

Students' expectations of teachers: the case of students at a Mexican University English

Department

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This article is the result of an investigation aimed at identifying students' perceptions of school practices. Informed by students, this article explores students' conceptions of teachers and discusses the importance of affective relationships. I focus on classroom level since the results of the investigation suggested that the classroom is where learning success or failure is determined.

Introduction

Scholars have finally honoured the set of assumptions and interpretations that learners bring with them to the language classroom. The significance of investigating language learning beliefs has been related to students' use of language learning strategies (Wenden, 2002), learners' anxiety (Oxford 1999), and autonomous learning (Cotterall, 1995). These types of studies emerged out of the recognition of the diversity of language learners in terms not only of their purpose for learning the language but also of the ways they learn (Benson & Nunan, 2005). Most of these studies have drawn on relationships between students' beliefs and their influence on learners' approaches to learning. Understanding their contributions is essential for effective teaching and learning because they are likely to influence the learning process.

Benson (2005) provides an excellent account on how the approach to researching language learning has shifted along the years to a current trend of looking at the learning experiences of learners. Unfortunately, studies that have investigated this have mostly used questionnaires or inventories, which make it difficult to understand the process from an insider's perspective. The use of such instruments reinforces an abstract idea of beliefs by disconnecting them from actions and students' real contexts and experiences, a point made by Block (1998).

Despite the growing number of investigations in the field, few studies have examined how university students interpret actual institutional and teaching practices and how these influence students' behaviour in a foreign language setting such as the one in this study.

Research Methodology and Procedure

This present study focuses on meanings in an attempt to understand what is happening to the students in this setting (described below) in their everyday school life. The general direction of the research was qualitative, in search of understanding the factors influencing students' perceptions of school practices to raise awareness of the issues involved. The study was concerned with creating understanding from the perspective of the informants' own frame of reference.

Methods of data generation included:

- (a) Involvement. My involvement with the student community in informal meetings and conversations mainly took place in students' informal gathering places (i.e. the school cafeteria, the square, corridors, and nearby *fondas*). My involvement with the student community allowed me to perceive students' general attitudes to school, to classroom practices in particular and how these attitudes differ according to several factors, including the type of course, teachers in charge and type of evaluation.
- (b) Conversations. After initial involvement had indicated certain topics, I decided to have open-ended discussions to further explore them. One constant in student voice was a general feeling of dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching they were receiving.
- (c) Diaries. I asked six participants to keep a diary of their daily school activities and of their personal life related to their role as student. Analysis of their entries helped me sharpen the focus of subsequent conversations.

(d) In-depth conversations. These were more targeted discussions of the issues brought up (or perceived) before. I used these to seek for details, to follow up the gaps, to clarify issues and to sound hunches out.

The table below presents the data collection periods, phases, and research participants used in the generation of research data.

Table 1
Data collection and processing research phases

Period (month/year)	Phase	Who	What
August/03 - December/03	Finding the voices	15 upper semester students, about 60 freshers	successive informal conversations, involvement with student community
September/03 - March/04	Finding // capturing the voices	10 conversational partners & 6 diarists	35 recorded purposeful conversations, diaries, incalculable hours of involvement,
January/04 - June/04	Examining the voices	Xochitl, Rubi, Juana, Maria, Ramon, Dizzy	15 targeted conversations, 6 diaries, countless hours of involvement

The participants were members of a BA in English cohort at a public Mexican university. Most of the subjects were in their early twenties.

Findings

The voices captured in the study offered information about students' perspectives on teachers and teaching. Three interrelated issues seemed evident in the findings:

- (i) the relevance ascribed to teachers in 'producing' learning,
- (ii) students' conceptualisations of teachers' and teaching effectiveness:
 - a. teacher as a person,
 - b. teacher as a professional,
- (iii) the significance of affective factors in student engagement with learning.

These are discussed below.

(i)The relevance ascribed to teachers in ‘producing’ learning. Unexpectedly, considering the level of studies and students’ ages, the participants tended to perceive the teacher as *the* central actor in the classroom. Students¹ were particularly inclined to see the nature of their learning opportunities as overwhelmingly determined by their teachers. Immersed in the culture of ‘autonomy as self-management of learning’ that seems to dominate the literature in language education (Benson, 2002), this finding might seem to challenge current teaching theories.

