

Learner Expectations in an Intensive English Program (IEP)

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Abstract

In today's fast-paced society, Intensive English Program (IEP) continue to thrive as more and more English language learners (ELLs) patronize them. This study aims to identify the expectations of Thai learners enrolled in these programs in Thailand. It employed a qualitative research inquiry among 185 freshmen students from different regions in the country. The result of the study presented four key areas which Thai learners value in an IEP program: teaching quality, characteristics of people in the institution, learning environment, and expectation of

oneself. The study also revealed that the learners' expectations are complicated probably as a result of the sociocultural value reflecting both the characters of traditional and progressive learners in Thailand.

Keywords: learner's expectations, Intensive English Program, Thailand English education, English teaching, language learning, ESL

Introduction

Every year, various international colleges throughout Thailand are faced with the challenge to prepare freshmen students who are about to take mainstream classes where English is used as the medium of instruction. Traditionally, educational institutions organize the “pull-out” system or segregated ESL instruction to address this issue (Goldenberg, 2008). In this approach, English learners (ELs) are expected to attend an hour of English as a Second Language (ESL) class each day. However, this approach has been deemed insufficient and ineffective by many educators and learners alike. Accordingly, the approach causes adverse effects to learners as it promotes a sense of “distance” and “separation” from other students (Adams & Kirova, 2006); this paved way to the increasing popularity of Intensive English Programs (IEPs).

In Thailand, higher education institutions offer IEPs to freshmen students in preparation for mainstream classes where English will be used as the medium of instruction. While some institutions operate by separating students based on their English proficiency level, others

have students study together according to their courses regardless of their English language proficiency level. The latter system aims to develop camaraderie among learners and foster a spirit of inclusivity where learners of all levels can study amongst each other.

Every year, the IEPs continue to accommodate hundreds to thousands of students from different regions of Thailand. The duration of such courses usually lasts for several weeks to several months prior to the opening of the regular semesters. The students focus primarily on the development of their English language skills for the entire duration of the course with less thought of the content subjects. With varied types of learners in so short a period of time, it is extremely important that IEPs are well-planned and carefully implemented. McKeon (1987) described language programs such as IEPs complicated and difficult to organize; thus, it is critical that they are guided by students' needs in their planning, development and operation. These needs may be explored through learner's expectations of IEPs.

A typical first day classroom scenario in an IEP usually involves the teachers asking their students about their expectations. Some students would be idealistic while others may be realistic. Some would think of the challenges ahead as achievable while others express no hope even before they start their journey. The activity is often taxing as it requires a lot of listening and consideration on the part of the teacher, nonetheless it is quite beneficial as it reveals a lot about the students' ideas and perspectives. According to Horwitz (1999), understanding learners is the key to understanding learner strategies and planning appropriate language instruction. This study, therefore, explores the learners' expectations in an IEP. Such a study is crucial now that the impact of technology and modernity has dramatically changed learners and their "evolving expectations" are constantly transforming language teaching and learning (Pedró, 2012).

Learner Expectations

Expectations are the belief systems which learners have of things around them. It is heavily influenced by the people and the community to which a learner belongs

(Altrichter & Elliott, 2000). Throughout the years, many educators and researchers have provided various reasons for the importance of learner expectations in educational settings. One of the most convincing findings so far is the idea that learner expectations have a rather “self-fulfilling” effect (Otte, Christiansen, & Howson, 1986). Where learners believe they can succeed, they will be motivated to accomplish even the most complicated tasks assigned to them. However, where students have less expectations, they are more likely to exhibit mediocre classroom performance. This has been proven in several studies conducted in various fields of education. Bedi, for instance, (2006) noted that lower level of performance resulted when learner’s expectations are not addressed and only educator’s perceptions were given consideration. This is especially true when learning occurs in an unconventional learning environment as online learning, tutorial schools, home schooling, etc. and where new teaching approaches are introduced to the learners.

Additionally, understanding learner expectation is important when planning to improve the different areas of an educational system. Information regarding learner expectations

may be used by teachers, managers and school administrators as a guide to develop their program to best suit their target learners especially where the students come from diverse cultural background.

Learning institutions undergoing a transition phase also benefit a lot when learner expectations are incorporated into their transition planning checklist. Bell (2005) noted, for instance, that learner expectation enables managers to be more innovative in their design of learning programs by providing relevant suggestions to support learners. The IEPs are considered a transitional phase where learners from secondary schools are introduced to the tertiary level. It is a crucial phase filled with expectations from learners as they transition from one stage of their academic career to another.

