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# The Impact of Expectation on College English Teaching

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## Abstract

*One problem concerning English teaching in China at present is that the achievement in English study does not match the energetic and financial efforts paid on the parts of teachers and students. This paper tries to explore this problem and discusses teachers' different expectations on the impact of students' English learning and teachers' teaching methods employed. The paper presumes that high expectation on non-major English students will result in improving teachers' teaching techniques, increasing students' English learning motivation and eventually leading to high study efficiency.*

## I The Current Problems in Non-Major English Teaching

One prominent paradoxical problem, so far, concerning English teaching in China is that the achievement in English study does not match the energetic and financial efforts paid on the parts of both teachers and students.

Both teachers and students are in eager quest for a short-term objective to succeed in exams and thus busy with based-on-test teaching and simulated practices. Eventually the seeming effectiveness is that success in exams is achieved at the cost of improvement of students' comprehensive English abilities.

One important reason for the ineffectiveness in English teaching is the low expectation on the part of teachers, which results in lack of innovative teaching and lecturing rather than ability practicing. As far as the learners are concerned, inadequate expectation strengthens the conventional conception of non-major English, lessens students' interests in English language, decreases their motives and consequently leads to ineffectiveness in study.

The rectification of misconception counts for much in solving these problems. Any emphasis on expectation evokes progress on teaching requirements and techniques. The authors have had

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experiences about teaching both non-English majors and English majors and thus profoundly perceived the great impact of expectation on English teaching. In major English teaching, instructions are based on high expectation that accentuate learners' abilities on output and thus gain efficient results. Meanwhile the learners are highly motivated and positive due to their own expectation on being English majors. As a rule, English majors after one-year study can achieve as much as non-majors after two-year study and even more. (Certainly the amount of time paid in study should be counted in this comparison.)

Consequently, this thesis makes its presumption that more expectation on non-major English learners will result in improving teaching techniques, increasing innovation, strengthening learners' motivation and eventually leading to study efficiency.

## II Theoretical Basis

American scholar S D Krashen proposes the Input Hypothesis<sup>1</sup> in which he makes attempts to clarify how learners transfer from one learning stage to another in language learning. He believes learners gain little but merely practice the acquainted grammar if the input messages have been already grasped. Therefore, the input should be slightly above the learners' real language level. If the learners language level is labeled as  $R_i$ , the sequential input message should be  $R_{i+1}$  (1 symbolizes the language message to be input in the following teaching). Only through such a process is L2 acquisition possible. Krashen's hypothesis helps elaborate that the teaching standard should be slightly higher set and instructors should expect more from learners. In non-major English teaching success in test is not the end itself

Krashen also proposes the Affective Filter Hypothesis<sup>2</sup> which elucidates that satisfactory input does not necessarily result in efficient acquisition of L2. Learners' psychological reactions must be taken into account, such as motivation, attitude, confidence and emotion, etc.

This hypothesis makes it clear that if learners are positive and properly motivated, the filter of L2 acquisition is lessened. Otherwise strong filtering compromises gains in L2 acquisition. Krashen adds that emotional reactions certainly affect the progress of L2 acquisition, but not the final achievement.

Scholars like Pierson conclude that "motivation and attitudes are important in determining the final achievement; the best learners are those possessing both strong motivation and outstanding abilities." (Liu Ruiqing 186)

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However how to enhance the motivation on learners' part? Many linguists consider that Communicative Language Teaching has the great capacity of activating the classroom atmosphere and enhancing the learners' interests, which is somewhat beyond the reach of Grammar Translation. "In Communicative Teaching, the instructors have a high expectation on the learners' language level. Teaching is conducted on the premise that the learners have already possessed the ability of communicating in L2" (Liu 190)

Consequently accentuation should be placed upon the Integrative Motivation<sup>3</sup>, which is more emphasized in classroom teaching in order to activate learners' motivation. For the sake of enhancing learners' interests, some measures are to be utilized to encourage the learners and to slightly award the learners' achievements in class teaching. Instructors thus are expected not only to adopt the grammar translation, but set higher standard for the learners that leads to necessary communication in L2 learning.

