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Preparation for Sessions

Expectations are often not fully understood until they are unrealized or exceeded. In this chapter, we explore expectations in the tutoring context that include learners, tutors, employers, or, in the case of young learners, parents. Encouraging the learner to articulate what exactly he or she wants, particularly when there is no language in common, can be challenging. Related to the discussion in Chapter 4 on autonomy, practical suggestions are offered on how to incorporate learner and other stakeholder desires.

Once a process for clarifying expectations is in place, the tutor and learner can plan the right level of involvement for the learner based on preferences and factors like age and time commitment. Various options are suggested for analyzing expectations and deciding what role the learner and tutor will play. Finally, in order for the learner and teacher to move forward, it is important to understand the language proficiency of the learner. Balancing learners’ expectations with their language level is a complex process.

In this chapter, we will explore questions like:

- How do tutors identify and meet learner expectations, especially those that the learner might not realize?
- What is language proficiency and how can it be measured?

Clarifying expectations

“Why and how do you want to learn a language?” This seems a question to ask someone asking for a language tutor, yet the answer tells something about motivation, lesson content, and learning methods.
The next question is how we can find answers. Of course this depends upon the learner and the context. For example, a child may not be able to fill out a survey or even want to study a language. In that case, parents’ expectations as well as a child’s interests must be taken into consideration. Gathering and analyzing data about learner needs and wishes is a part of planning a successful tutoring experience. Undeniably, language learning is a complex process, so ongoing needs analyses are required to help ensure that the learner’s goals are realistic and achieved.

When discussing needs, it is important to start by identifying the learner’s current language proficiency (see the end of this chapter) as well as the goals for the lessons. Identifying the learner’s level on a detailed proficiency scale can facilitate the establishment of realistic goals as well as benchmarks to track progress and increase motivation. This is especially important, since students in a one-to-one context may have higher expectations that sessions will lead to accelerated language learning.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) first wrote about the process of needs analysis by dividing needs into three categories: necessities, lacks, and wants. Necessities are based on future language usage. If the language learner hopes to present at international conferences, then the tutor needs to find out about the functions, forms, and knowledge needed to interact and present. Fortunately, many books have been published with more and more specialized language for specific purposes which can help guide lesson planning.

The second type of need, the learner’s lacks, refers to the learner’s current proficiency in the language. A lack is anything that might prove harmful or inhibit learning if it is not addressed. A proficiency or diagnostic exam is one way to gather this information. An interview is another. If a learner’s way of requesting is offensive to interlocutors, those they are speaking with in the new language, it is important to address politeness or requests towards the beginning of learning. The process of understanding what is lacking may bring out non-linguistic needs, too, such as gaining confidence or making friends.

Then there are the learners’ wants. Perhaps one learner sees perfect pronunciation and flawless grammar as the goal, but this may not align with the learner’s current level, aptitude, or the tutor’s beliefs about language learning. This can happen particularly if the learner is living in the country where the language is needed, rather than studying it out of interest. Sometimes needs analysis is more about reconciling competing views and making compromises so that both parties feel comfortable with the language learning process (Graves, 2000). With