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**A Tale of Expectations and
Perceptions: A Case Study of Non-
Native English Speaking Students
in Masters Level TESOL Program**

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A Tale of Expectations and Perceptions: A Case Study of Non-Native English Speaking Students in Masters Level TESOL Program

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Abstract

Second language teacher education has been regarded as central to ensuring the quality of the English learning experience of many students around the world. In recent years, an increasing number of non-native English speaking teacher trainees have gone to English-speaking countries to attend post-graduate level teacher education programs. One central consideration is to what extent these non-native speaking teacher trainees receive adequate preparation from these programs. The present research investigates this pivotal concern by evaluating one masters level TESOL program in New Zealand. This study employed qualitative evaluation, using in-depth interviews with one non-native English speaking student from Asian backgrounds, focusing on her expectations and perceptions of the program. Findings demonstrate that the program has several aspects of strengths, such as improving English reading and writing proficiency, cultivating subject knowledge related to applied linguistics and promoting research engagement. However, there are also weaknesses with the most salient one being lack of practice teaching. The findings indicate a need for language teacher education programs which both incorporate exploration of students' expectations and the establishing of built-in procedures for students' evaluation of the entire program rather than just of separate courses.

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I Introduction

Past decades have witnessed an ever-increasing number of non-native learners of English around the world. As a result of this growing demand for English instructions, there has been a corresponding need for more trained English teachers (Wright, 2010). The majority of these teachers are believed to be non-native English speakers (Canagarajah, 2005); and the number of those who go to English-speaking countries such as Britain, Australasia, North America to attend post-graduate level teacher education programs is also increasing (e.g. compare the number reported in Liu (1999) with the number in Brady & Gulikers (2004)).

One vital consideration is whether these large numbers of non-native English speaking (NNES) trainees receive adequate teaching preparation from these programs (Moussu & Lurda, 2008). Although it has been recognized that learning to teach should be conceptualized as a lifelong process emerging out of and through experiences in social contexts (Johnson, 2006; Xu & Connelly, 2009), participating in a teacher education program is unarguably one such experience. Richards (2008) contends that second language teacher education (SLTE) is a core activity and central to ensuring the quality of the learning experience of many students of English.

A review of available literature on second language teacher education reveals aspects of suggestions made by researchers to SLTE programs. The first salient one is to pay greater attention to the structure of these programs in order to balance transmissive vs. experiential learning (Malderez et al., 2007). By integrating extensive and intensive constructive and experiential learning, programs can create opportunities for student teachers to test theories and principles (Crandall, 2000; Mattheoudakis, 2007), as well as to confront and get accustomed to the complex classroom realities (Chiang, 2008; Pennycook, 2004) and develop their knowledge of teaching by engaging in teaching (Szesztay, 2004). Another suggestion is that SLTE programs need to promote the skills of reflection and self-evaluation in teachers (e.g. Dickson et al., 2006). The practice of reflection can provide a means to recast prospective and experienced teachers as thinkers to develop more informed practice, making tacit beliefs and practical knowledge explicit and leading to new ways of knowing and teaching (Farrell, 2007; Tsui, 2009). In addition, researchers have also called for the growth of professionalism among language teachers, in particular the inclusion of research components in SLTE programs (see Borg, 2010). Instead of merely consuming or applying other's theories, teachers will become capable of creating theories out of practice and gaining new understandings of the complex social, cultural and institutional factors that affect L2 teachers, L2 teaching and L2 student learning in particular teaching and learning environments (Johnson, 2006).

Researchers have further proposed several specific issues in order to cater to non-native English speakers' special needs in teacher education programs besides suggestions which are in line with those mentioned above. The first one is related to NNES students' lack of the English proficiency needed for

their future career, which has been regarded as constituting the bedrock of professional confidence of NNES teachers (Braine, 2010; Derwing & Munro, 2005). The need to incorporate language development in teacher training programs has been highlighted repeatedly (Cruickshank, Newell & Cole, 2003; Lee, 2005). The second aspect of recent concern is that TESOL programs neglect to address the socio-cultural and political issues and challenges facing NNES trainees planning to go back to their countries to teach English in different contexts (e.g. Carrier, 2003). Scholars (Dogancay-Aktuna, 2006; Holliday, 2005) have voiced their concern that the theoretical and pedagogical courses taught in TESOL programs do not always correspond to what is needed in EFL contexts, and advocate that SLTE and TESOL programs need to address some more problematic situations in these EFL contexts with different educational policies and teaching practices (e.g. Crandall, 2000; Zhang, 2004).

