Student Preferences and Expectations in an English Classroom

Christopher Sullivan

Introduction

This paper reports on the findings of a four-item, open-ended questionnaire designed to gather qualitative data about first-year students' preferences and expectations for their English courses at a Japanese women's university.

Previous research has examined the differences between teacher and student language learning beliefs (see Gabillon, 2012, for a summary). This literature was unanimous in suggesting that mismatches between teacher and student beliefs can negatively affect learning and cause stress among all of the participants in a language course. Conversely, correspondences between beliefs can promote learning and foster positive emotions. The importance of conducting such research is obvious. Most of these studies, however, only focused on beliefs regarding language instruction, and tended to overlook beliefs regarding the other elements of a language course.

The purpose of the following research, therefore, was to elicit information on Japanese student preferences and expectations regarding as many different aspects of a university English course as possible (affective, behavioral, cognitive, cultural, social etc.). A secondary goal of this study was to establish a basis of comparison between teacher and student beliefs. A later study will examine the preferences and expectations of native English-speaking instructors to determine how they compare and contrast to those of their Japanese university students. A third and final purpose of this research was for the author to pilot qualitative methods of data collection and analysis (Hatch, 2002).

Literature Review

Definitions

There are no set definitions for the terms *preferences*, *expectations*, and *mismatch* in language education. Instead, they are usually subsumed under the blanket term 'beliefs' (Borg, 2006; Gabillon, 2012). Before introducing the research investigating the relationships between teacher and student beliefs, I will therefore define how the above terms are used in this study.

The term 'preferences' refers to the stable likes and dislikes that individuals possess. These likes and dislikes may be either present- or future-oriented. An example of a preference from this study would be the statement, "speaking makes us happy". The students who wrote this response enjoy speaking activities in the present, and will most likely continue to enjoy them in the future. The statement, "we dislike the feeling that mistakes are not allowed," would be an example of a preference phrased as a negative (i.e. when reversed, it expresses the preference, "we like the feeling that mistakes are allowed").

The term 'expectations' refers to an individual's beliefs of how something should (or should not) be, or what form something should (or should not) take. These beliefs represent the 'ideal' to an individual. An example from this study would be the response, "we want more cheerful lessons". This statement implies that the current lessons are not cheerful enough, and that they should be more so. "We don't want to be given ambiguous answers," is a statement phrased as a negative, expressing the expectation that answers should be clear.

The term 'mismatch' refers to a conspicuous difference between an individual's preferences and expectations, and what these individuals actually experience in a language course. This term appears with some frequency in the literature on language education beliefs. Several synonyms for this term exist, such as *classroom shock* (Lutz, 1990), *confused encounters* and *culture bumps* (Thorp, 1991), *conflicts* (Barcelos, 2006), and *discrepancies* (Gabillon, 2012).

Often, mismatch arises as a result of the difference between a teacher's preferences and expectations and those of a student, or in more dramatic situations,

between a teacher's and those of an entire class. Consequences of mismatch range from the minor (misunderstandings and miscommunication; Luppescu & Day, 1990) to the medium (missed learning opportunities, lower grades, poor teacher evaluations, demotivation; Hu, 2011; Kumaravadivelu, 1991) to the major (stress, identity crises, withdrawing from school or leaving a teaching position; Brown, 2009; Kern, 1995; Schulz, 2001).

However, occurrences of mismatches may also be beneficial. They may challenge assumptions, create learning opportunities, and encourage intercultural exchange (Bloom, 2007; Kumaravadivelu, 1991; Thorp, 1991). Convergences, instances in which teacher and student preferences and expectations are in alignment, are likewise argued to have positive effects on learning, motivation, and emotions (Barcelos, 2001; Kumaravadivelu, 1991).

Previous Research

The findings from studies comparing and contrasting teacher and student beliefs are complex and occasionally contradictory. Lutz (1990) hypothesized the existence of 'classroom shock', and then demonstrated that a statistically significant match existed between American student and teacher classroom expectations, while significant mismatch existed between Japanese students and American teachers. McCargar (1993) found statistically significant differences in classroom role expectations between American teachers and students of various nationalities, as well as differences between the expectations of students of various nationalities. Mismatches in expectations of error correction were most prominent. Kern (1995) found that on a group level, the language learning beliefs of American teachers and students of French were highly correlated. However, on the individual level, differences existed between particular teachers and students. Barcelos (2001) found that a mismatch between her own beliefs about the role of the teacher, and those of her Brazilian ESL students', created a personal dilemma for the author. She concluded that dilemmas could be mitigated if teachers and researchers investigate student beliefs, and teaching programs address this topic. Bloom (2007) identified four specific tensions that occurred between herself and her American students while negotiating a Spanish curriculum. These tensions

stemmed from her own preference for a communicative approach to language learning, with her students preferring a more traditional approach. Brown（2009）found that American students also preferred a traditional approach to language learning, while their non-American language teachers preferred a communicative approach.