According to students, when the teacher adopts a less directive mode, students fail to recognise the teacher’s intention, and complain about it. They seem to favour traditional teaching that places sole authority in the classroom with the teacher. They appear to follow direction from teachers whose authority they do not question, provided teachers are not authoritarian. In this sense, students regard teachers as providers of knowledge and as having the authority to structure the class in an appropriate way.

Similarly, students believe that some kind of balance between teacher predominance and student participation is necessary. Students feel it is the teacher’s responsibility to generate interest and the student activity will follow. Students distinguish among teaching purposes and the level of appropriate teacher direction. That is, students are in favour of teachers being the central classroom actor, as they seem to perceive that the goal of the lesson is to convey knowledge or information. Students give the impression of being comfortable with teachers dominating classes, respecting teachers’ authority in the subject matter. Nevertheless, students also indicated that they would like teachers to be more ‘dynamic’, meaning that the teacher should allow opportunities for students to be more ‘active’. They want to be co-participants of learning by offering issues, ideas, opinions or feelings through open discussion or small group

¹ To avoid repetition, whenever I use the term *students* I am exclusively referring to the students who participated in this investigation and not to students in general.

work, as long as the teacher genuinely promotes participation. In short, students like teachers who lead the way towards learning, providing a secure space where learning activities are meaningful to their needs.

It is worth noticing that, even though they place great emphasis on the teacher's presence, students do not view their own role in the learning process as passive. Indeed, while they may have high expectations of the teacher, they do not have lower expectations of themselves. The frustration from feeling incapable of understanding or making any visible signs of progress can be overwhelming. Thus, the incorporation of positive feedback and encouragement cannot be overvalued in teaching, even at university level.

A very interesting issue emerging from the data is the way students talk about teachers; students seem to make a distinction between what teachers should *be* and what they should *do*. This way of conceptualising teachers may be indicative of a convergence between *person* and *professional*. Students tended to highlight the nature of the teacher as a *person* (expected attitude) but they also referred to a conception of the teacher as a *professional* (expected actions). These two conceptualisations obviously overlap and discussion of it should better be approached as a complex amalgam of intimately interconnected features rather than as ends in a continuum. These two conceptions of teachers are discussed in the following sections.

(ii-a) Students' conceptualisations of teachers' and teaching effectiveness / Teacher as a person. From the student perspective, the suitable link between '*being*' and '*doing*' is necessary for effective teaching to occur. That is, the teacher in the classroom and the person outside of the classroom are not two distinct individuals, but one and the same. Thus, students expect teachers to show their 'humanness' both within and outside the classroom.

Students appear to see the teacher's personality as the key element in the promotion of learning. Openness, authenticity, humour, fairness, patience, a real interest in students as people

and a willingness to listen to them are features students appreciate in teachers that they identify as contributing to effective teaching (and learning). Students praise teachers who, rather than simply doing ‘a job’, show real concern for students’ learning and wellbeing. They want to be validated by teachers as something more than a commodity of their daily routine.

There were comments stressing that the personality of the teacher is crucial to their learning. Student voice indicated how it is *the* teacher who can transform a dull subject into an interesting one; it is *the teacher* who makes them learn. Students seem to be calling for teachers who care about them both as people in school and as young adults immersed in complex lives; teachers who care about the whole person. Students appear to like and trust this type of teacher-person; they are teachers students are willing to meet both within and outside the classroom setting. I will now turn to the other dimension of the conceptualisation, the teacher as a *professional*.

(ii-b) Students’ conceptualisations of teachers’ and teaching effectiveness / Teacher as a professional. Another constant in student voice referred to a notion of the teacher as a *professional*. Although the features of a teacher-person and the general characteristics of the classroom environment are extremely important to define what helps a teacher provide effective teaching, the most obvious manifestation of it emerges from what teachers’ *do*. This other dimension highlighted by student voice is frequently dealt with in teaching manuals and training courses. However, some issues deserve discussion. Perhaps the most outstanding one is that of *profesionalismo*², an issue mentioned by the students.