Most of these above suggestions to SLTE programs are, however, based on either non-empirical theoretical reviews or experimental innovative research studies. Wright (2010) notes that the 'daily reality' of SLTE programs has not often kept pace with the valuable theoretical consolidation that has been achieved. Further, in his recently proposed curriculum model for second language teacher education, Wright (2010) stressed the importance of evaluation as an inherent component of any second language teacher education program. Although scholars have proposed approaching evaluations with the program's participants as the primary focus and orientation (e.g. LaFond & Dogancay-Aktuna 2009), no empirical studies have been conducted attending to the voices of student teachers in training. An emphasis on student teachers' expectations cannot be made at a more appropriate time in the history of TESOL. The present study, therefore, investigates one Asian non-native English speaking student's perceptions of the strengths and weakness of one second language teacher education program at a university in New Zealand, and the extent to which the program meets her expectations.

II Methodology

The present study is part of a larger qualitative multiple case study conducted by the author, which evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of a New Zealand masters level TESOL program and how far the program meets and is relevant to the expectations of a group of non-native English speaking students currently attending or having attended the program. The research questions addressed are: 1. What do non-native English speaking students, in particular those with Asian backgrounds, expect from the masters level TESOL program?; 2. How do they actually perceive the strengths and weaknesses of the program?; and 3. Is there any gap between their expectations and actual perceptions?

1 Research context

The MA TESOL program under study is affiliated with one public university in New Zealand. The overall aim of the program, according to its handbook, is to develop students' understanding and knowledge of theories, research issues and their applications in the teaching and learning of the English language. The program enjoys a high degree of recognition and attracts students from both New Zealand and all over the world. Students in the program range widely in age and are a mixture of native and non-native English speakers with various cultural and language backgrounds. The program has a built-in procedure of internal evaluation from students of individual courses, yet not for the whole program.

The program itself, similar to those at other universities in New Zealand or Australia, consists of a Postgraduate Diploma and a higher-level MA. Students who are not native English speakers and who have not had at least two years of secondary or tertiary education with English as the language of instruction will need a minimum score of 6.5 IELTS (Academic) or equivalent to get admitted. Students enrolled in the Postgraduate Diploma usually take one year's core courses delving into topics such as second language acquisition, description and analysis of language, curriculum development, language assessment, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis and so on. Each course has one two hour session per week for twelve weeks throughout one academic semester. For higher level MA, students can choose from three different program paths — by course only, by research thesis only, or a combination of elective courses with research dissertation.

2 Research participant

Participants in the larger study were recruited using criterion sampling method to ensure sample quality (Patton, 2002): first, he or she has finished the program recently or has finished taking all the core courses yet is working on a thesis or dissertation, and second, he or she comes from an Asian background. In this way, it can be ensured that the participants have attended all the compulsory core courses of the program and thus the evaluations of the program they give can be more comprehensive and reliable.

The particular participant reported in present study is Yu (pseudonym). She was a native Japanese and received her Bachelor of Arts degree major in English literature from a Japanese University and also teachers' license during the same time. Then she had taught English grammar, reading and writing courses for two years in a private senior high school in Japan since 2007. Under the pressure from high stakes university entrance examination, most of her courses were conducted in a test-oriented, teacher-centered and grammar-translation method. At the age of 33, she joined this program, and at the time of the study, she has finished all her coursework and is working on her graduation thesis, delving into the topic on vocabulary learning of Japanese students.

3 Data collection and analysis

Data collection for this study occurred over two months. The primary source of data was digitally recorded semi-structured interviews with Yu. Interview allows researchers to investigate phenomena that are not directly observable (Mackey & Gass, 2005), tailoring to the research questions of the present study of participant's expectations and perceptions. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews enable participants to elaborate on issues raised in depth and breadth (Dornyei, 2007). A written questionnaire aiming at obtaining background information was also collected prior to the first interview. In this way, boredom during interviews can be kept at bay by keeping demographic questions to a minimum and maintaining interviewee's motivation (Patton, 2002).

Two interviews of approximately ninety minutes each and about two weeks apart were conducted between the research and Yu. Follow-up interviews were arranged to provide opportunity to develop lines of investigation, check details, clarify any possible misinterpretation, and compare response. All interviews were transcribed by the researcher. In attempt to increase the reliability of the findings, efforts were made in piloting of interview questions, choosing interview locations which were quiet and subject to participant's availability and convenience, and using verbal or nonverbal probes and avoiding leading questions during formal interviews.

