

Original Paper

“I Wanna Sound Like You so Why Don’t I?” Expectations Versus Reality for Egyptian Learners of English

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Abstract

We all come with our preconceived notions. The expectations of 180 Egyptian learners of EFL at a private institution in Egypt revealed that the majority of learners expect to sound like native speakers by the end of the 3-month course and teachers to do all the work and provide them with a textbook. This could be attributed to the learners’ previous experience with language learning. Still, teachers need to be able to anticipate and fulfill their needs.

Keywords

EFL, learners, English, Egyptian, expectations, reality, teacher, native

1. Introduction

Who doesn’t have expectations? Whether you’re planning your future or taking a class, we all come with our preconceived notions. But when your expectations come crashing down once you are in a classroom, perhaps it is time to revisit them.

Having spent a good number of my teaching years teaching EFL, I lost count of the number of times I have had learners come up to me and demand that they be able to sound as “American” as I did by the end of the 3-month course. I could not help but notice the disappointment on their faces when they graduated a few months later and still did not sound native-like.

Side conversations and private correspondence with the learners have led me to conclude that no learner signs up for a course without a preconceived notion about how the program will run.

2. Method

Over the course of 11 months, I have been in contact with over 180 Egyptian learners of English as they entered and exited a 3-month course of EFL at a private institution in Egypt. The following were some of their expectations and their interpretations:

3. Result

Expectations! Expectations! What's a Teacher to do!

3.1 Expectation

The majority of learners expect to sound like native speakers by the end of the 3-month course. Worse still, they expect the 5 hours they spend in class every week to be enough for them to learn the language without having to practice at home. They complain when they are assigned homework that requires them to reinforce what they learned in class. A good portion of class time is often dedicated to negotiating assignments to accommodate their busy schedules.

3.2 Reality

Most of the learners sign up for these courses under the impression that the EFL course is a once-in-a-lifetime potion after which they would not be required to “learn” again. One look at the learners’ educational background renders this understandable. At school, language acquisition was not one of the learning outcomes. English was taught as a subject—like any other--that they were required to pass in order to graduate, not in order for them to be able to communicate in it. And in order to pass, you learned chunks of phrases, completed sentences by conjugating verbs, and provided short answers to comprehension questions. Drilling exercises was all they needed to excel in English. Since this is usually the only previous experience with a foreign language they have had, they seem to transfer it to the new language-learning setting, oblivious of the fact that communicative competence is a lifelong process that will not stop once they complete the course.

3.3 Expectation

Teachers had to do all the work. It was their job to teach the students who were not expected to contribute much to the equation. Consequently, flipped and student-centered classrooms were not an option. The students were paying customers who were sure to file an official complaint when they felt they were not getting their money’s worth. After all, they did not pay money to have their teachers lay all the work on them.

3.4 Reality

Teachers were the authority on language, and learning would become elusive if they relinquished their role. Teachers provided student with input and corrected their mistakes. Most, if not all, of the students who enrolled in EFL courses were replicating the only experience they had undergone in a language classroom: their foreign language classes in their respective schools. In those classrooms, it was teachers who lectured while students listened in an attempt to “learn” the language by reproducing the teacher talk they heard. Teachers were the ones who developed and graded the tests that decided the fates of the students and whether they had “learned” their lessons and were eligible to pass, hence the dependence on teachers as authority figures. Students listened intently to them in order to try and glean what was important enough to be on the test so they could pass the course.

3.5 Expectation

If I had a penny for every time I was asked, “Where’s the book?” I would have bought a private island by now. That is what students expect to be assigned on the first day of classes. No-textbook classes are a deal-breaker for them. Many a student dropped a course as soon as they were told that the material would not include a textbook. They did not even wait for a rationale or syllabus before they made their decision to pull out. It was that simple. No book meant no learning for them, no progress.

3.6 Reality

Students need a textbook that will ensure structure as dictated by the lessons/chapters. Every text has a learning outcome, pre-reading questions, as well as post-reading exercises that, should they find themselves in a situation where they were required to produce, would enable them to turn to a page in order for the answers to magically appear. Students need rules; most of them are a product of a school system that reinforced rote memorization and reproducing decontextualized formulaic phrases from the book in exams for grades. Given the schools they graduated from, this comes as no surprise. The schools only adopted a testing system for assessment; the test came straight from the books. The questions were modeled after the exercises in the book. If you happened to be one of the students who paid attention in class, then you held the key to the answers. The higher your scores, the more prestigious the universities you were admitted to. All you had to do to unlock the mystery to the test was to crack open the book and the rules to decipher the secret codes to the questions would pop up, hence the deference to the book.

4. Discussion

Finally, almost all learners come with their expectations. Some are more myths about language acquisition than they are aspirations. As teachers, we need to heed that and be prepared to debunk the myths our students hold about language learning just as we are cognizant of their language needs. This will enable us to better anticipate and fulfill their needs. This is what I have learned over the years.

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