According to the student voice, teachers not only have to be *buena onda* but also *committed* to be respected as a professional. Being a demanding teacher does not necessarily

² *Profesionalismo*, in Spanish, is a term used to refer to the exercising of a profession with capacity and efficiency; thus, a *profesional* teacher is a person whose job is carried out efficiently and outstandingly. I use the term *profesionalismo* in this way to distinguish it from the English’s conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize or mark a profession.

entail seriousness or being authoritarian, but a level of dedication and commitment to understand that students' views on school are often closely connected to their daily lives, personal interests and learning experiences. Students want to know that teachers are genuinely interested in and engaged with their profession, that they are *profesionales*.

Students are concerned that teachers enjoy their work. They want teachers to be engaged in the teaching profession as something more than just a job. Therefore, they expect certain activity in their teaching practice, often referred in terms of what teachers should do. In this regards, students' recommendations are in line with what most teaching manuals include; nevertheless, there is one issue which appears to be undervalued by teachers at the researched institution: affectivity.

(iii) The significance of affective factors in student engagement with learning. Most of the students consulted craved for caring relationships with both peers and faculty. Students often complained about the scarce support they receive from the institution and specifically from teachers, which seems to indicate that students perceive themselves as simply another 'piece' of the school. This seems indicative of how teachers tend to regard students: the business of the institution, a 'commodity'. From these students' perspectives it appears as if some teachers believe that their main task is to 'deliver' knowledge, forgetting that they deal with people and that these people have feelings, aims, dreams, and concerns, just as teachers do.

Students appreciate caring and concerned teachers in several ways. Understanding students, taking time for them, being non-judgemental, breaking down barriers between teachers and students, concern for making class interesting and fun are qualities of good teachers mentioned by students. Both explicitly and implicitly, affectivity seemed to underlie all the remarks made about their teachers, tinting everything that effective teachers do with personal touch.

Implications

The very same student voice, critical of teacher attitudes, provide sufficient ideas into how an affective environment can be established. The focus of making the classroom fun and entertaining while the content being learned is practical and useful resonate throughout many of the comments made by students. Through their voice, I was able to perceive how students' orientations to learning are often influenced by the teacher's attitude. Consequently, teachers need to strive for a certain amount of agreement and understanding with their students to ensure fostering an environment where learning can be effective. Teachers might promote a constructive learning 'climate', which has been shown to be helpful to learning, as well as being a worthwhile end in itself, by realising how their attitude and behaviour actually affect their students.

Disruptive emotions on the part of the student (anxiety, fear, frustration, stress, anger and impotence), which make teaching techniques ineffective (Arnold and Brown, 1999, p. 2), are the result of negative learning experiences. Therefore, it is the teachers' responsibility to counter the development of these negative emotions by building student confidence through positive feedback and praising. In order to accomplish this, Dörnyei (2001, p. 37) discusses the importance of building trust in the classroom. This involves:

- acceptance of students
- ability to listen and pay attention to them
- availability for personal contact

Acceptance involves a non-judgemental, positive attitude towards the students as complex human beings with both virtues and shortcomings. The importance of listening and paying attention to students cannot be stressed enough considering that they might be the most informed witnesses of what happens in the school. The last point involves teachers being open and

approachable enough for students to ‘trust’ the teacher. These attributes in a teacher would contribute to creating positive affective learning relationships where students could feel confident enough to participate, ask for assistance, establish communication, and feel at ease within the classroom; aspects that student voice denoted as currently lacking in this research setting.

Conclusion

While the emphasis in education today is on the student as the focus of learning, we must remember that the teacher is the person specially trained to guide students, select appropriate learning materials and create a positive classroom environment. The results of this investigation suggest that teachers still have a central role in the classroom to promote learning, and that students expect teachers to take this leading role to implement engaging activities. Another important finding of this research is the importance of affectivity: students expect teachers to care about their emotional well-being by avoiding attitudes that damage their self-esteem. Teachers can empower students to reach their learning goals by fostering an environment that is supportive and conducive to learning. Immersed in the culture of ‘learner training’, these crucial aspects seem to have come to a second place; however, teachers should consider them when planning and implementing their courses.

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