### **III The Impact of High Expectation on Techniques and Motivation and Concerning Experiment**

The impact of expectation on teaching can be perceived in the difference between major English teaching and non-major English teaching. In major English teaching, more requirements are imposed in criteria upon listening, speaking, reading, translating and writing on the part of the learners. The reflections of requirements on teaching techniques are that motivation and communication are fairly accentuated.

The learners themselves aware of their status and tasks purposefully distinguish themselves from non-majors in application of language abilities and learning methods, which results in prominent efficiency.

However the instructors of non-majors usually conduct text-based teaching and focus mainly on examinations, regardless of the training of integrative language ability in general. Low expectation does little to enhance learners' motivation and to innovate teaching techniques. The after-effects of low expectation on the learners are that they, guided by the instructors, make the success in exams as the end of study rather than enhancement of total language ability and in no way strengthen their interests in L2 learning.

Different expectations of L2 learning affect the final achievement of both majors and non-majors, due to the different techniques and motivations resulted. Different expectations

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certainly result in different achievements in the field of non-major English learning, which is the subject this thesis aims to discuss and for the sake of discussion the following experiment was conducted.

The experiment was conducted in two classes in Xi'an University of Architecture and Technology, which lasted for two years from September, 2001 to June 2003. The subjects in the experiment shared basically equal educational backgrounds with their mean scores of the entrance examination being 62.43 and 61.81 respectively. The same textbook—*21<sup>st</sup> Century College English*-- was used as teaching material in both classes.

Different teaching techniques were employed as a result of different expectations on the students. In class A, Communicative Language Teaching was conducted due to the teacher's high expectation on students --to raise students' comprehensive English abilities. In the class, the teacher used English only to give the lessons and students were also expected to ask or answer questions in English. Each time at the beginning of the class, two or three students were asked to tell a story or the latest news. And then a topic related to the text was given to the students for free discussion.

As for the listening and speaking practice, the teacher firstly conducted dictations on sentences and passages, then the students were asked to listen to either a conversation, a story or a passage and role-play the dialogue, or retell the story or summarize the main idea.

As for the reading practice, firstly, some questions related to the background information were raised to let the students freely discuss and think about the theme or content of the text they were to read. Secondly, text-related questions were offered to students before learning the text, to which students were required to give answers after reading the text. The most satisfactory answers were listed on the blackboard. When all this was done, students were asked to close their books and summarize the text. Then, text analysis was done. Students were asked to participate in analyzing the text, such as finding topic sentences and thesis statement, making sound judgment and inference, recognizing denotation and connotation, understanding figurative language, drawing conclusions, working out the organization of the text and features of its style.

As for writing practice, some useful words, expressions and sentences were provided for students, who were asked to write a summary of the text or imitate the text structure to write a short passage.

As for translating practice, students were asked to do some translation practice literally and orally.

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In the following part, a sample class on intensive reading (Text A) will be given to provide a picture of what the instructors have done in the experiment.

### The Sample Class A(Communicative Approach)

#### Text A: How I Got Smart

#### Step One: Pre-reading Activities

1. Some idioms were given to students and asked them to hypothesize about what they might mean so as to enlarge the students' vocabulary (5 minutes).

Example: love at first sight

2. Students were asked some free questions to practice their spoken English (10 minutes). (The purpose is to arouse students' interests in the passage and motivate them to actively participate in the class.)

Example: Do you remember the first time you fell in love?

Students were divided into several small groups in which they had a free discussion about these questions. After that a few students were asked to give their views on these questions.

#### Step Two: Text-related Questions

Text-related Questions were given to students before reading text A (5 minutes). The purpose of the questions is to facilitate the engagement of reading. They motivate students to read more purposefully in order to find an answer or complete a task. They can direct students' attention to the important points in the text, preventing them from giving off along a false track. Best of all, they can activate their minds.

Example: How interested was the writer in school before he reached his sophomore year?

