



Expectations and Outcomes of First-year University Students in English Language Learning

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Students' expectations constitute a critical factor that can significantly influence their attendance, performance, satisfaction, and retention in a course. Unfortunately, the existing literature on university students' expectations within academic contexts, and their potential evolution throughout study, remains limited. This study examines students' expectations regarding English courses during their first year at a Czech university, evaluated at two distinct time points. Initial expectations were assessed at the beginning of the winter semester, and follow-up opinions were gathered after the first academic year. The survey revealed discrepancies in students' self-assessed language proficiency and the anticipated versus actual time dedicated to self-study at both the onset and the end of the period. The findings indicate that while several aspects examined in the study were consistent with student expectations, considerable scope remains for improvement. The department's management should guide instructors towards taking responsibility in fostering and facilitating oral communication among students, a task that may occasionally provoke anxiety.

Keywords: students' expectations, tertiary education, English course, meeting expectations, EFL, language learning

INTRODUCTION

Communication in English represents an indispensable element of academia, necessitating a requisite level of proficiency. This requirement is particularly pronounced in countries where English is not an official language and is taught as a foreign (EFL) or second language (ESL). Frequently, this education continues at the university level, intensifying the need for proficient English communication skills.

Students' expectations constitute a critical factor that can significantly impact their overall satisfaction, performance, learning outcomes, and retention in a course. While aligned or fulfilled expectations foster a productive learning environment, a mismatch

Citation: Lengálová, A., & Semotamová, J. (2025). Expectations and outcomes of first-year university students in English language learning. *International Journal of Instruction*, 18(2), 415-428. <https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2025.18223a>

between expectations and reality can result in lowered motivation, disengagement, and attrition (Bordia et al., 2011a, 2011b). Previous research has identified students' expectations as a significant affective variable at the tertiary education level, particularly in ESL and English for Academic Purposes classrooms (Ransom et al., 2005).

Tertiary first-year students' expectations can encompass various factors, including the transition from secondary school to university, the attractiveness of the chosen study program, prior educational experiences, perceptions of the institution, and self-efficacy (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008; Brinkworth et al., 2009; Crisp et al., 2009). However, the named studies generally address students' university education as a whole, rather than focusing specifically on EFL contexts.

The transition from secondary school to university and the disparity between students' expectations and the realities of university life can cause considerable distress, leading to poor academic performance and, consequently, a higher dropout rate. This inconsistency between students' expectations and reality can profoundly influence their experiences during the first year and thus their overall attitudes toward further studies. Learners' attitudes are fundamental also to the language acquisition process. A comprehensive understanding of incoming university students' expectations can significantly benefit educators and enhance teaching efficacy (Landolfi, 2014).

As stated earlier, initial expectations and motivations significantly influence overall performance. According to the developments in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1991), both internal and external factors can alter and regulate an individual's ideas and thinking, particularly concerning their motivations and decision-making processes. Additionally, self-efficacy plays a crucial role in shaping these processes and individuals' approaches, especially in terms of academic interests, which subsequently manifest in educational achievements and, ultimately, in career aspirations and goals (Kwee, 2021).

Student engagement in a course is contingent upon their participation in school-related activities and their commitment to learning (Schunk & Mullen, 2012). According to the principles of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), students possess inherent growth tendencies, such as intrinsic motivation. While motivation can arise from various sources, intrinsic motivation specifically stems from the fulfilment of psychological needs within the SDT framework (Reeve, 2012). Additionally, those who feel competent in classroom activities are more likely to exert greater effort in studies (Skinner et al., 2008). When students feel connected to their teachers and peers, they are more inclined to participate in learning tasks (Shen et al., 2012). Naturally, there are also other relevant factors affecting the approach to the course including interests in career development and anticipated financial benefits.

When examining individual motivations, thoughtful consideration of subsequent practical implementations proves beneficial. Extra-curricular activities (ECAs) including clubs and societies have been integral to higher-level institutions since their inception. Their implementation assists students in overcoming apprehensions and cultivating a sense of competence. Moreover, providing opportunities for skill development effectively supports students in strengthening their self-confidence and

motivation for active engagement. In this context, students have opportunities to improve their linguistic proficiency beyond the confines of formal classroom instruction (García & Kleifgen, 2018). Participation in English ECAs enhances students' language acquisition self-assurance as well as social interaction, facilitating the practical application of academic learning (Le, 2024). English ECAs are a significant facet of university students' involvement, particularly in regions where English is not an official language but is taught as a foreign language (Zakhir, 2019), such as the Czech Republic.

