

A Hierarchy of Student Expectations

- This paper is an examination of expectations which ESL students bring with them to a university setting. International, or foreign, students arrive in this country with certain expectations which may or may not be realistic. As students learn to adapt to their new surroundings (physically, emotionally, and academically), these expectations and the degree to which they are met can play an important role in the students' academic success. Teachers should be able to recognize the various types of student expectations and be sensitive to their effects on students. This paper draws an analogy to Maslow's hierarchy of needs while identifying and illustrating five hierarchical levels of student expectations. In addition, it offers suggestions to teachers for dealing with problems that can arise when these expectations are not met.

I begin each term with high anticipation for a new set of foreign students, their faces alive with expectation of the English they hope to learn during the following few weeks. They gaze at their new American teacher, ready and anxious to learn as much as possible about the English language. Whether motivated by a desire to enter an American university and a need to pass the TOEFL examination or a desire to add to their employment skills in their native country, they are almost without exception a teacher's dream: truly motivated students. Certainly, as a group, college-bound ESL students have entered the ESL classroom by choice; they have chosen a career path which includes the use of English. Working with these students I have observed, however, that this motivation, so strong at the beginning of the semester, fluctuates as the term progresses, sometimes increasing to an unsuppressed frenzy of study and involvement in classwork and sometimes diminishing to the point where the students drag themselves pessimistically through classes.

A multitude of factors, both cognitive and affective, may account for such fluctuations. All have been discussed thoroughly in the literature on second language acquisition.¹ Any one or more of these cognitive or affective factors may account for variations in student performance. However, I would like to focus on the effects of the

students' own expectations of their perceived ability to achieve success.

Student expectations can be seen as a reflection of both psychological and social conditioning. They can be viewed as a set of variables which are influenced by both sides of the affective domain, the intrinsic and the extrinsic.² Consider, for example, the student who views himself as a successful language learner. He has a high level of self-esteem due to his performance in English classes in his native country. He has positive expectations about his future achievement in an American school. However, upon reaching the United States, he soon finds that his past English instruction (the translation method, little practice speaking English, nonnative teachers) has not prepared him for the social and academic situations in which he now finds himself. In contrast with positive intrinsic factors, this student now has negative extrinsic factors to deal with. Thus expectations, though predetermined by the student, are fulfilled or unfulfilled subject to the conditions in which the student finds himself when beginning a new learning experience. Such is the case with international students new to the United States.

I am continually amazed at the ability of my students to perform in spite of the personal disappointments and emotional crises they write about so eloquently in their personal journals. (Most of the student quotations in this paper were taken from such journals; others are from conversations and student surveys.)³ Perhaps more than any other group of young adults, international students coming to the United States for the first time bring with them an array of untested expectations relating to all facets of their lives: academic, social, and financial to name a few. In observing my students, talking with them, and especially reading their journals, I have come to the conclusion that their expectations can be classified into several categories. For this purpose, I have borrowed from the hierarchical framework developed by Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1970; Rivers, 1983). Just as Maslow proposes that there is a five-level hierarchy of needs (physiological needs, and the need for safety, belongingness and love, esteem, and self-actualisation) which must be met before an individual can be expected to reach his potential, it seems that there is a similar (though not identical) hierarchy of expectations that must be recognized and addressed, if not met, before the international student can devote full attention to learning English.

Material Needs

What are some of the expectations international students bring with them from home, expectations which may or may not be realized once they enter American academic life? The first set of expectations and those which correspond to the first level of Maslow's hierarchy, have to do with *material and physiological needs*. These include not

only food and shelter, but other aspects of the environment as well. Of course there is constant discussion in the classroom about the quality of food in America. "Too much oil and too much sugar, American people don't eat a lot of fresh vegetables," writes one student. Students who came to this country anxious to discover hamburgers and French fries are often disappointed. They soon find themselves gravitating to ethnic restaurants or shopping in an international market. On more than one occasion I have had a student suffering from constipation. In most cases, students blame this problem on the shortage of vegetables in the American diet. I was surprised to learn however, from a colleague of mine, that one of his students blamed this same problem on her inability to use the American toilet. She was too shy to use the public restroom where bathroom stalls had walls two feet off the floor, and she felt uncomfortable in the bathroom at her host family's house which had no lock on the door. In another case, a student had the opposite problem and proceeded to treat himself with medicine brought from home. When that did not work he gave up eating altogether. Needless to say these students were not doing well in their classes.