　　The findings from research conducted in Japan are equally complex and contradictory. An early study determined that Japanese university students were not able to reliably express their language teaching or learning beliefs, so these beliefs could not be compared with those of their teachers（Luppescu & Day, 1990）. Yet a study one year later suggested that not only could students express these beliefs, but also that they preferred a communicative approach（Widdows & Voller, 1991）. This finding was later confirmed by Sakui and Gaies in 1999. Ten years after Widdows & Voller, another study suggested that university students preferred traditional methods to communicative ones（Matsuura, Chiba, & Hilderbrandt, 2001）. This newer finding was contradicted by Falout, Murphey, Elwood, and Hood（2008）, who again suggested that Japanese students do prefer communicative methods. Two studies both found that Japanese university students were less likely to recommend punitive actions for misbehaviors when compared to foreign teachers or students, Ryan（1995）and Burrell（2009）.

Research Questions

　　To date, there have been no large-scale studies comparing and contrasting the overall preferences and expectations that Japanese university students and their instructors possess regarding their English courses. This study represents a pilot attempt at gathering data on one half of the collation. More specifically, this smaller-scale study investigated the preferences and expectations of the students at the women's university where the research took place. In order to do so, the following research questions were set:

　　1)　What preferences do the students have regarding their English courses at this university?

　　2)　What expectations do the students have regarding their English courses at this university?

Methods

Participants

This study was conducted at a women's university, located in Tokyo. This university was ranked as slightly-higher-than-average under the Japanese *hensachi* system (university ranking expressed as a standard deviation). The participants were 109 female students, from five different first-year English classes. These classes were all taught by the author, so the participants should be considered a sample of convenience. Every student was a Japanese national, with the exception of one foreign student from Korea. Four of the students were second-year students who were repeating a first-year course. All of the first-year students were enrolled in three required English courses: a communication, a discussion, and a reading course. The roster for each course was the same, so students placed in a class would attend these three required courses together (with the teacher for each course differing).

Procedure

At the end of the second semester, in the penultimate lesson, the students were placed into small 'focus groups' comprised of three-to-four people. Focus groups were chosen as it was hypothesized that groups brainstorming together would generate more, and more varied, responses than individuals working alone (Morgan, 1997). These groups were given a four-item bilingual survey containing the following questions:

1) What do you *like* about your university English courses?
2) What do you *dislike* about your university English courses?
3) What do you *want* in your university English courses?
4) What do you *not want* in your university English courses?

Items 1 and 2 were included in order to elicit student preferences, and Items 3 and 4 were included to elicit student expectations.

The groups were told that they could discuss and write their responses in either English or Japanese, they could write as many responses per question as

they wanted, and that they should use whichever language was easiest to communicate their ideas in. They were instructed to think about all of their university English courses when answering the questions, not just the course they were attending that moment. In order to encourage as wide a range of responses as possible, a bilingual list of eight prompts was provided at the bottom of the questionnaire sheet, and students were asked to consider them: *Teachers, Textbooks, Activities, Classmates, Homework, Tests, Assessment, and Grades*. The groups were then given twenty minutes to complete the activity.

From the five classes, thirty-four survey sheets in total were collected. On all sheets, every single question was answered, with an average of approximately two responses per question. The responses were all uniformly brief; each was a single word, phrase, or short sentence. There were 277 responses across the four categories (*Likes, Dislikes, Wants, Not Wants*). Only five of the 277 responses were written in English, twenty-two contained a mix of English and Japanese, and the remaining 250 were written in Japanese.

After the data were collected and input into word processing software, the responses were translated into English. A native Japanese colleague and I created our own separate translations, and then working together, collated these into a final version.

Analysis

In order to analyze the data, these translated responses had to be assigned codes. This coding was accomplished through the qualitative technique of *Inductive Analysis* (Hatch, 2002). These codes were not predetermined beforehand, but instead were 'discovered' by inductively exploring the data. The data were examined, codes were hypothesized, and then these codes were either accepted or rejected as the data were examined again. After several cycles of this process, fifteen codes were retained: *Activities, Advancement, Assessment, Attendance, Classmates, Contents, Courses, Culture, Homework, Language, Lessons, Skills, Teachers, Tests, Textbooks*. Although these codes were not decided on prior to the analysis, seven of the eight questionnaire prompts emerged as codes (with only *Grades* not appearing).