In analyzing the interview transcripts, a typical sequence of qualitative analysis outlined by Ellis and Barkuizen (2005) was followed. Once each interview was conducted and transcribed, the transcript was read through to gain a global understanding (Patton, 2002), then an open coding for themes by micro-analysis of line-by-line scrutiny of the data was conducted. Several similar themes from each interview transcript were categorized together. Respondent checking strategy (Creswell, 2009) was employed to increase the study's credibility: preliminary analysis pertaining to the identified categorization of participant's expectations and perceptions was presented to the interviewee to ensure that they matched her ideas and views and accurately captured the essence of the previous interview.

III Results and Discussion

1 Yu's expectations

Yu's expectations of the program involved three folds—to learn theories and approaches related to language teaching; to improve her own English proficiency, especially writing ability; and to take some actual teaching practice in New Zealand. All of these expectations appears to be closely influenced and deeply shaped by her previous learning and working experience, personal and academic interests as well as present and future life plans, rendering each perspective of expectation a colour of uniqueness (Farrell, 2008a; Zhan, 2008).

One of the courses (course on Teaching English) she previously took for teachers' licence inspired her and boosted her desire to learn more teaching methods in the master's program ('I thought if I could know more [methodologies I can use], that will be useful'). As a result, she could test whether what she did in class was right or wrong according to scholastic views rather than just her own experience, and get suggestions on what she could do to improve her future teaching. Although the term 'teaching methods' tend to be somewhat general and confusing, when asked about how to define them, Yu stressed the skills required specifically for language teaching related to particular teaching approach (Richards, 1998), such as the ability to organize and facilitate communicative interactions in class. Her aspiration for cultivating this perspective of teaching skill appears to be influenced by her dissatisfaction with the teacher-centred learning culture prevalent in Asian countries and the still dominant grammar-translation method of English teaching in Japanese secondary schools (Butler & Iino, 2005). Furthermore, it seems that she had already got interested in certain academic fields and would like to learn about in the program, among which were language assessment, SLA, and vocabulary learning. One interesting incidence she shared was about the polar opposite level of scores she got for TOEFL and IELTS before applying for master's study, leading to her doubts about whether these tests can really assess students' language proficiency. Besides, she was always curious about what's the best way to learn new vocabularies because she 'learn new vocabulary everyday', but 'keep forgetting them'. All these incidents had lead to her aspiration to learn related theories in the program, not only to untangle her doubts and quench her curiosities, but also to share them with her students in future teaching in order to offer her students wider suggestions and help establish their beliefs. She explained this in the following way:

'if I say this is the best way to learn English coz this is based on theory, even if they don't like it, they may follow. I think this is also good way. I think learning theory is very interesting, and I can also use them in class, I can tell them to students. They need some belief; something that they can believe in [...] from my experience I can tell them certain way to learn English, but if I know theories, I can tell them different ways. So I think they can have wider choices that they can take'

Besides above presented aspiration to learn more theories and methods to become a better English teacher in the future, what Yu also wanted to achieve from the program was to improve her own English proficiency, particularly writing ability. The reason for this was her lack of confidence in her own writing ability and ensuing doubt of her competency in teaching writing course during her two years' teaching post. Although the writing course she taught only asked students to make simple one sentence in English and she regarded it to be quiet easy, she 'always thought I was not the right person to teach writing course', because she had never written in English long sentences before she

joined the master's program. Even for the English courses she took for bachelors' degree, they often wrote assignments in Japanese, and she got no way to learn how to write in Japan since her undergraduate studies didn't provide any English writing course. As a result, she aspired to improve her writing ability during this master's program and to learn 'how to write, how to organize essays'. Yu's desire to consolidate their English linguistic competency echoes with scholar's suggestions on incorporating language development in teacher training programs (e.g. Cruickshank, Newell & Cole, 2003; Lee, 2005). Furthermore, it is noticeable that particular improvements English writing skills had been stressed, which seems to be influenced by her previous teaching and learning experiences as well as future working and living scenarios.