#### Step Three: Oral Exercise on Text

With the questions in minds, students started their passage reading. After finishing reading the passage, they were given a few minutes either to search for answers to these questions or to discuss them with their classmates. Then they were expected to answer these questions to the class. The key words and phrases of the most satisfactory answers were put on the blackboard. When all this was done, students were required to close their books and to recall the major points of the passage. They could either speak to themselves or talk to their deskmates just by looking at the blackboard. Here are some words and expressions from Text A.

Examples: out of focus, on the contrary, beyond one's wildest dreams, invest on, bridge the

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gulf, begin one's venture into, sweep sb off sb's feet, in time, play into one's hands, be absorbed in, frown, be stumped on, come across, feed on

#### Step Four: Text Analysis

Text analysis is an important means of helping students to understand texts fully. Students have to learn various devices that establish textual cohesion, especially the use of signal words, which provide an aid for the reader to grasp the thread of thought in the material to be read. They are basically classified into five groups: 1. words that signal more of the same; 2. words that signal the order or sequence of events; 3. words that change the direction of thoughts; 4. words that signal a conclusion or a summary; 5. words that signal cause and effect. During the presentation of the text, students were often asked to grasp the thread of thought, working out linking ideas in the text with the help of the devices mentioned above. It is of great help for students to predict what may come next, to understand the intention of the author, and the arguments put forward in the text. In this way, students would probably have less chance to be confused or puzzled by the interwoven ideas of the text, thus both their reading speed and comprehension will be greatly improved.

When the text was presented, the teacher should always ask students to participate in analyzing the text instead of a teacher's monotonous explanation. Analyzing the text with students gives them a chance to improve their ability in understanding and evaluating the texts. It is also beneficial to them to acquire the skill of active reading.

#### Step Five: Post- reading Discussion

Students were asked to discuss the following questions in groups using the given cues and then a representative was selected from each group to report to the class.

Example: What misconceptions do youngsters have of their teachers? (cues: common misconception, teachers-child prodigies a bookworm, play rather than study, an enthusiastic devotee of books and homework hate compulsory education patient)

#### Step Six : Written Assignment

Students were introduced one way on how to write an essay by analyzing the text's structure.

In Text A, the author introduces a misconception as a way of leading into a story, but the

same structure is also useful for presenting theories, arguments and opinions.

The following is a detailed analysis of the first three paragraphs:

Look again at paragraphs 1-3 of Text A. The author starts by outlining a misconception:

*A common misconception among youngsters attending school is that their teachers were child prodigies. Who else but a bookworm, with none of the normal kid's tendency to play rather than study, would grow up to be a teacher anyway?*

He then gives a specific example—himself—that shows this idea is incorrect:

*I've tried desperately to explain to my students that the image they have of me as an enthusiastic devotee of books and homework during my adolescence was a bit out of focus. On the contrary, I hated compulsory education with a passion. I could never quite accept the notion of having to go to school while the fish were biting.*

Then he goes on to introduce the key event in the story he wants to tell:

*But in my sophomore year, something beautiful and exciting happened. Cupid aimed his arrow and struck me right in the heart. All at once, I enjoyed going to school, if only to gaze at the lovely face in English .*

When the detailed analysis was done, the teacher should remind students to notice how the author tried to get our attention with this introduction: Then students were asked to use the same structure to introduce a story of their own in about 150 words. Meanwhile, the teacher should tell students not to worry about relating the whole story – just concentrate on the introduction, and try to make their introduction interesting enough that the readers will want to hear more.

While in class B Grammar Translation method was used due to teachers' low expectation on students—to help improve their reading, writing and translating abilities with the terminal goal to pass the exams. In this class the teachers used a lot of Chinese to lecture and seldom asked students questions. When learning a new text, firstly students were guided to look at the new words and phrases with pronunciations and Chinese meanings. Secondly, text reading was started with teacher's sentence-by-sentence translation and grammar explanation. Thirdly, text-related questions and exercises in the textbook were dealt with. Lastly, the teacher guided the students to practice the new words and phrases.

