

# Unheard Voices: Students' Experiences and Perspectives on a Tertiary English Course

Apiwan Nuangpolmak  
Chulalongkorn University  
Language Institute

## Reference Data:

Nuangpolmak, A. (2014). Unheard voices: Students' experiences and perspectives on a tertiary English course. In N. Sonda & A. Krause (Eds.), *JALT2013 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

In Thailand, English courses at a tertiary level are often thought of as pathways to successful future careers. Previous studies have shed light on the ways in which tertiary English curricula can be designed to correspond with the principles of language teaching approaches as well as to specifically address the demands of the employment market. What is lacking in these studies, however, are the voices of students—the voices of the persons who matter the most in the learning process. This paper reports a small part of a study that aims to investigate the students' perspectives and experiences of an undergraduate compulsory English course. Questionnaires were administered to 527 first-year students from 18 disciplines. In-depth data were also collected from 20 students who participated voluntarily in semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed a mismatch between students' expectations and what they really experienced in the English course currently offered at the university.

高等教育機関における英語コースは一般的に、将来、仕事において成功をおさめるための通過点と考えられている。過去の研究も、高等教育における英語カリキュラムが、さまざまな言語教授法の原則に対応するようデザインされたり、雇用市場の需要に応えるものになるようデザインされ得るといったことに焦点を当ててきた。しかしながら、これらの研究で見落とされているのが、学生たちの声、つまり、学習過程においてもっとも重要である人たちの声である。本稿では、大学の必修英語コースにおける、学生たちの意見（見方）ならびに体験を調査する研究の一部を報告する。アンケート調査は、18学科の527人を対象に実施された。また、さらに詳細なデータを、半構造的インタビューに自主的に参加した20人の学生から収集した。調査の結果、学生たちが期待していることと、現在大学で提供されている英語コースにおける実体験のあいだに、ずれがあることがわかった。

**D**ESPITE LIVING in a predominantly Thai-speaking environment, Thai graduates inevitably require a good knowledge of English to progress efficiently both in professional and academic domains. Having a good command of English is beneficial for career advancement. In addition, good English proficiency is essential for higher education, since the majority of global academic content is offered in English. Due to its significant roles in learners' future, English is instructed at all levels of education in Thailand, from primary to tertiary, as a compulsory foreign language. Most tertiary curricula mandate the enrolment in at least two foundation English courses as a condition for graduation (Wongsothorn, Hiranburana, & Chinnawongs, 2002).

The research was conducted at the language institute of a leading public university in Bangkok, Thailand. The language institute offers English courses, at both undergraduate and



postgraduate levels, university wide. Each year, some 5,000 freshmen are required to enrol in a foundation English course called Experiential English (EXP ENG). The students take this foundation course not only as a condition for graduation, but also as a prerequisite for other English courses in subsequent academic years.

As claimed by Nunan (1989), “the effectiveness of any language programme will be dictated as much by the attitudes and expectations of the learners as by the specifications of the official curriculum” (p. 176). Accordingly, curriculum planners should take into account learners’ needs and perceptions with regard to the learning process. So far, changes in EXP ENG, for example, in terms of course syllabus and learning materials (i.e., coursebook), have been implemented top-down from the administration and the academic committee with little contribution from the students. Since EXP ENG is undertaken by the majority of students in the university, it would be beneficial to obtain some insights on students’ learning experiences so that future changes can be catered to addressing students’ expectations more directly.

## Literature Review

Silva (2003) contended that students are often viewed as “recipients of educational product rather than partners in the educational process” (p. 11). Students’ perspectives and experiences have been neglected when it comes to decision-making or reforms. Voices of students, when acknowledged, are believed to signify presence, involvement, and commitment in the learning process (Cook-Sather, 2006). This is because students are considered members of the learning community. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), learning takes place in a context and evolves through the interaction and participation of the participants in that context. Social participation is therefore crucial to the process of learning and knowing (Wenger, 1998).