Yu's third aspect of expectation of the program was to take some English teaching practice in New Zealand local language classrooms, which echoed with Flynn and Gulikers' (2001) appeal that TESOL programs should require all student teachers to do a practicum. In Yu's view, such practice would be an exciting challenge for her due to the different students she would teach, a precious opportunity which she would not be able to get in Japan. Here in New Zealand, she would communicate with students only in English, instead of the teaching situation in Japan in which she used Japanese to explain everything. She also expected that kiwi students would be more active and talkative than their Japanese peers who are usually very quiet in classroom, possibly resulting in more classroom interactions. On another hand, Yu also hoped that through teaching practice, she would get access to teaching materials such as textbooks different from the translation style ones she used in Japan, which might be more conversation orientated instead of just presenting translations and words meanings.

2 Yu's perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the program

'thanks to the lots of readings and assignments, I can feel I did improve!'

Yu felt that one of the most important gains she had achieved through the program was the huge improvement of her English reading and writing abilities in a short period of only two years. This could be attributed to the lots of readings of book chapters and journal articles she did as well as all the essays she wrote for assignments. Thanks to these practices, she noticed that 'I can read really fast now, I think it's related to automation', and when looked back, 'all I did was writing, I think, everyday'. She had also made conscientious efforts to learn how to write essays in English by taking writing courses in the university's student learning centre, which was recommended to her by one of her Japanese friends studying in a different department of the same university who had taken the course before. These writing courses, which she regarded as quite useful, gave her clear ideas of how to organize essays as well as thesis, and she got the knowledge learned there internalized and adopted for her own writing afterwards. This improved writing skill, in her mind, was a precious gain from the program from which she could benefit for the rest of her life.

'when I looked at the brochure and saw that I could take this course, I was so excited!'

Luckily, Yu was able to get her prior curiosity satisfied and even her interests in related topics boosted through some of the courses she took in the program. One course in point was the one on language assessment. Not only had she got the chance to analyze and discuss the reliability and credibility of the test of IELTS for the course's assignment, she had also developed interests in the statistical knowledge gained from the course, which later on contributed to analyzing of the quantitative data of her thesis. Such method of 'analyzing numbers' was brand new to her, completely different from the abstract reasoning she did during undergraduate studies in literature; and she believed it could open a new perspective to her future teaching career when 'making tests': 'I made lots of English tests in Japan, but without this course I never thought about it, say this test is good, but how, which part is good', but after taking the course she thought she could see the results of tests in different ways by using the knowledge gained from the course, such as item analysis and so on.

A further example illustrated by her was about the assignment for course on learner language. For this course, she analyzed language data gathered by the lecturer in a local language school of a Spanish child who was in the process of learning English. By focussing on the child's learning of the use of auxiliary 'can' through nine months' period of time, she and her classmates categorized the child's development into five stages, and tried to figure out how they could generalize the development into others as well. Through analyzing the data, she got a bit of intriguing taste of how people improve their L2 ability, a question of interest that had haunted her for a long while before she joined the program. Besides the assignments, Yu also appreciated the content of the course's lectures, which introduced her lots of methods to analyze learner's language, although she would use only one of these ways to analyze the data for her assignment, she needed to explain the rationale for choosing this particular method and she believed that the other methods would be useful in the future in case she had to analyze other kinds of data by herself.

'you do this because it is the only one choice you have, but if you have ten choices yet you still choose the same one, there's huge difference'

As a whole, Yu was quite satisfied with theories learned from the program, and thought that they are 'more than enough' for her future teaching. Not withholding that fact that 'just one year we didn't have enough time to get into only one particular theory deeply', she stressed that 'I got general ideas of language teaching, at least I could understand what fields are connected to language teaching, who has said what theory and what other theories are related to it'. Even for certain course in which she got no prior interest, such as sociolinguistics, she felt that it had widened her knowledge and made her aware of the interconnection between different fields, further enabling her to share ideas with people interested in other fields in the future.

In response to the question of how the program would help her future career as an English teacher, Yu pinpointed the psychological sense of security

during future teaching she would derive from the theories learned in this program. She illustrated this point through the example that previously she knew about only the translation method of teaching, but through the program she got to know more options such as communicative and task-based language teaching methods. In her words, ‘now I know lots of theories and beliefs, and understand that there is no definite best way to improve second language learning, and I have more options in minds about how to teach’, as a result of which, ‘in the future, even if I still choose translation the same as before, I’ll feel more confident about my teaching’.

‘all we learn from these courses are just imaginary worlds! Or something happened in the past!’