Once the codes were decided on, the responses were then assigned one or more of these. For example, a statement such as, "[we like] many discussions with friends," would be assigned the codes for both *Activities* (discussions) and *Classmates* (friends).

Results

Table 1 summarizes the results of the data analysis for the *Likes* and *Dislikes* categories. Table 2 summarizes the results for the *Wants* and *Not Wants* categories.

Table 1
Codes for the Likes and Dislikes Categories

Likes			Dislikes		
Code	Number	%	Code	Number	%
Classmates	29	40.85	Teachers	27	36.99
Teachers	24	33.80	Courses	21	28.77
Activities	22	30.99	Contents	20	27.40
Contents	10	14.08	Lessons	16	21.92
Language	9	12.68	Textbooks	13	17.81
Lessons	8	11.27	Activities	11	15.07
Courses	7	9.86	Homework	11	15.07
Culture	4	5.63	Advancement	11	15.07
Skills	4	5.63	Skills	9	12.33
Homework	3	4.23	Classmates	8	10.96
Textbooks	2	2.82	Language	7	9.59
Assessment	1	1.41	Culture	4	5.48
Advancement	1	1.41	Assessment	4	5.48
Tests	0	0	Tests	4	5.48
Attendance	0	0	Attendance	1	1.37

Note. Number = Number of times that code has been assigned to a response. Percentages do not add to 100% as multiple codes could be assigned to the same response.

Table 2

Codes for the Wants and Not Wants Categories

Wants			Not Wants		
Code	Number	%	Code	Number	%
Activities	35	51.39	Teachers	19	31.15
Contents	23	31.94	Lessons	11	18.03
Language	20	27.78	Assessment	10	16.39
Culture	20	27.78	Tests	10	16.39
Skills	17	23.61	Activities	9	14.75
Teachers	10	13.89	Homework	9	14.75
Assessment	8	11.11	Contents	7	11.48
Lessons	7	9.72	Skills	6	9.84
Advancement	6	8.33	Courses	4	6.56
Classmates	4	5.56	Culture	3	4.92
Textbooks	3	4.17	Language	2	3.28
Homework	3	4.17	Attendance	2	3.28
Tests	3	4.17	Textbooks	1	1.64
Courses	1	1.39	Classmates	1	1.64
Attendance	1	1.39	Advancement	0	0

Note. Number = Number of times that code has been assigned to a response. Percentages do not add to 100% as multiple codes could be assigned to the same response.

A full examination of all of the codes for each category is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, the three most frequent codes for each category will be listed, the themes that often appeared in the responses for that code will be noted, and example responses will be provided.

In the *Likes* category, the three most numerous codes were *Classmates* (40.85 %), *Teachers* (33.80%), and *Activities* (30.99%). Responses referring to *Classmates* often contained themes of communication, friendship, and fun. Statements such as, "[we like that] classmates can become friends (because of games)" and "[we like] many discussions with friends" were illustrative of these themes. Responses with the code *Teachers* contained themes of rapport, mood, and fairness. Examples include statements such as, "[we like] teachers who actively communicate with the students", "we enjoy the cheerful and friendly teachers", and "[we like that] the teachers have a fair attitude". Responses referring to *Activities*

contained communicative and ludic (playful) themes, such as, "having a discussion with 3 or 4 other people was enjoyable", and "[we like] lessons that are like a game".

The most frequent code in the *Dislikes* category was *Teachers* (36.99%). These responses contained themes of mood and classroom management. Students disliked "when the teachers are negative", "teachers with intense mood swings", and "when teachers do not prepare, [and] the lesson's efficacy is reduced". Responses coded as *Courses* were the second most frequent (28.77%). These statements referred to homework, the pace of the course, and the reading course in particular. "We dislike courses with a lot of homework", "[we dislike] courses that students must prepare for", and "[we dislike] reading: the pace of the class is not interesting", were illustrative examples. The third most frequent code was *Contents* (27.40%) and these responses contained themes of variety, interest, and level. Statements such as, "we become bored with textbooks that always use the same pattern", and "the reading textbook level is too low. It seems like our comprehension will not improve" were typical for this code.

The most frequent codes in the *Wants* category were *Activities* (51.39%), *Contents* (31.94%), and *Language* (27.78%). The responses referring to *Activities* again contained communicative and ludic themes such as, "[we want] activities that feel like games", and "[we want] lessons in daily conversation". Students also indicated that, "we want to take frequent breaks. We get tired. 90 minutes is long". Students wanted *Contents* that were practical, cultural, and interesting. They wanted "English we can use after we join society", "Western movies, Western music", and "the content of the textbooks topics to have more range". English *Language* wants were also practical and cultural, however, the students additionally wanted "the teachers to speak a little more Japanese", and "explanations in Japanese as well, not only in English".