The recognition of students’ voices can lead to meaningful dialogues among members and establish trust within the community (Rodgers, 2006). At the same time, through these voices, teachers, educators, and policy makers can witness not only how the learning process influences students to become who they are, but also how the students themselves play a role in influencing their own learning process (Silva & Rubin, 2003).

The constructivist theory of learning puts an emphasis on students making sense of their own experience. It is claimed that this reflection on learning will make students better learners as they become increasingly aware of their own learning process (Kohonen, 1992). Reflecting on personal experiences is seen as a point of departure for better organisation of one’s own learning process (Nunan, 1999).

As more and more researchers have realised that “learners are individuals and that their individuality may have significant consequences for their learning” (Benson, 2004, p. 5), learners’ stories and their learning experiences are receiving worthy attention in second language acquisition studies. Voices of students reflect what is really going on in the classroom. Through these voices, teachers are offered direct feedback on their practices (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). Furthermore, each of the students’ voices enables teachers to identify individual problems and needs. This subsequently allows teachers to, for example, differentiate work requirements, design specific activities, or develop a support system, in order to accommodate students’ learning difficulties and facilitate successful learning (Doran & Cameron, 1995).

## Research Methods

The study currently reported was a part of a programme and materials evaluation project. For this part of the research, a mixed-method approach was adopted that aimed to investigate

the students' perspectives on the design and implementation of EXP ENG syllabus and materials. Firstly, during the 15th week of the 16-week semester (September 2012), questionnaires were administered to 527 students, which accounted for approximately 10% of the population. These students were a mixed group of the university's 18 faculties. Secondly, to gain insights about students' learning experience, interviews were also conducted during the 2nd week of October 2012, which was immediately after the final examination. Twenty freshmen, 7 males and 13 females, were recruited on a voluntary basis to participate in the semi-structured interviews. The participants had options of giving interviews in English or in their mother tongue.

### Findings and Discussion

Within the scope of this paper, two main topics of findings, namely students' expectations of a tertiary English course and students' appraisals of EXP ENG, will be discussed in detail.

### Students' Expectations of a Tertiary English Course

Both the questionnaire and the interview data revealed that a focus on communicative ability was the 1st-year students' main expectation of a tertiary English course. Of the questionnaire respondents, 435 (82.54%) selected *to communicate in daily life* as their goal for learning English. Findings from the survey further indicated that the students preferred to develop the skills that they could use in the real world such as listening to news or songs, reading news or magazine articles, writing emails, and making a conversation on everyday topics. Table 1 presents the skills and content that the students wanted to study in their English course.

Table 1. Students' Preference for Course Content\*, N = 527

Rank	Skills / content	%
1	Listening to English songs	78.7
2	Reading magazine articles	74.3
3	Making a conversation on everyday topics	64.6
4	Reading news articles	63.3
5	Listening to news	61.9
6	Writing an essay on everyday topics	56.5
6	Writing a personal email	56.5
8	Reading academic journals	48.8
9	Discussing controversial issues	43.2
10	Making a presentation	41.9
11	Writing an academic essay	34.2
12	Listening to academic lectures	33.5

Note.\* These 12 items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale. The percentage represents where respondents identified *agree* and *strongly agree*.

As shown in Table 1, students placed a greater emphasis on the real-world skills than on the academic skills. Of all the 12 skills listed, those items that are associated with academic tasks such as reading academic journals, writing academic essays, and listening to lectures received lower ratings from the students. The reason for this may simply lie in the fact that there is no demand for the freshmen to perform these academic tasks just yet at this stage of their study. Therefore, the relevance is minimal for them.

The focus on the real-world skills was also pointed out by the participants in the interviews. The participants asserted that when they commenced higher education, they had hoped to develop skills that would enable them to communicate their ideas better.