Shelter, or housing, is another aspect of the international student's life that should be considered. For some students, American kitchens, appliances, and beds may be unfamiliar. One student wrote that "host family children are too noisy." Whereas American students would demand quiet of their families or roommates in order to study, international students are frequently too shy or too polite to request quiet. Other physical factors that affect and often interfere with my students' academic pursuits are a lack of convenient and inexpensive transportation, unfamiliar weather, and the difficulty of communicating with the necessary people at the bank, the post office, the doctor's office. In all likelihood these are not problems the students even considered before coming here to study.

Physical Security

Maslow's second needs level is *safety and security*. International students are sometimes frustrated by acts of crime or vandalism which may have been unheard of in their native countries. Japan, for example, has an extremely low crime rate. Bicycles stolen and tires slashed are unexpected acts which Japanese students are not prepared to deal with. Physical assault is a constant threat to students who are easily frightened by daily newspaper reports of such incidents in their American hometown. In one case, a student was unable to take the TOEFL because he was frightened by gangs on the way to an inner city test site. In addition, many students find that expenses are higher than anticipated. They are constantly worried about whether their funds will run out or whether monies can be transferred quickly from foreign sources. There is the unknown aspect of the fluctuating

exchange rate. "My country's money is much undervalued, things are expensive." In the case of students from Spain there is a \$3,000 limit to the amount of Spanish money which can be exchanged during one year by a student on a tourist visa. Unlike American students, they cannot legally get a job to help make ends meet. In addition, there are frequently concerns about getting and maintaining the appropriate visas. Thus, some students are forced to worry about their security in addition to their schoolwork.

Another aspect of the second level of the hierarchy is the need for order. Frequently, as with any student living away from home for the first time, students are faced with disciplining themselves. Many spend too much time partying. In response to what they like best about the United States, one student wrote, "We can do anything we want, nobody cares about others business." Another wrote, "I can do almost anything if I want." These students viewed this freedom as a benefit. On the other hand, an older student (34 years) from Mexico wrote that what most disappointed her about the United States was, "the rules about everything." A Spanish teenager would like to "live in another place of California like Santa Barbara or Santa Cruz because it's more entertainment and more things to do and Rohnert Park is like a died city." The struggle to put order in their lives must consume a fair amount of energy for students interfacing with a foreign lifestyle.

Acceptance

Fitting in, or *belonging*, Maslow's third level, is especially trying for a foreign student. Frequently these students arrive in this country alone, all of their friends and family left thousands of miles behind. In addition to the homesickness they are surely feeling, they must meet the challenge of being accepted by a host family or roommates. They must make friends with students from unfamiliar cultures. Some students are more successful at this than others. "My roommate is very kindness and she teach me English or American culture sometimes." I have found that most foreign students have considered this hurdle before deciding to leave home and are excited to finally have the opportunity to "get to know Americans." When they are actually faced with the situation though, it can be quite frightening. "I think that Americans are very polite, but is difficult to make friendship with them," writes one student.

On the other hand, some Japanese students are shocked when they discover that they have come from Japan to find themselves in a program with 80-90% Japanese. One student from Japan told me that she felt guilty and embarrassed when she socialized with other Japanese students, speaking only Japanese, while her friend from Germany was forced to speak English all the time. She felt that she should be doing more to interact with Americans, but she could not

make herself do it. This student felt she was lazy. But similar situations occur for Japanese students who are just too shy or frightened to try to communicate in English. One blames herself: "My English is not good. I dare not to know American friend." These students solve the dilemma of fitting in by insulating themselves with friends from their own culture, but they often do so against their better judgment. Such a paradox is easy to recognize but difficult to resolve.

Another factor in this third level of Maslow's hierarchy is love. For young adults from some foreign cultures, Japan for example, interaction with members of the opposite sex is a novelty. When these young people become attracted to each other they are experiencing a new, often untried emotion. In addition, there is the possibility of an attraction developing between two people of dissimilar cultures or religions. Besides the cultural barriers that must be dissolved for such a relationship to flourish, there is also the possibility of parental disapproval and resultant guilt. In most cases, students have come to America to study and to learn English. When romance interferes it is most likely unexpected and traumatic. Consider, for example, a letter I received from a student who had been missing classes due to a "broken heart." She had never expected to be sidetracked from her studies. "When I left my city, I was happy because I could make my dream which was coming to America by myself come true. Now I need time to fix my broken heart, I've been taking a lot of time to fix it but still now I can't take myself back yet. Maybe, because I'm in America where I don't have anybody who knows me very well." Her last sentence underscores the increased pain of the international student who is far from home and comforting family. In another, more optimistic case, a young student from Taiwan was forced to miss several classes to travel to the consulate to secure a visa for his wife whom he had left in Taiwan. His success with the consulate was mirrored in his classroom attitude and achievement.