James (2002) identified two key areas of learner expectations in educational setting: the quality of education and personal relevance. Some learners regard the quality of education provided by a learning institution as most important. In this point of view, students hope to get their money's worth by making sure that there is progress or development

in their learning. For instance, Choy, McNickle and Clayton (2002) explored learner expectations in online learning. In their study, they investigated students' expectations of the services either currently provided or required to be provided by language centers and their effects to students' success while studying online. The study revealed that students expect an efficient technical support system in online learning and effective facilitation by teachers of the teaching-learning process. Other students value personal relevance where they reflect whether a course or program is right for them or not. They also take into account whether it is in-demand and will land them immediate employment upon their graduation. Where there is a gap between learner expectation and reality (Kerka, 1995), students may fail to complete a program or attain satisfactory performance in class.

To sum up, learner expectations remains relevant as they provide insights to better influence learners, improve an educational system, and adjust aspects of the teaching-learning process during transition phases. Currently, literature on learner expectations emphasizes the quality of education

and personal relevance as key areas where learners are most concerned. However as education continues to evolve, learner expectations will continue to unmask new perceptions and ideas to better address learner needs and achieve the desired outcomes that will equip learners to be effective in their future careers.

Components of IEP

In the broadest sense, Intensive English Programs (IEPs) aim to develop student's English proficiency. The program may be offered in two ways (Language Enhancement Center Payap University Chiang Mai, 2019): A general English course which focuses on training from pre-intermediate to advanced levels without an academic focus and an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course that offers academic English training from pre-intermediate to advanced levels. Although every institution that offers this kind of program includes a unique plan on how best to offer such course, general features most often include the following (Peng, 2007):

- a long period of English instruction both academic and communicative aspects;

- integrative co-curricular activities into the program such as English festivals, English corners, speech and singing contests, etc.;
- involves native speakers and non-native English speaking teachers;
- emphasis on communicative features of English language learning that involves various group work and pair work activities;
- multimedia and technology equipped classrooms; and
- a focus on the development of cultural awareness among learners.

Other IEPs encourage students to get to live with teachers especially when it is a short term intensive course (Foss, Carney, McDonald, & Rooks, 2008). Such an arrangement enables students to interact with speakers of the English language in a more natural environment. It also provides cross-cultural training for the students who have yet to experience learning with diverse learners (Moussu, 2006).

Other institutions have bilingual educational support staff which is often available to provide various forms of assistance to IEP students (International Education Division, 2010).

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative method of research inquiry. A total of 185 freshmen students from different regions in Thailand comprise the population of the study. A free-answer type of survey questionnaire (Calderon & Gonzales, 1993) was administered on the first week of the summer intensive course. The respondents were asked to write their expectations of the IEP. This type of inquiry is appropriate as the aim of the study is to discover new ideas beyond those that are already known to the researcher. Retrieved questionnaires were collected and analyzed using the elaborative coding technique or the top down coding scheme (Saldana, 2015). First, relevant texts from the survey questionnaire were highlighted and abstracted from the questionnaires. Statements and phrases with similar constructs were grouped into themes. Initial coding revealed 845 relevant texts for coding. Where recurring texts were used, frequency distribution was employed. Then, similar

categories were re-grouped and combined to form the second level coding. Again, categories were refined further to relevant and meaningful theoretical constructs. Final coding resulted in four major constructs that include expectations on: teaching quality, characteristics of the people in the institution, learning environment, and oneself.

Results and Discussions

Thai students' expectations in an IEP program are as follow:

Expectation of teaching quality

English education is regarded among the learners who have enrolled in the IEP. This is reflected in their relentless mention of “quality English education” and “speak English fluently.” Like any language learning program, fluency is considered a predictor of one's success. Where fluency is not achieved, students experience depression (Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007), stress (Yeh, & Inose, 2003) and a feeling of lack of occupational success (Shields, & Price, 2002). In Thailand, the dire need for language fluency is expressed in the Basic Education Core Curriculum

(Ministry of Education, 2008) with the following specific criteria as an indicator of one's success at Grade 12:

...skillful in the use of foreign languages (with emphases ...speaking...) to communicate about themselves, their families, schools, the environment, foods, beverages, interpersonal relationships, free time and recreation, health and welfare, selling and buying... with a vocabulary of around 3,600-3,750 words (words with different levels of usage) (p.259)

The awareness of the importance of fluency in English education in today's society is reflected in the IEP students' responses:

Extract 1

I am excited to learn in the intensive class because I like to speak in English with many foreign teachers. This is my first time to learn in English. It is good for me. I know (name of school) will help me have good education.

Extract 2

My seniors said intensive has good quality because they can speak in English better after the course. I hope I will be like them after my intensive classes.