The aforementioned aspects were considered in the questionnaire which served as the primary tool in our research. Thus, the main objective of this study was to investigate the expectations of first-year university students and evaluate the adequacy of the training they received. In the research, we examined the potential factors influencing students' approaches to English courses during their initial period of studies, exploring what students expect from EFL classes and overall language education provided at Tomas Bata University in Zlín (TBU), Czech Republic, and assessing the extent to which their expectations were met. Consequently, the department's management should utilize the results to align students' expectations with course content, within the framework of the university's formal requirements.

The research questions were formulated as follows:

Research question 1: What are the expectations of first-year students regarding the English language courses at Tomas Bata University in Zlín?

Research question 2: To what extent are these expectations met during the course?

Research question 3: How can the management effectively align students' expectations with their actual experiences from the course?

METHOD

The survey instrument employed in this study was a web-based questionnaire comprising 15 closed-ended and one open-ended questions. The research was conducted at TBU in Zlín, which encompasses six faculties: Faculty of Technology (FT), Faculty of Management and Economics (FaME), Faculty of Multimedia Communications (FMC), Faculty of Applied Informatics (FAI), Faculty of Humanities (FHS), and Faculty of Logistics and Crisis Management (FLCM). All first-year students in bachelor studies were invited to participate in the surveys, with strict anonymity maintained throughout the process. The platform utilized for administering the questionnaire was SURVIO (www.survio.com).

The research procedure was as follows (Figure 1): Initially, a pilot questionnaire was developed and consulted. Based on the feedback received, minor modifications were made to refine the instrument. Upon finalizing the questionnaire, it was uploaded to the online platform at the beginning of the winter semester. The relevant study departments of each faculty then disseminated the survey invitation via email, encouraging students to complete the questionnaire. After the designated response period, the data from the questionnaires were collected and analysed. The procedure was repeated at the end of the academic year. Consequently, the findings were documented in the manuscript and communicated to the management of the Language Centre.

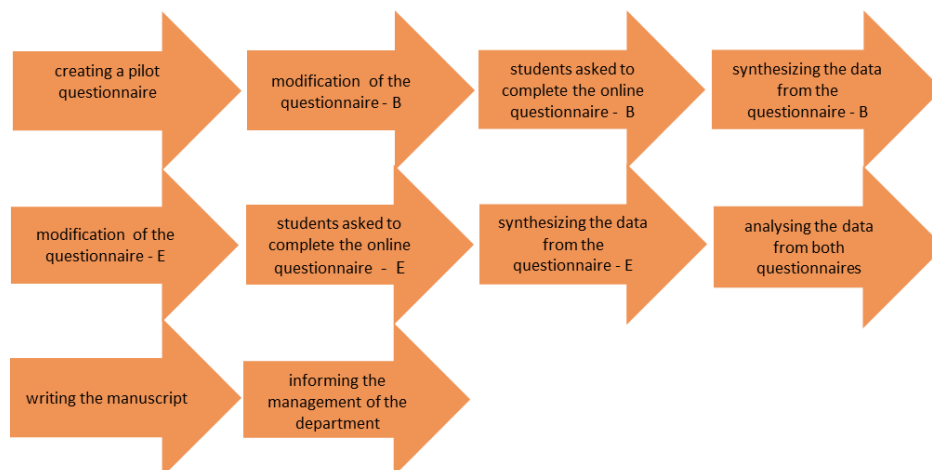


Figure 1

The process of the research (B, E - beginning and end of the academic year, respectively)

It is important to note that at the outset of the academic year, students are informed of the requirements and assessment criteria for each course. This information remains accessible throughout the year via the university's information system. These documents are commonly known as rubrics (e.g. Taylor et al., 2024).

Following this brief introduction, we now delve into a more detailed analysis of the relevant data. As mentioned above, the participants were first-year university students who were given the opportunity to complete the questionnaire at two distinct points in time: at the beginning and the end of the academic year. This allowed us to trace the evolution of their initial expectations and how those expectations were met. The "expectations questionnaire" was administered from September 20 to November 19, 2023, while the "fulfilment questionnaire" was accessible from April 22 to May 13, 2024. The initial survey garnered responses from 727 students, whereas the follow-up survey included 274 students. A critical issue that arises concerns the comparability of these two different sample sizes. By examining the response rates of these respective participant groups, we sought to ascertain whether the data from these two cohorts could be validly compared. However, due to the significant discrepancy in the number of respondents and the strictly anonymous nature of the responses, pairwise comparisons were not feasible. Therefore, our subsequent analysis primarily focuses on simple percentage comparisons between the responses at the beginning and end of the academic year.