Self-Esteem

Self-concept (*esteem*, in Maslow's hierarchy) is another important category of possibly unfulfilled expectations. I have observed students suffering linguistic shock. They arrive in the U.S.A. fully expecting to be able to communicate, to some degree at least, in their second language, a language which in some cases they have been studying for as many as eight or nine years. But studying English in a Lebanese, or Indonesian, or Japanese high school does not necessarily prepare students to be able to understand and verbalize spoken English. Thus, these previously confident students begin to have doubts. They listen, but they are unable to understand. Their culture often does not permit them to ask for clarification or repetition. They speak but are not understood, so they stop speaking. As teachers we must provide successful linguistic experiences so that these students do not lose their confidence.

Potential

Finally, at the summit of Maslow's hierarchy is *self-actualisation* wherein he focuses on the individual's unique talents, abilities, and potentials, his intellectual and aesthetic needs. (It should be noted that Maslow's hierarchy of needs was developed as a humanistic, psychological profile, not as an explanation of the needs of international students.) Self-actualisation occurs when the student has developed the facility in English necessary to express his true self and his identity. Beginning-level students often feel unable to communicate their personality or their intellectual ideas. Expression of such personal traits requires sophisticated expression of abstract concepts. Beginning students must often be content using the concrete vocabulary for household items, food, clothing, and the like. In the context of such limitations it is very difficult for students to express their identity. They must wait until they have reached a more advanced level before they can express themselves adequately and precisely in terms of their emotional, mental, and spiritual characteristics.

In addition to self-actualisation, the final level of student expectations also focuses on the students' academic and intellectual expectations. Assuming their needs have been met on all of the other levels, then students can strive for academic achievement. Unlike Freud, who felt that unexpressed needs could be the basis for creative energy, Maslow believed that frustration of a need is unhealthy. I do not suggest that the realization of student expectations is so absolute. At this level once again, international students may meet with frustration, but the effects of that frustration are not necessarily harmful.

I recently spoke with one of my former Japanese students who is now studying at the university. We talked about her experiences the previous term in her preuniversity classes. She confided that she had not enjoyed her reading class because the teacher expected the students to talk about the reading material, whereas in Japan the teacher had done all the analysis, and the students "just listened passively." In Japan, reading had been her favorite subject; she loved to read, then to learn from the teacher's explanation of the text. But here, she was continually anxious about being called upon. Since she was such a good student, and capable of providing excellent answers, the teacher probably nominated her frequently which apparently increased her anxiety rather than appeased it. Thus, her initial, positive attitude toward English reading class was transformed to one of anxiety. According to the student, her performance suffered as a result. This may have just been her perception though because, in fact, she continued to receive high marks in her reading class and proceeded to raise her TOEFL score significantly. Perhaps (in contradicton to Maslow) the anxiety caused her to prepare more thoroughly for this class. However, for a less competent student, the outcome may not have been the same. Such a student might have

just given up in reaction to such anxiety. The good teacher must recognize the limits to which he can push his students before such pressure becomes counterproductive.

Cooperative group work, communicative activities, and experiential tasks, which ESL teachers have come to view as activities essential to language acquisition, may involve totally unexpected and unwanted classroom behavior for graduates of foreign educational systems. In her survey of the learning-style preferences of ESL university students, Joy Reid states, "virtually none of the respondents chose group learning as a major learning preference" (Reid, 1987, p. 98). So students are faced with new teaching methods and are often required to communicate their understanding of the material in an unexpected, unfamiliar manner.