In a quality English education, the students expect that English will be used as the medium of instruction in

their classes. Subsequently, they expect an English speaking campus where students speak English freely and comfortably during the IEP. They are convinced that such a milieu will help improve their English listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills.

Extract 3

There are many foreign teachers in the IEP and studying in English with them will help me make my English better.

In a similar vein, the students expressed their need for practical classes that will be useful in their daily lives. For instance, many of the respondents emphasized that they will be grateful if they can, “speak to foreigners visiting their country,” or that they can, “communicate with their classmates in English.”

Extract 4

My English is not good but I like to speak with foreigners. So I will practice every day with my friends in the dorm. I have one foreign dorm mate. I hope she likes me.

These responses emphasize the students’ preference for English language fluency over accuracy. This has consistently been an aspiration among Thai learners as noted in many

studies conducted in Thailand. For, instance, Wiriyachitra (2002) explained that Thai learners have not been satisfied with higher education in Thailand primarily because it did not address English speaking skills which are crucial in the learners' future occupations. A study by Weenink (2008) reflects a similar concern and expresses the dire need for children to have, "outstanding fluency in English" so that they will be assured of a brighter future.

Behind the seemingly positive attitude towards English education is the awareness of the challenges and difficulties that come with its learning. This was echoed by their responses as they anticipate "more difficult subjects," "misunderstanding," and "cannot write easily in English," Such responses may be reflective of their view of life and the world as a series of problems to be solved (Vathanaprida & MacDonald, 1994). Having just enrolled in an IEP, they have already anticipated the challenges they will encounter during the course.

Extract 5

I am sure IEP subjects are more difficult than my subjects in high school. So I will study harder.

Extract 6

I want my classmates will understand my English. It is not good but I will try by best.

Expectations of the characteristics of the people in the institution

Thai learners are easily affected by the people around them. In the institution, these include the teachers and other students who can greatly impact their lives and play a significant role in their future success. For the teachers, they expect them to be knowledgeable of teaching methods and strategies that can help facilitate their understanding of the lessons easily and clearly.

Extract 7

I like my teacher style is good so I can understand my subjects.

Extract 8

Many foreign teachers speak fast. It is hard to understand them. It makes me nervous and shy.

Extract 9

I sleep when I do not understand my class. Teacher should teach fun and happy; many kinds of teaching ways are good.

Another characteristic the students look for in teachers is *kindness*. As it is their first time to be away from their family, the pressure of living alone is enormous. Learning with *nice* teachers seems to lighten up the pressure of the situation. As Buddhism is engrained in Thai culture, this expectation should not come as a surprise as *kindness* is a basic doctrine of Buddhism.

Extract 10

It is hard to learn English. I hope my teachers will be kind and friendly.

For their peers or classmates, they expect them to speak well in English. They believe that if their peers can speak English well, they can learn from them even outside the classroom.

Extract 11

I am not good at English so I am scared to meet new friends but I think it is good because I can learn English from them.

Thais put high regard on friendship; thus being friendly was a unanimous response from most of the students. This mind set can be easily observed in their day to day life as they address others like family members using kinship terms as older brother, younger sister, to extend the concept

of friendship (Nguyen, 2005). *Friendliness* is also encouraged in Thai society as it continues to promote the country as *Muang Yim* or the “Land of Smiles.”

Extract 12

I will feel very comfortable if new classmates are friendly and they like me.

Thai personality according to Philips (1965) is rather practical and not reflective when confronted with problems in life. As they have earlier anticipated the problems and challenges in the IEP, they look for possible solutions such as helpful teachers and classmates to assure them that they can overcome the difficulties that lie ahead. *Helpfulness* seems one practical solution to the various anticipated problems in an IEP.

Extract 13

Studying in international school is hard. I hope my classmates help each other to succeed.

Others wish to have funny and happy teachers and classmates who will make the learning atmosphere less stressful and more meaningful with their jokes and positive aura. This is typical of Thais who are known to seek pleasure

and happiness in their life both at play and at work (Vathanaprida & MacDonald, 1994).

Extract 14

I want my classmates are happy so I will not be scared. They should think good things like me and not bad. If we think good things, we can succeed.

Physical attributes as *clean, cute, pretty, and handsome* come next. This result reflects much of Thai culture which gives a high regard to physical appearance which has been correlated to “moral goodness” and “merit” (Williams-Leon & Nakshima, 2001). For instance, fair skin is related to moral achievement and modernity. As Thai students adhere to this worldview, such ideals are translated on how they see the people around them including their teachers and classmates.