Teachers (31.15%), *Lessons* (18.03%), and *Assessment* (16.39%) were the three most numerous codes in the *Not Wants* category. Themes of mood, classroom management, and fairness again appeared in responses coded as *Teachers*. Students did not want "to be scolded severely", "lessons in which only the teacher gets to speak", and "...when teachers show favoritism". Responses referring to

Lessons contained themes of style, control, and contents, such as, "[we do not want] lessons that are pointlessly long", or "lessons with no variation". Regarding *Assessment*, themes of summative testing and fairness often appeared. "We don't want grades to only be determined by tests", and "so much difference between different teachers' assessment systems is not good" were typical examples.

Discussion

During the data analysis, the difficulty and time-consuming nature of coding all-too-soon became apparent. Much second-guessing and recoding occurred during the process, and no member-checking or follow-up interviews were conducted with any of the participants. As a result, the internal validity, reliability, and generalizability of this study are therefore highly suspect. Similarly, while composing this article, the impossibility of reporting on all codes for each category was quickly realized. Despite these limitations, I believe that this paper has presented enough evidence to attempt to answer the research questions.

The first such question asked, "What preferences do the students have regarding their English courses at this university?" The most common response referred to classmates. Students liked when their English courses presented opportunities to make and communicate with friends. A similar preference existed for communication. Students liked activities that were communicative or ludic in nature. This preference for communication supports the findings of Falout et al. (2008), Sakui and Gaies (1999), and Widdows and Voller (1991). Students liked English teachers who were friendly, who tried to build rapport, and who treated everyone equally. Again, communication appears as a preference, as students also liked teachers who communicated with them.

Teachers were the most common negative preference. Students disliked angry or unfriendly teachers, a finding also discovered by Falout et al. (2008). Ryan (1995) and Burrell (2009) found that Japanese university students were less likely to recommend punishment for misbehavior. If the students in this study did not view misbehavior as worthy of a reprimand, perhaps they were genuinely surprised and disappointed when their teachers became angry. Students also dis-

liked when course content was too repetitive, boring, or easy. Another dislike was for courses that assigned much homework, or required much preparation. A final negative preference that should be noted was for the reading course itself. A similar dislike for reading was noted by Widdows and Voller (1991).

The second research question asked, "What expectations do the students have regarding their English courses at this university?" The most reported expectation was for activities that contained communicative and ludic themes. Students also wanted course contents that were practical, cultural, and interesting. This desire for practical, communicative English echoes the preferences for communication noted above. The desire for cultural contents corresponds to a finding by Sakui and Gaies (1999) that Japanese university students believed it was useful to know about English-speaking countries in order to speak English. Another noteworthy desire was for the teachers to speak, and explain, in more Japanese.

The most common negative expectation returned to subject of teachers. Students did not want their teachers to scold them, to dominate the lesson, or to treat them unfairly. When teachers dominate the lesson, students lose opportunities to communicate. Boring and repetitive lessons were again mentioned as being not wanted, as well as not liked. Finally, summative testing was mentioned as another negative expectation, similar to a previous finding by Widdows and Voller (1991). Although two of the three required first-year courses, communication and discussion, were 'oral skills' in name, they both had end-of-semester written tests, so students' negative desire for written, summative testing may be understandable.

Conclusion

This study investigated the preferences and expectations held by the students at a Japanese women's university for their English courses. These preferences and expectations resembled each other in several ways.

Firstly, students both liked and wanted opportunities to communicate and create relationships with their classmates and the English teachers. Conversely, they neither liked nor wanted their English teachers to scold them, or be unfriendly.

The fact that the social (communication) and affective (friendship, mood) aspects of the English courses were much more frequently mentioned than the linguistic (language acquisition) aspect is worthy of note. Almost twenty-five years ago, Widdows and Voller suggested that, "since maturational and social development is a major motive in coming to university, and since academic knowledge of English is not highly regarded, it would make sense to develop English language courses that take account of this" (1991, p. 134).

Secondly, preferences and expectations for cognitive (ludic and interesting activities) and cultural (practical English, cultural material) aspects were also more prevalent than linguistic ones. The students did want to learn, as evidenced by their dislike for easy courses. However, they wanted to learn useful English through cultural material, interesting activities, and games, rather than lectures, reading, homework, and written tests.

"...If teachers and students are to live peacefully in the classroom," writes de Almeida Soares, there is a need for, "the establishment of shared beliefs about teaching and learning a foreign language at a language school" (2007, p. 43). This study was conducted as a first step in such an establishment.

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