I expected to learn more speaking and listening. I mean I thought English course at this level should aim at developing our communication. (Student 12)

At this level, I expect that it will be different from what I've experienced in my secondary school . . . I want something different, more interesting, and interactive. I mean, I want to learn something which helps me improve my communicative skills. (Student 19)

I want to improve my speaking and writing skills. I find EXP ENG met my expectation since I got a chance to learn and practice writing. I'm quite satisfied. (Student 2)

Students' expectations of a tertiary English course seem to be fuelled by their desires to improve certain skills. Productive skills, namely speaking and writing, were students' priority concerns. To some extent, the students' emphasis on these two skills may indicate the aspects lacking in their background education. This coincides with the findings from surveys conducted by Thailand's Ministry of Education that productive skills of primary and secondary students were generally below standard, with few of them passing the test criteria (Wiriyachitra, 2001).

In addition to the need to improve the skills that they were lacking, the anticipation of students upon commencing their first year of tertiary study is also likely influenced by their previous language learning experiences in secondary schools.

In my former school, grammar was a focus, but there were also classes with foreign teachers and I liked that. I can talk with them to practice my speaking . . . . However, I had to prepare myself for the entrance exam so I had to focus on improving my reading skills. (Student 1)

It [the course] was the same as [the course] in my former school. We studied grammar but did not really focus on speaking, so I would like to improve my speaking and listening skills. (Student 2)

Both Student 1 and Student 2 had similar experiences in secondary English classrooms where the content did not match their personal needs. Despite the students' preference for improving conversational skills, the syllabi of both schools left little room for the development of those skills. The pressure of the national examination and the university admission process apparently dictate the ways in which secondary English classes are conducted. To equip their students for these high-stakes English tests, schoolteachers tend to pay more attention to discrete-point knowledge such as vocabulary or grammar form and conveniently neglect fostering skills such as speaking and writing (Foley, 2005).

From the interview data presented above, it is apparent that students commencing university expect different learning experience from what they had repeatedly encountered in high schools. It is understandable that these freshmen would hold such an expectation. The more important question, however, is to what extent this expectation was met after attending the university. To investigate this issue, students' perspectives on their tertiary learning experience will be illustrated next.

## **Students' Appraisals of EXP ENG**

### ***The Coursebook***

As McDonough and Shaw (2003) asserted, materials are the product of the implementation of learning objectives and syllabus design. The goal of materials is to stimulate learning and support the organisation of the teaching and learning process (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Since learning materials contrib-

ute largely to learners' experience in language learning, it is essential that the voices representing this experience be carefully examined. Currently, a commercial coursebook called *English Unlimited: Upper-intermediate* (Tilbury, Hendra, Rea, & Clementson, 2011) is being used as core materials for EXP ENG.

In general, the students gave positive responses in the survey with regard to the content of the main coursebook. Table 2 shows the students' evaluation of EXP ENG materials.

**Table 2. Students' Evaluation of Learning Materials, N = 527**

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
There is a variety of content in the coursebook.	0.8%	11.5%	74.2%	13.5%
There is a variety of activities in the coursebook.	1.3%	20.3%	70.4%	8.0%
The coursebook is appropriately challenging for 1st-year students.	2.1%	15.9%	70.8%	11.2%
The coursebook facilitates your performance on the exam.	5.1%	26.0%	59.9%	8.9%
The content of the coursebook addresses your English learning needs.	2.8%	23.2%	67.7%	6.3%

Although the majority of the students appraised the coursebook positively, the voices of the minority should not be ignored. As seen in Table 2, a quarter of the students stated that the coursebook could neither help them on the test nor serve their goals in English learning. Concerning the evaluation of materials, both short-term and long-term effects should be considered (Tomlinson, 2003). In this case, it could be said that, at least for some, the current coursebook used for EXP ENG failed

to offer any short-term benefit (i.e., facilitating test performance) and did not lead to long-term outcome (i.e., addressing learning needs).

The data from the interviews also suggest the students' indifference toward the use of this coursebook. For example, Student 19 claimed that the coursebook offered nothing new to her in terms of content.