To prove that teacher's different expectations on students would result in the difference in the effectiveness of classroom teaching, a proficiency test and a questionnaire were administered to

the two experimental classes. Test results are shown in the following two tables. The test consists of five parts—listening(20%),reading(40%),translation(10%),writing(15%), speaking(15%).

#### Class A (Communicative Teaching Approach)

Part	Points	Mean	Median	Mode	Range	SD
	20	10.33	11	11	8	2.32
	40	30.27	31	35	16	4.5
	10	7.97	8	8	5	1.47
	15	12.4	13	15	7	2.11
	15	10.18	10.5	11.5	5.5	1.69
Total	100	71.15	70.75	76.5	36.5	8.95

#### Class B (Grammar-Translation Teaching)

Part	Points	Mean	Median	Mode	Range	SD
	20	8.10	8	10	14	3.54
	40	27.55	29	29	36	7.23
	10	5.96	7	7	10	2.83
	15	9.89	10	9	8	2.19
	15	9.52	10	10	8.5	1.93
Total	100	61.03	61	69.5	57.5	12.54

*Notes:*

= listening(20%), = reading(40%), = translation(10%),

= writing(15%), = speaking(15%).

*Mean=the sum of the separate scores divided by their number.*



*Median=the score which is at the center of the distribution.*

*Mode=the most frequently obtained score in the data.*

*Range=the spread of the distribution of scores.*

*SD=the most stable index of variability which tells whether the test scores tend to bunch together or are distributed more or less evenly over a broad range.*

By comparing the two tables above, we could draw the following generalizations:

- 1) The tables show that the students in Class A did better in every part of the test than students in Class B.
- 2) The students in Class A tend to cluster together toward the central point, with the mean being 71.5, the median being 70.75.
- 3) The students in Class A are more homogenous than those in Class B, as is shown by SDs.

The above statistical findings accumulated from the experiment showed that the teacher's high expectation on students was more effective in helping improve students' English abilities than the teacher's low expectations.

In order to further prove which teaching method was more attractive and beneficial to students in classroom English learning, a questionnaire was done to collect students' views.

*Question one: How do you like your English class?*

*A) a lot B) a little C) not at all*

For this question, the number of the subjects in Class A choosing A(86%) was much greater than that in Class B(46%), but the number of subjects in Class B choosing C(30%) was larger than that in Class A(5%). From this result, we have no difficulty in seeing that the teaching method plays a very important role in attracting students' having English class.

*Question Two. How much do you think you have learned from the English course?*

*A. a lot*

*B. some*

*C. a little*

For this question, nearly 45% students in Class A chose A, which was much more than that in Class B (26.5%). On the other hand, almost 38.6% students in Class B chose C, greater than that in Class A (around 10%)

This result suggests that students do benefit from their English course, which is to a large extent due to their interests in class.

*Question Three. How do you usually participate in your English class activities?*

*A. active*

*B. often absent-minded*

*C. with little interest*

For this question, more than 70% students in Class A chose A, much greater than that in Class B (46.8%). The result shows that communicative approach is more attractive than grammar translation method. Students' attentiveness in class depends on their interests. Generally, those who pay more attention learn most. And that concentration is the necessary and sufficient condition for converting input to intake. Input here means what the teacher presents before the students, and intake means what the students have got understood or have been aware of.

#### **IV Conclusion and Prospects**

The above experiment implies that low expectation is necessary for improvement of L2 learning. High expectation impels the instructors and learners to adopt higher standard for evaluation and corresponding techniques.

While imposing more expectations, the instructors should be practical and flexible. Higher standard might be positive for some learners who become more activated under pressure. However others might become frustrated with more expectations, for high standard makes the gap between standard and actual language ability prominent. Practically, the instructors may take care of the actual level of the learners and impose expectations gradually.

Notes:

1. see 刘润清,1999, 《论大学英语教学》。北京：外研社。 P.154
2. see 刘润清,1999, 《论大学英语教学》。北京：外研社。 P.161
3. see Tian Aiguo , 1999.A Hand Book for Teachers of English .Xi'an : Xi'an Foreign Studies University Publishing House.P.87

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