We are fully aware of the limitation inherent in this study – the disparity in the number of participants completing the questionnaire at the beginning (727) and end (274) of the academic year. Attrition in participant numbers in questionnaire-based research can occur for various reasons. In our case, these may include a lack of interest or motivation and survey fatigue. Other causes that are often given as the reason, such as privacy and

confidentiality concerns or perceived length and complexity, are not relevant in our case.

The distribution of participants was analysed from multiple perspectives, including faculty affiliation, gender, completed secondary education, duration of English study, and self-assessed level of English proficiency. These variables were examined at both the beginning and end of the academic year, with significant changes observed in some cases. These findings will be discussed in detail in the Results and Discussion section.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The first variable to be analysed is the distribution of students across the faculties (Table 1). As can be seen, the number of respondents declined by approximately two-thirds at the end of the academic year. This substantial attrition may be influenced by a range of factors, which are often individual in nature, including health-related issues, withdrawal from studies, or a lack of willingness to continue participating in the study (Pan & Zhan, 2020). However, the proportion of students from individual faculties exhibited minimum variation.

Table 1

Participants by faculties (% / No)

Faculty	FT	FaME	FMC	FAI	FHS	FLCM	Total TBU
Beginning	17.8/129	29.3/213	9.8/71	11.0/80	20.1/146	12.0/87	100/727
End	14.6/40	28.1/77	9.1/25	13.1/36	25.2/69	9.9/27	100/274

Note: "Beginning" refers to the start of the academic year, while "End" denotes its conclusion (applies to all tables).

The second aspect examined was the gender distribution among participants. Notably, the proportion of respondents who chose not to disclose their gender, while minimal, remained consistent throughout the study. Among those who did report their gender, there was a 3.6 percentage point increase in the proportion of male participants; however, female participants continued to be nearly twice as numerous. This disparity may reflect the broader gender composition at TBU, where, in 2023, females constituted 56% of the student population (5,025 out of 8,933), as stated on the University webpage (Tomas Bata University in Zlín, n.d.).

The observed trend aligns with findings from Becker & Glauser (2018), who noted that women are generally more likely to participate in survey research, particularly in web-based formats, than their male counterparts (Becker, 2022). This pattern is evident in the detailed data from our study.

Table 2

Participants by gender (%)

Gender	Male	Female	Not given
Beginning	32.9 / 239	65.3 / 474	1.8
End	36.5 / 100	61.7 / 169	1.8

Students' attitudes and expectations are also shaped by the type of secondary school they attended. In this context, the distribution of participants from various types of secondary schools remained relatively stable throughout our research period, with the

most significant variation being a 2.2 percentage point difference in the category of non-identified secondary schools between the beginning and end of the academic year.

Table 3
Participants by the type of secondary school (%)

Type of secondary school	Grammar school	Vocational school	Business college	Other types of secondary school
Beginning	25.3	30.9	19.3	24.5
End	25.9	32.1	19.7	22.3

A significant factor influencing the expectations and attitudes of first-year students is their preferred study program and, consequently, their faculty. Of particular interest is whether their current faculty was the preferred choice or an alternative option. As demonstrated in Table 4, the differences among the various categories are not pronounced. Notably, the proportion of students whose current faculty was their first choice increased, while the other two categories experienced a slight decline. This shift may be attributed to the dissatisfaction associated with studying in a non-prioritized field.

Table 4
Participants by the first choice of faculty (%)

First choice	The present faculty	A different faculty of TBU	A different university
Beginning	65.7	8.3	26.0
End	68.2	6.2	25.5

Table 5 presents an analysis of the previous duration of English language study. Similar to the preceding analysis, the variations among the individual categories at the beginning and end of the academic year are minimal. However, one might anticipate that an additional year of study at university would reveal a shift to longer time of study. Nevertheless, this trend is not consistently observed in the data.