For me, I think all commercial textbooks are the same. I mean, we used similar kind of textbooks at my secondary school. (Student 19)

In addition, Student 3 expressed her mixed feelings with regard to the coursebook. Despite the overall positive evaluation, Student 3 still had reservations about the potential of this coursebook as self-study material.

The textbook was quite good. There's nothing outstanding about it, but I find it's rather difficult to identify the focus for each unit. Things tend to be scattered all over the place. It's fine to use as a learning material in class, but I had problem identifying the focus when I prepared myself for the exam. (Student 3)

According to the interview data, the extent to which students positively appraise the course materials appears to be driven by two main factors: interest and relevance. In other words, the students tended to give positive opinions if they found the content in the coursebook interesting or relevant to their personal or academic needs. In the following excerpts, Student 6, Student 10, and Student 3 each mentioned the reasons why they liked or disliked particular units in the coursebook.

My most favourite unit is Unit 6 "Virtual Worlds," since I don't know much about this kind of things before . . . I love IT, so I find the topic very interesting. (Student 6)

I don't like Unit 4 "Local Knowledge" because it does not interest me. I like Unit called "Talented" since it's interesting. I also share the same views. I find it's easier to understand the contents if I can relate myself to what being taught in class. (Student 10)

The topics were all right in all the units, but I personally don't like "Local Knowledge." The content wasn't relevant to me. I had no clues on many things presented in the unit. (Student 3)

As can be seen, neither Student 10 nor Student 3 liked Unit 4, titled *Local Knowledge*, because the content did not interest them. On the other hand, Student 6 enjoyed Unit 6 because of its novelty and Student 10 preferred Unit 1 because he could relate to the concepts discussed in the unit.

According to Dörnyei (2001), learning materials should involve the topics in which learners are interested. Tomlinson (1998) commented that since individual learners differ in terms of affective orientation, good learning materials should take into consideration learners' diverse interests and therefore should provide variety and choices. Due to time constraints in terms of class hours, only eight out of 14 units of *English Unlimited* were taught in EXP ENG. The academic committee's decision to utilise the coursebook selectively, in this sense, may have inadvertently limited the variety of content the coursebook could have offered.

In terms of relevance, the comment of Student 5 below exemplifies that unless the learning materials address learners' needs in language learning, it is less likely that the materials will be viewed as of much value.

About the coursebook, I must admit that I don't really like it that much since I want to study more of everyday English, something that I can use in real life. But I do under-

stand that we need to use a core coursebook for the whole university. This book tends to focus more on reading and grammar. Although there's CD that comes with the book, not many students would use it outside classroom. The chosen units were kind of okay. But I personally prefer something more interactive. (Student 5)

Chambers (1999) asserted that learners will enjoy the learning activities if they can perceive some kind of relationship between the activities and the world they live in. Similarly, Dörnyei (2001) claimed that materials with little relevance to the learners can hardly motivate them. The students' perceptions about the coursebook's relevance were evidently related to their goals for English learning. As seen in Student 5's comment, the mismatch between the expected learning content and what was actually offered by the coursebook leads to the disappointment on the part of learners.

### *The Learning Environment*

Even though EXP ENG, as a compulsory English course, mandates the same set of learning materials for all students enrolled, the learning environment within each classroom may differ. Emerging as one of the main themes from the interview data is the role that teachers play in creating positive or negative learning experience.

It is the teacher who makes a difference. I was fortunate to have such a perfect teacher last semester, so because of him, all seemed to work. What I like most was the fact that our teacher tried to relate the content in the book to what we might encounter when we work as a doctor. Like we studied Unit 2 on "misunderstandings," he could make us become more aware of this important aspect, particularly in our profession. I find this unit very interesting and useful. (Student 19)

I like my teacher, and he is the best teacher I've ever had. He made the lesson interesting and fun. I'm happy with everything. I don't mind studying this subject twice a week. It's all worth it. (Student 18)

I must say that I give credit to my teacher who made the lessons interesting and fun. (Student 6)