In addition, students are often likely to feel that their educational objectives are not being met by our system. How often do we hear, "But will this lesson help me pass the TOEFL?" Our holistic language approach may not seem appropriate to their needs. Nunan's study (1986) provides data which illustrate a discrepancy between what ESL students feel is important to them and what ESL teachers feel is important for them. For example, in Nunan's research, pair work was rated *low* by students and *very high* by teachers. Similarly, student self-discovery of errors had the same mismatch. Nunan quotes from a similar study by Eltis and Low (1985): "These data indicate that those teachers surveyed would seem to rate 'communicative' type activities highly, while learners favoured more 'traditional' learning activities, the one exception being 'structured conversation'" (Nunan, 1986, p. 6). It appears that "many learners do have rather fixed ideas (in some cases culturally determined) about what it is to be a learner and what it is to learn a language" (Brindley, 1984 in Nunan, 1986). If this is the case, then students must somehow adjust their expectations to account for our current teaching methods. Or, as Nunan recommends, "the selection of learning strategies and activities could become the focus of discussion, consultation and negotiation" (p. 14).

In response to unmet academic expectations there are certain strategies which teachers can employ to help alleviate potentially negative effects. As it applies to curriculum design, Rivers, like Nunan, supports the concept of student input. "There is no single pedagogical answer, only the answers of many individuals. Language teachers must learn humility. They will have to abandon the authoritarian approach of 'designing the program to meet their students' needs' as they see them, in favor of discovering first how the students perceive their needs, and then considering what contribution they can make, as teachers and course designers, to meeting these needs" (Rivers, 1983, p. 137). In addition, university-level students are capable of understanding the goals of our language instruction techniques and the research which supports such techniques. It seems

likely that these students may be more receptive to our techniques if we openly discuss our teaching strategies and our reasons for using them. Thus we can address students' academic expectations through open discussion and the current trends of student empowerment and student-teacher negotiation.

Whereas students are often willing and even demanding in discussing their academic expectations, other student expectations—from physiological expectations to the expectation of self-actualisation—are somewhat more difficult for the teacher to identify and address. Student journals have proven an excellent means of identifying personal problems. ESL students are often more willing (and able) to write about their fears and anxieties than to talk about them. They should be given opportunities to express these feelings. Intrapersonal games and role-playing can also be successful with some students.

Once unmet expectations have been identified, we need to recognize their possible influence on student achievement. Academic pursuits may be shoved into the background when students' time and energies are being devoted to dealing with failed expectations. Since there are so many psychological and social factors potentially affecting our students, factors which we can neither predict nor control, it would seem reasonable that we do everything appropriate, whenever possible, to help meet student expectations. The key word here is appropriate. As teachers, we cannot be available to solve every nonacademic problem students have. Most of my students indicate that they find their teachers friendly, helpful, and understanding. Therefore, there may be a strong tendency for students to come to depend on teachers for support through all kinds of difficulties. But students learn by dealing with problems themselves. They need this experience to maintain self-esteem and achieve independence. When we recognize a student crisis, we need to weigh the problem against its effect on the student's achievement and perhaps offer consolation or advice. But education, not counseling, remains our primary goal. If educational success is more likely when students are not wrestling with a multitude of psychological or sociological problems, we must recognize that we have some responsibility in helping our students to overcome these problems. Part of the solution is merely in the recognition of unmet student expectations by both the teacher and the student, part is in creative problem solving by the students themselves, and part is in providing a sympathetic ear and appropriate advice when necessary.

Thus if we notice our students' enthusiasm beginning to falter, their motivation appearing to wane, perhaps it is time to consider whether there is some expectation that has not been met. One enthusiastic student from Hong Kong is convinced that after four months, foreign students will suffer acute homesickness. "The novelty

of studying in America has worn off, a return home is still months away," he writes. This phase passes, but by recognizing it (and similar situations) we can help our students get through a difficult time with the least damage to their academic progress. So when student achievement fluctuates, an investigation of unmet expectations might provide the teacher with some insight into possible causes and possible solutions. ■

Footnotes

¹See Brown, 1981 and 1987; Krashen, 1981; and Widdowson, 1983 for further discussion of cognitive and affective variables.

²See Brown, 1987; Gardner, 1973; Oller, 1979; and Schumann, 1978 for further discussion of the intrinsic and extrinsic (psychological and social) influences on the affective domain.

³Journal entries and quotations were taken over a period of one academic year from my students: 35 high-intermediate- and advanced-level students from Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Indonesia, Lebanon, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Brazil, and Mexico. In addition, I conducted an extensive survey of the 60 students in our program representing all levels of proficiency. As noted in this paper, the majority of our students are Japanese.

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