Table 5
Participants by the years of learning English (%)

Years of studying English	Less than 3 years	3 – 5 years	5 – 8 years	More than 8 years
Beginning	0.8	3.6	15.8	79.8
End	0.7	1.8	16.8	80.7

Self-assessment is a widely recognized tool for promoting a learner's autonomy and monitoring progress in second language acquisition, particularly at advanced stages of education (Engelhardt & Pfingsthorn, 2013). In our study, participants were surveyed regarding their self-assessed proficiency levels at the beginning of the academic year, as well as their targeted improvements by the year conclusion (Table 6). Notably, at the year onset, students demonstrated a strong desire to advance their skills, as evidenced by an increase in the percentage of those aspiring to achieve proficiency levels B2, C1, and C2, coupled with a decrease in the proportion of those at lower levels. This trend reflects a positive outlook on their anticipated progress, commonly referred to as dispositional optimism - a generalized expectation of favourable future outcomes.

Table 6
Participants by the self-assessed level of English in September 2023 – CEFR levels (%)

Self-assessed level	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
Beginning	7.3	38.2	45.2	8.4	1.0
End - expected	4.4	31.0	49.6	12.4	2.6

A follow-up inquiry was conducted at the conclusion of the academic year, approximately seven months after the initial assessment, prompting participants to evaluate their proficiency levels both at the beginning (retrospectively) and the reality at the end of the year. The results, as outlined in Table 7, are particularly noteworthy. At the start of the year, 38.2% of students self-assessed at level B1; however, by the year's end, i.e. retrospectively, only 10.2% maintained this self-assessment. While this discrepancy may be partially attributed to the significant attrition within the research cohort, the predominant factor is likely the phenomenon known as memory optimism. Moreover, a marked difference is observed at higher proficiency levels. Initially, 8.4% of students self-reported at level C1, which retrospectively increased to 40.8% by the end of the year. A similar, though slightly smaller, difference is evident at level C2.

This overestimation can be elucidated by several factors. One contributing factor is hindsight bias, wherein memory distortion and the subjective nature of foreseeability, centred on beliefs about one's own knowledge and ability, play a critical role (Roese & Vohs, 2012). Another factor is memory reconstruction, as memory does not perfectly record past events; instead, it reconstructs over time. Students' recollections of their past English proficiency may also be influenced by their current knowledge and skills, leading them to unintentionally adjust their memories to align with their current understanding and abilities (Loftus, 2005). Additionally, students may overestimate their past abilities to protect their self-esteem. Admitting to a lower past proficiency might evoke feelings of inadequacy, prompting them to subconsciously enhance their recollection of their skills to maintain a positive self-image (Baumeister, 2010).

Table 7
Participants by the level of English in May 2024 - CEFR (%)

Self-assessed level	B1	B2	C1	C2
Beginning - retro	10.2	42.6	40.8	6.5
End - reality	23.4	54.7	19.7	2.2

Students' preferences regarding the purpose of the study of English often evolve over time due to a multitude of factors. These factors include their experiences, shifting goals, and perceptions of the language's relevance. These changes are shaped by both academic demands and personal development, with a prevailing trend towards prioritizing academic success.

The changes in preferences can be attributed to various factors. First, students may soon discover that a vast majority of academic literature, research articles, textbooks, and online educational resources are available in English, prompting them to use English to access the latest information and stay updated with advancements in their fields (Warschauer & Kern, 2000). Second, the internationalization of higher education and the presence of international students foster a preference for English as a common

means of communication (Knight, 2008). This, however, was not substantiated by our research.

A critical factor influencing attitudes towards studying English is its potential applicability during university studies. Six primary purposes were identified, as outlined in Table 8, and the evolution of student preferences was analysed. The data reveals significant changes across all categories. The most pronounced shift occurs in the first category; initially, 37.3% of students prioritized achieving good academic results, whereas by the end of the year, this figure had risen to 64.2%. This trend indicates that over the year, students increasingly focused on attaining high grades, thereby diminishing their aspirations in other areas. Notably, there was a 22.7 percentage point decrease in the category "Traveling abroad during studies." The second largest decline was observed in "Better jobs during studies," and the third in "Certificate in English." This pattern suggests that students initially underestimated the course's difficulty, necessitating greater effort than anticipated, which led them to deprioritize other objectives. In this context, for both students and tutors applying new aspects of teaching/learning, called Education 4.0 (Peredrienko et al., 2020), is still a challenge.