For me, I felt that my teacher really focused on preparing us for the exam, and that set the dynamic of the classroom. The teacher spent a lot of time on teaching vocabulary, grammar and reading, and she often said "This is going to be tested in either mid-term or final." (Student 17)

Teaching style has a direct impact on the students' learning process as it dictates the way teachers behave in the classroom, the manner in which they transmit and retrieve information, and the media they choose to assist learning (Kaplan & Kies, 1995). As the excerpts above suggest, some teachers were able to make lessons interesting and relevant. This certainly compensates for what is lacking in the materials. According to Student 19 who had earlier expressed her disinterest in the coursebook, her teacher's ability to create a relationship between what is learned in the book and what can be used in the real world helped build a positive attitude toward the course. On the other hand, a particular teaching style can demotivate students. According to Student 17's comment, some teachers may feel obliged to equip their students for assessment. Thus, they place more emphasis on helping students perform the test and less on assisting them to develop the skills.

Derived from the interview data is also a negative view of traditional, by-the-book lessons where teachers simply deliver the content "literally." Student 2's comment suggests that with the help of popular media, a teacher could easily turn a "dry" lesson into an interesting one.

There's nothing to do with the book, it's more about finding the right media to capture students' interest. For example, when we studied Unit 1 titled "Talented," the examples presented in the book were too unfamiliar for us. I think it might have been better if teacher had used up-to-date examples of well-known talented people to introduce the topic. For instance, teacher could have used examples from popular TV series, and this would have made the lesson more interesting. (Student 2)

In addition, heavy instruction of grammar was frowned upon by students. In Student 5's point of view, learning grammar is redundant and pointless. Instead, class time should be spent on other skills which benefit or interest students more.

I don't see any point of teaching grammar at this level. I feel that class hours are better spent on helping students improve speaking and listening skills. For grammar, we have studied it since we were in primary schools, and what we did in class here didn't really help much. I mean, students who are good at English would not need this quick revision, but those who are weak would still find it hard to grasp the concept. So, it seems to me that we ended up wasting the class time on something which didn't really benefit anyone. (Student 5)

To sum up, students' satisfactory learning experience in tertiary English courses depends largely upon how the lessons were conducted. Perhaps because EXP ENG is compulsory, students seem to readily accept the required materials as a decided aspect. Learning process, on the other hand, can be manipulated to enhance the content in the materials as well as maximise the potential of learning.

## Pedagogical Implications

As the findings suggest, tertiary students commence their study with certain perceptions about what the university's English learning experience should entail. It is crucial that teachers and programme developers take into consideration these anticipations, when deciding course objectives and content, so that positive experiences can be achieved. Learners' voices, therefore, should not be kept unheard. Instead, their opinions should be gathered at all phases of programme development.

To begin with, a needs analysis should be conducted prior to designing the syllabus and materials (Nunan, 1988; Tudor, 1996). Brindley (1989) mentioned two interpretations of needs analysis: product oriented and process oriented. In the former interpretation, needs are viewed in relation to future language use. The result of a needs analysis in this sense will involve the specification of learners' linguistic requirements in potential language situations. On the other hand, the latter view of needs entails various cognitive and affective factors concerned in the learning process such as learning styles and motivation. The learners' information yielded by this orientation of needs analysis can assist with the selection of content, methods, media, and mode of learning.

In order to ensure the satisfying learning experience, learners' appraisals should also be collected during the implementation of the syllabus and learning activities (Breen, 1989). Information gathered at this stage does not only make the alteration possible but also offers a glimpse of what students really experience during task engagement. Lastly, students' retrospection of the recently completed learning experience is useful to materials designers and course developers in their investigation of learning effects, affective impact, and educational value derived from a given learning situation (Tomlinson, 2003). Surveys of learners' perspectives are commonly practised as a part of language programme evaluation (Kiely & Rea-Dickins, 2005).