For the program as whole, Yu pointed out one particular disappointing point which was the lack of actual teaching practice. All she learned from the program was related either to things happened in the past like certain data gathered by lecturers previously, or something imagined for the future, such as the final assignment she did for the course on vocabulary learning, which was to design a vocabulary learning programme. In her view, this was just ‘imagined students, and imagined classes, but what I want to do is just to go to actual language classroom and teach there, instead of imagining’, and she hoped that if she could use the knowledge gained from the program to make plans and deliver actual lectures, she could get feedback from students to get to know what she did was good and what was not, so as to make improvements before going back to her home country and teach.

In sum, based on analysis of Yu’s case, the program appears to be strong in promoting participants’ pedagogic competence with respect to equipping them with certain subject knowledge related to applied linguistics (Crandall, 2000; Richards, 1998; Yetes & Muchisky, 2003), such as second language acquisition and language assessment. Yu expressed her appreciation of the knowledge gained from various courses and have illustrated the potential usefulness of this knowledge for their future teaching practice, which were in line with researchers’ discussion of the positive impact SLA knowledge would exert on language teachers (Ellis, 2010; Mattheoudakis, 2007). With regard to students’ linguistic competence, comments indicate that the program significantly improves students’ English writing and reading skills. Large amounts of reading of research journal articles and scholastic book chapters together with writings of dissertations and essays for assignments, in Yu’s view, were all conducive to the development of their linguistic proficiency, which corroborates with the findings of Dogancay-Aktuna’s (2005) survey. What’s more, the program also appears to promote students’ professionalization through research engagement. The whole year’s ‘engagement in research’ (Borg, 2010) by conducting their own research for thesis writing under supervisors’ guidance acquaints students’ with the general process of managing research in the field of applied linguistics. Besides engaging in their own research and course projects, Yu mentioned that she has read many research journals and books during the program. These reading and using research, in Borg’s (2010) term, ‘engagement with research’, would

possibly exert significant positive influence on students' future teaching and help them to identify ideas to experiment with in their work.

The program's most salient weakness which surfaced in the interviews appears to be the lack of practice teaching experience, which has been regarded by scholars as the 'core element' (Wright, 2010) or 'most important aspect' (Farrell, 2008b) of an SLTE curriculum. Yu has identified the fact that no teaching practice had been officially organized and offered by the program, and regarded this as quite disappointing. In her view, teaching practice would grant her precious opportunity to trial knowledge gained instead of only learning 'things written on papers' or in 'imaginary world'. Further, she would be able to experience the realities of the local classrooms, and such opportunity will be especially intriguing for international students with no prior teaching experience in New Zealand.

3 Gaps between Yu's expectations and perceptions

One most obvious gap which emerged from the findings is the program's lack of practice teaching. This finding corroborates previous studies' observations that a split between the learning of theory, methodology and skills with practice still remains in many SLTE programs (Mahboob, 2003; Richards, 2008; Wright, 2010). Yu mentioned that although the course on the teaching practicum has been listed in the program's handbook, yet it has always been an unavailable course during the past three academic years. Brady & Gulikers (2004) note that even when opportunities to do a practicum are available for student teachers, many teacher educators hesitate or in many cases refuse to let non-native English speaking students apply for fear that their poor linguistic skills might impede ESL students' learning. Besides, it is noticed that in terms of participants' expectations of improving their all-round English proficiency, there still seems to be room for fostering students' linguistic competence in the program, since Yu has not explicitly made any comment on the program's positive influence on her speaking proficiency.

IV Implications and Conclusions

Although this study presents analysis of only one case, implications for language teacher education programs can be revealed. First of all, the study findings seem to indicate that student teachers were only recipients of the program's overall design and implementation. No administrative staff or program coordinator had discussed with students about their expectations prior to joining the program. It would therefore be beneficial for TESOL programs to incorporate an 'exploration of students' expectation' section into the program's entire design, so as to involve students in their own study planning. In this way, the expectations students bring to program studies would be capitalized on and training would become more responsive to the expectations they bear and challenges they face.

Another implication for SLTE programs relates to the particular need of non-native English speaking student teachers, and this is specifically their aspiration for continuous English proficiency improvement, such as surfaced in the present study as well as in previous literature (e.g. Dogancay-Aktuna, 2005). Unlike native speakers, non-native English speaking teachers are permanent language learners. TESOL programs should tackle this problem through direct or indirect methods to upgrade these groups of teachers' English proficiency, to boost their confidence in their linguistic competence, and empower their future teaching career.

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