Table 8
Participants categorized by the area of interest in utilizing English during studies

Area of interest	Good study results	Certificate in English	Travelling abroad during studies	Reading literature in English	International networking	Better jobs during studies
Beginning	37.3	18.2	43.0	34.4	20.4	48.2
End	64.2	8.4	19.3	28.8	14.6	30.7

Students' perspectives on the potential applications of English post-graduation are generally diverse. A key application is global mobility, particularly for those who envision working or living abroad, or anticipate frequent international travel. For such graduates, proficiency in English is essential, motivating them to maintain and further develop their language skills during studies (Crystal, 2012).

For graduates pursuing further education, English proficiency enables access to a vast array of scientific literature and professional resources, the majority of which are published in English. Those who need to stay current with advancements in their fields are likely to continue utilizing English to access the most recent information also after graduation (Warschauer & Kern, 2000).

The survey responses at the beginning and end of the academic period showed less variation in these perspectives than observed in the previous table. The potential use of English after graduation is shown in Table 9. A notable positive development is the increased intention among students to use English for further studies, whether in a master's program or other post-university endeavours, which rose by 11.2 percentage points. A similar increase of approximately 10 percentage points was observed in the intended use of passive skills, such as reading and listening. This suggests that over time, students develop a more nuanced understanding of how English proficiency can benefit them academically and in accessing global knowledge, leading to a shift from general to more specific applications of the language.

An additional increase was noted in understanding English from media and in the category "Communication with foreigners in the Czech Republic", indicating enhanced students' confidence in oral communication in their home country, both within and beyond the academic context. The categories connected with travelling and staying abroad remained relatively stable over the period analysed.

Table 9

Participants categorized by anticipated future utilization of English (% , more choices in the item)

Purpose	Study	Travel	Communication with foreigners in the CR	Long stay abroad	Watching films, listening to songs	Reading texts in English
Beginning	42.8	78.9	34.8	37.7	52.5	39.0
End	54.0	76.6	40.1	39.8	62.4	49.6

In addition to evaluating the overarching approach, students assessed individual language skills, namely reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Each of these competencies plays a distinctive role in fostering the comprehensive development of student's language proficiency, a cornerstone for their academic success and future career prospects. The skill of reading is indispensable for comprehending academic texts and nurturing critical thinking. Grabe & Stoller (2002) underscore its significance in academic contexts, particularly for non-native English speakers. Furthermore, reading is instrumental in the development of writing skills. Hyland (2003) explores its role in enhancing writing proficiency. Overall, writing enhances communicative aptitude and substantially augments students' ability to analyse and structure their ideas effectively.

Listening and speaking are pivotal for direct oral communication, encompassing participation in class discussions, collaborative endeavours, and professional networking. The critical role of listening in language acquisition has been thoroughly examined, as evidenced by Rost's (2015) contribution. Universities place particular emphasis on mastering lecture comprehension and delivering effective presentations.

The outcomes of our investigation into the progression of students' self-assessed abilities across the given four skills throughout the academic year are presented in Table 10. Notably, there is a marked enhancement in reading comprehension, a skill fundamental to academic achievement. Additionally, there is a notable advancement in listening proficiency by the year's end. Conversely, the active skills of speaking and writing witnessed a decline in the proportion of students' focus.

Table 10

Participants categorized by challenges (at the beginning) and improvements (at the end of the year) in English proficiency by skill (% , more choices)

Skill	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing
Beginning	6.3	18.6	66.9	35.8
End	24.1	25.5	52.6	24.1

A fundamental component of language mastery is speaking. However, even individuals competent in other areas may encounter discomfort when required to engage in verbal communication. This anxiety can be broadly categorised into linguistic challenges, psychological factors, social dynamics, and cultural differences. Our initial

questionnaire provided participants with five choices to identify the factors contributing to their apprehension; the results are presented in Table 11. The most frequently cited reasons fall within the category of social dynamic – students expressed a fear of embarrassing themselves in front of others and a fear of making mistakes. This issue has been examined in studies by Tee et al. (2020) and Alnuzaili & Uddin (2020) and was more specifically discussed by Bhattachaiyakorn & Phettakua (2023) in a similar context at a Thai university.