Extract 15

There are many cute students in the college. I think I will be happy studying here.

Extract 16

I like my teachers. They are pretty. I will study hard with them.

Expectations of the learning environment

Physical features of the school matter much to the learners. Most importantly, they expect modern and varied facilities inside the school campus such as canteen, dormitory, gym, swimming pool, and shuttle. These seem to reflect the changing characteristic of Thai people as they embrace modernity and Westernization (Nguyen, 2005). It is probably for this reason that various educational institutions in the country highlight these features to promote their schools and entice students to enroll in their programs. The relationship between the quality of school facilities and student achievement is nothing new. Uline & Tschannen-Moran in 2008 confirms that school facilities affect student's performance. Therefore, "maintenance culture" is important in any learning institution (Asiyai, 2012). Periodic inspection should be carried out and sufficient funding must be allocated by school the administrators.

Extract 17

I like the swimming pool here. I enjoy swimming a lot. I will swim every time to be healthy. My family is not here, so I need to take care of myself.

their quest for a peaceful learning environment. In their responses, they have highlighted *quiet, silent, calm, and no violence* as key characteristics they look for in a learning environment. Violence has been known to interfere with the learning processes in many ways (Fonagy, Twemlow, Vernberg, Sacco, & Little, 2005). It diverts the student's attention from learning to thinking endlessly of their problems. Parents mostly concern themselves with this issue when choosing the right school for their children. In Thailand, students themselves are keen for a peaceful campus where they can concentrate on academic work with less conflict from their environment.

Extract 18

The campus is far from Bangkok. It is quiet and peaceful. I do not like it but I know this is good for my studies.

Another significant response reveals Thai students as nature-lover learners. Although it has been mentioned earlier that they are open to modern lifestyle, the students expect an eco-friendly campus with less cars that emit pollution and that it is not overly crowded. They hope to stay in a

place surrounded with *trees, fresh air, and birds* to brighten their day every morning. To them, the scenario reminds them of the home they left behind to pursue their education. This shows how much Thais are constantly evolving and changing but their values remain unsullied and strong.

Extract 19

There are many trees in the campus. I can hear the birds in the morning. I know I can study better in this place.

Expectations of oneself

Most students have high expectations of the future. For instance, they expect to: finish their courses on time, they can improve their English skills, they will become successful in their careers, and that they will get a good job in the future. Keyuravong (2010) accurately describes the Thai aspiration for English education:

...the English language is associated with a good and well-paid job. People with a good command of English have better opportunities in education and in their career. For students at school it is essential to develop a good command of English as this increases their chances of gaining a place at a good university after graduation from which a good and well-paid job will be likely to follow.

This implies that English language is seen as leverage to economic progress and the economic well-being of individuals. Hence, it is not surprising how much English language is revered and valued in Thai society.

Extract 20

I will do my best here for my parents so I can get good job in the future.

Extract 21

I think my English will be very good after my study like my seniors. All of them can speak English well.

Contrary to the above expectations, however, is a laissez-faire attitude of the present. In their responses, the students have not cited concrete solutions to address expected problems in the IEP course. Instead, a general statement that pertains to hard work has been repeatedly expressed while others made promises to do their best during the course. However, immediate plans include to: *eat well for good health, sleep well, have fun classes and be happy* during the IEP.

Extract 22

I like it if the classes are fun and teacher give many games. I do not like boring classes. It makes me sleepy.

There has been some mention of bravery; however, it is often cited in the context of homesickness as the students live in dormitories away from their families. In general, the learners' expectation of themselves is highly reflective of Thai culture especially the concepts of "sedouk" and "sabai." The concepts of "sabai" which means "comfortable" or "contented" and "sedouk" which means "convenience" are deeply ingrained among the learners allowing them to take their present IEP condition lightly despite all the difficulties and challenges ahead (Insight Guides, 2016).

Conclusion

The expectations of Thai learners reflect both the characteristics of traditional and progressive learners. According to Gonzalez (2016) more traditional learners attribute their success in language learning to outside factors while more progressive learners focus on their own effort. In the study, Thai learners have set their expectations on

the teaching quality, the people in the institution, and the learning environment as outside factors that may affect their success in learning during the IEP. In addition, they have also emphasized the important role they have to play to be successful in their studies. Results also revealed that details of these expectations are made more complicated by the influence of culture. For instance, students expect themselves to work hard but at the same enjoy and have fun during the IEP course. The latter indicates that the students have remained true and steadfast to their beliefs, customs, and traditions. Their expectations are reflections of both traditional and progressive learners who are trying to make the most out of an ever changing society and the demands of modernity while remaining rooted in their culture and traditions.

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