role-playing was not only useful but also exciting as they could never be involved in such a classroom activity when learning in their public schools. Although they expected to enjoy the exciting mood of role-playing, they were not confident to take part in such role. They were afraid of making mistakes when speaking. They were worried too much about how they would sound and how they were embarrassed when making errors. For instant, one participant shared that “when my friends take part in a role, it is full of fun...but while playing a role, I feel so nervous; everyone is looking at me, so it’s uncomfortable” (SA.II.57).

Challenges and learning behaviors

The low-competence learners in this study had to cope with the following challenges.

- Being always in a feeling of being left behind.
- Having problems with understanding teacher’s instruction and lesson content.
- Getting bored and losing learning motivations easily.

As discussed in the literature review, current experiences and challenges in class reflected clearly what students are expecting. Their learning behaviors in class filtered under observation are listed as below:

- Very little or attempt to seek for helps or explanations
- Working individually most of the time
- Staying passively and quietly most of the time
- Observing and remembering as much as possible.
- Writing notes as much as possible
- Giving very short and inappropriate answers very often.
- Being confused and embarrassed when speaking in English
- Being highly nervous when listening to lectures delivered by native teachers.

As predicted in the literature, expectations may influence how individuals react, respond and experience when learning. A behavior of not asking for helps or explanations came from their embarrassment since no one in class made requests, and because of the thinking of being seen like “a fool”. What these students were really expecting at that time was that if their teacher was subtle enough to realize their problems and it was better if their classmates were “braver” to request an explanation for them. They needed a teacher who was able to guess what their difficulties were without asking their verbal expressions. Besides, they also expected that their classmates would be able to loudly ask teachers whenever questions or problems appeared as this made a strong impression on them and help them get more experience. In our study, the participants also expected that their teachers generated interest and their activities would follow. They hoped the teachers to bring out the best in them, help them to find the courage to speak out, give them the desire to do the required work, and always stimulate their learning motivation. As a result, low competence learners tended to learn individually and quietly most of the

time in class. To “compensate” for their “poorer contribution” to the lesson in comparison with more competent learners, they often try to observe and take note as much and carefully as possible. In their arguments, these strategies would be helpful for their memory.

Interestingly, whenever the teacher gave those students opportunities to share their answers or ideas, they usually offered incorrect and appropriate responds. To explain for their inappropriate answers, they claimed that they had no or very little comprehension of lessons as well as what the teacher was asking. They felt nervous whenever the teacher asked; especially when it was a native teacher. What was going on in the class did not completely satisfy their expectations; these learners felt uneasy since their teachers did not give them detailed explanations for their questions. Besides, they felt that their teachers went through the lessons too fast and usually used explanations and instructions in English. Although they always wanted to “please” the teacher, most of the time, they had no idea about what and how they were expected to answer and their lack of lexical repertoire. However, it was not relevant to deduce that they had no expectations of having chances to cooperate with their friends and teacher and communicate in foreign language. Interestingly, they hoped that they were given more time to observe and prepare, they wanted their teacher to make them feel safe and confident before calling for answers. They expected to get into simple conversations in which they could follow the stream and take part in completely. It also was expected that Vietnamese teachers were in class to help for translating if or when required during foreign teachers’ lessons. Hence, it was obvious that enthusiasm, patience and subtlety are features the students expected about their teachers. Trejo (2007) asserted that the personality of the teacher is crucial to students’ leaning. His discussion indicated how it is the teacher who can transform a dull subject into an interesting one; it is the teacher who makes students to learn. He indicated that students expected their teachers to be more dynamic, meaning that the teachers should allow opportunities for them to be more active.

Conclusions

The findings of the study concur with other studies undertaken previously that low-competence learners have a set of expectations about their class that develops from their own learning experiences and challenges (Trejo, 2007; Kuh *et al.* (2005); Spratt, 1999; Braxton *et al.*, 1995) and reflects through their learning behaviors (White, 1999; Barcelos, 2000; Oettingen and Mayer, 2002). Noticeably, whilst Bordia *et al.* (2006) found that learners’ expectations of teaching covered two broad domains: expectations related to content of the course, and expectations related to teaching and learning styles during their learning process, low-competence learners’ expectations from our findings were evident in three broad domains involving learning activities, teachers and classmates. This study has revealed some students’ expectations about classmates which did not get any attentions in previous studies. The results of this study suggested that their classmates have a significant role in low-competence students’ mind. The learners wanted their peers to be willing to support and share knowledge with them.

This study would be a good reference for other private English schools in Vietnam. It is necessary for private schools to understand these learning expectations to design learning curricula and for the teachers to know what their low-competence learners want from them to adapt their teaching to please these learners. If the students feel that they are

well-prepared for study at their class, and crucially, the class provides valuable support if and when required, then a greater engagement can be initiated. In this light, it is also hoped that the findings of this study can be universally available for EFL teachers to have a more in-depth awareness of student expectations. The very same low-competence learners' expectations provide sufficient ideas into how an affective environment can be established. Typically, low-competence learners cherish some expectations that others do not. For example, they expect to learn in a funny way with aids such as pictures, games, songs, but not role-plays and films. It is matched their expectation when teacher carefully launched into explanations in Vietnamese. Instead of calling teachers for help by themselves when questions of problems appear, it is expected that someone else in class would do so since these learners are usually very shy and easily get embarrassed. As a consequence, teachers need to strive for a certain amount of agreement and understanding with these expectations to ensure fostering an environment where learning can be effective. Teacher might promote a constructive learning climate which has been shown to be helpful to learning by realizing what their students are expecting now, especially the low competence ones. These findings would contribute to creating positive affective learning relationships where students could feel enough to participate, ask assistance, establish communication, and feel at ease within the classroom. Knowing these student expectations might prefer other forms of teaching and learning that could help teachers to introduce these activities in as supportive and unthreatening a way as possible.

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