In summary, students should not merely be seen, but heard. Voices of students are powerful reflections of classroom reality. Should these voices be utilised, enriched learning experience will ensue. Tertiary students, as adult learners, should be treated as active participants in their own learning. The involvement in the learning process is believed to be a requisite for self-directed, life-long learning beyond the compulsory English studies (Benson, 2001; Dickinson, 1987).

## Bio Data

**Apiwan Nuangpolmak**, PhD, is an English lecturer at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI) in Bangkok, Thailand, where she develops and teaches courses such as English for Academic Purposes and Skills in English for Graduates. Her research interests include material development, motivational strategies, fostering learner autonomy and writing instruction. She can be reached at <apiwan.n@chula.ac.th>.

## References

- Benson, P. (2001). *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*. Harlow, UK: Longman.
- Benson, P. (2004). (Auto) biography and learner diversity. In P. Benson & D. Nunan (Eds.), *Learners' stories: Difference and diversity in language learning* (pp. 4-21). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Breen, M. (1989). The evaluation cycle for language learning tasks. In R. K. Johnson (Ed.), *The second language curriculum* (pp.187-206). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brindley, G. (1989). The role of needs analysis in adult ESL programme. In R. K. Johnson (Ed.), *The second language curriculum* (pp. 63-78). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chambers, G. N. (1999). *Motivating language learners*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

- Cook-Sather, A. (2006). Sound, presence, and power: "Student voice" in educational research and reform. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 36, 359-390.
- Dickinson, L. (1987). *Self-instruction in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Doran, C., & Cameron R. J. (1995). Learning about learning: Metacognitive approaches in the classroom. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 11(2), 15-23.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Flutter, J., & Rudduck, J. (2004). *Consulting pupils: What's in it for school?* London: Routledge Palmer.
- Foley, J. A. (2005). English in ... Thailand. *RELC Journal*, 36, 223-234.
- Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). *English for specific purposes: A learning-centred approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kaplan, E. J., & Kies, D. A. (1995). Teaching and learning styles: Which came first? *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 22(1), 29-33.
- Kiely, R., & Rea-Dickins, P. (2005). *Program evaluation in language education*. Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kohonen, V. (1992). Experiential language learning: Second language learning as cooperative learner education. In D. Nunan (Ed.), *Collaborative language learning and teaching* (pp. 14-39). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McDonough, J., & Shaw, C. (2003). *Materials and methods in ELT* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Nunan, D. (1988). *The learner-centred curriculum*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D. (1989). Hidden agendas: The role of the learner in programme implementation. In R. K. Johnson (Ed.), *The second language curriculum* (pp. 176-186). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D. (1999). *Second language teaching and learning*. Boston, M.A.: Heinle & Heinle.
- Rodgers, C. R. (2006). Attending to student voice: The impact of descriptive feedback on learning and teaching. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 36, 209-237.
- Silva, E. M. (2003). Struggling for inclusion: A case study of students as reform partners. In B. C. Rubin & E. M. Silva (Eds.), *Critical voices in school reform: Students living through change* (pp. 11-30). London: Routledge Falmer.
- Silva, E. M., & Rubin, B. C. (2003). Missing voices: Listening to students' experiences with school reform. In B. C. Rubin & E. M. Silva (Eds.), *Critical voices in school reform: Students living through change* (pp.1-7). London: Routledge Falmer.
- Tilbury, A., Hendra, L. A., Rea, D., & Clementson, T. (2011). *English unlimited: Upper intermediate*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tomlinson, B. (1998). Introduction. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Materials development in language teaching* (pp. 1-24). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tomlinson, B. (2003). Materials evaluation. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Developing materials for language teaching* (pp.15-36). London: Continuum.
- Tudor, I. (1996). Learner-centredness as language education. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wiriyachitra, A. (2001). A Thai university scenario in the coming decade. *Thai TESOL Newsletter*, 14(1), 4-7.
- Wongsothorn, A., Hiranburana, K., & Chinnawongs, S. (2002). English language teaching in Thailand today. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Education*, 22, 107-116.