Table 1

Factors affecting the fear of speaking (% , more choices in the item) at the beginning of the year

Reason for the fear of speaking	Inability to respond quickly	Inadequate vocabulary	Fear of making errors	Fear of embarrassing oneself in public	Fear of the teacher's ridicule response
Beginning	34.2	40.4	46.8	49.4	15.6

The findings from the initial survey at the beginning of the academic year were shared with tutors at the Language Centre, who were encouraged to implement strategies aimed at motivating students to engage in direct communication and overcome their fear of speaking. The aggregated results of students' self-assessments on addressing this issue are presented in Table 12. A positive outcome is that 72.2% of participants reported having overcome their initial fear of speaking, with 18.6% indicating that they had completely lost this fear. However, a significant challenge remains for tutors, as more than a quarter of respondents continue to experience anxiety about oral communication.

Table 12

Completion of the challenge in oral communication at the end of the year (%)

I have lost my initial fear of speaking	Completely	Partially	Not at all
End	18.6	53.6	29.6

It is noteworthy to examine students' responses on the intensity of self-study outside the classroom. Table 13 illustrates a significant decline in student determination over time. Initially, a majority of students (66.4%) intended to devote 1 to 3 hours per week to the preparation for the course, and nearly 10% aimed to self-study for 3 to 5 hours. However, these figures significantly decreased to 32.5% and 2.9%, respectively, by the end of the period. Notably, 62% of participants admitted to spending less than 1 hour on self-study. This substantial decline can be attributed, as previously, to the demanding nature of tasks in other university subjects.

Table 13

Percentage of participants who spent the specified amount of time each week on self-studying

Time spent studying English individually	Less than 1 hour	1 - 3 hours	3 – 5 hours	More than 5 hours
Beginning	22.0	66.4	9.6	1.9
End	62.0	32.5	2.9	2.6

A useful means of significantly enhancing English language skills are extracurricular activities (ECAs), which provide additional opportunities for practical application and immersive experiences. The increased engagement enhances motivation to study and contributes to the holistic development of the individual.

Despite these potential positive effects, in our survey only less than 10% of first-year students reported involvement in extracurricular activities at the year's end (Table 14). This low participation can be caused by, similar to the previously discussed issue, time constraints. Furthermore, the limited availability of such activities or insufficient information about them may further contribute to this low level of engagement. However, more concrete reasons can only be identified in future in detailed analyses of both students' opinions and the offer of extracurricular activities at the university.

Table 14

Involvement in extracurricular activities at the beginning and the end of the academic year

Involvement in ECAs	Yes	No	Don't know
Beginning - expected	15.6	18.8	68.6
End - reality	9.9	90.1	-----

CONCLUSIONS

Our study monitored the expectations of students regarding English language acquisition at the onset of their studies and evaluated the extent to which these expectations were met in one academic year. A secondary objective was to formulate recommendations for university management and English language instructors, based on the study's findings. These recommendations aim to better align course content with students' expectations.

It was observed that the transition from secondary education engenders high expectations among students concerning English language learning. Initially, students anticipate significant improvement in their communication skills in English, express a willingness to participate in extracurricular activities, and express enthusiasm for dedicating considerable time to self-study outside of formal instruction. However, upon familiarization with the university's educational system and the demands of higher education, students tend to temper their ambitions, often reducing their focus to merely passing exams or, at best, achieving satisfactory grades in English courses.

An intriguing finding of the study is the shift observed in students' retrospective self-assessment of their starting English proficiency. Over time, students display increased self-confidence, often rating their initial English abilities much higher than they did at the beginning of the year.

The study's findings are intended to form recommendations for the Language Department and University administration on aligning students' expectations with course content, within the framework of existing institutional guidelines and directives. Particular emphasis should be placed on the division of students into groups based on their initial proficiency levels, thereby facilitating optimal skill development for each student. Additionally, instructors should intensify efforts to overcome the barriers that many students face in oral communication.

The adaptation of course content to students' expectations is inherently constrained by the formal requirements imposed by the accreditation of individual study programs. Nonetheless, at the outset of the academic program, instructors must provide students with a clear and comprehensive explanation of the objectives and aims of each English

course. This early clarification is essential to fostering student motivation and ensuring their active engagement in all course-related activities.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, particularly the significant discrepancy in the number of students participating at the beginning and the end of the academic year. This disparity has precluded the possibility of conducting a statistically robust analysis of the data.

In the future, it may be valuable to examine the perspective of the tutors, with their motivation potentially serving as a focus for investigation, as suggested by the study conducted by Liton (2013).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors express their gratitude to research participants and study departments of TBU.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.

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