

Article

Not peer-reviewed version

---

# First-Year Palestinian English Majors' Attitudes and Expectations towards EFL Learning: A Mixed-Methods Study

---

[Oqab Jabali](#)\*, [Bilal Hamamra](#), Heba Saadeh, Ahmad Ayyoub

Posted Date: 19 July 2023

doi: 10.20944/preprints202307.1270.v1

Keywords: attitudes; EFL; expectations; first-year English Majors



Preprints.org is a free multidiscipline platform providing preprint service that is dedicated to making early versions of research outputs permanently available and citable. Preprints posted at Preprints.org appear in Web of Science, Crossref, Google Scholar, Scilit, Europe PMC.

Copyright: This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

*Article*

# First-Year Palestinian English Majors' Attitudes and Expectations towards EFL Learning: A Mixed-Methods Study

Oqab Jabali <sup>1,\*</sup>, Bilal Hamamra <sup>2</sup>, Heba Saadeh <sup>3</sup> and Ahmad Ayyoub <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Language Center, Faculty of Humanities, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine

<sup>2</sup> Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine; bilalhamamra@najah.edu

<sup>3</sup> English Department, Faculty of Humanities, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine; heba.yassen@najah.edu

<sup>4</sup> English Department, Bethlehem University, Bethlehem, Palestine; ahmad.aayyoub@bethlehem.edu

\* Correspondence: oqab.jabali@najah.edu

**Abstract:** The increasing enrollments in the English Departments at Palestinian universities highlight the need to understand the attitudes and expectations of students, as these factors can significantly impact their motivation and proficiency in learning English as a foreign language (EFL). This study aimed to explore the attitudes and expectations of Palestinian first-year English majors in relation to EFL learning. A total of 244 students participated in the study, completing a questionnaire and participating in interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives. The results revealed a high level of enthusiasm among the students towards EFL, as evidenced by their strong attitudes and exceptionally high expectations. Moreover, the study identified specific student characteristics, including gender and the required hours dedicated to English learning, as well as the experience of studying abroad, which served as predictive factors for their attitudes and expectations. The findings emphasize the importance of regularly assessing the attitudes and expectations of learners in English departments to effectively cater to their needs and attract more students. By understanding the motivating factors and aligning instructional strategies accordingly, English departments can create a more engaging and tailored learning environment for students pursuing English as a foreign language.

**Keywords:** attitudes; EFL; expectations; first-year English majors

## 1. Introduction

The primacy of the English language on the global stage is irrefutable. It is the lingua franca in diverse fields including banking, finance, medicine, science, technology, communication, cultural studies, and education. Given its role as an international language, English enables communication with a broad array of different nations, fostering the growth of global business and communication opportunities. Consequently, the acquisition of English as a second or foreign language is increasingly seen as a cornerstone of success. Institutions and educators are showing a great interest in equipping students with proficient English language skills, thereby paving the way for a wide range of career opportunities. Moreover, multilingualism may catalyze innovation not only in the sciences but also in research; it has potential to foster fruitful international relations (O'Rourke et al., 2016) and to create additional opportunities for individual and collective growth and development (Eriani et al., 2021).

The efficacy of language learning is intrinsically linked to students' motivation, attitudes, and beliefs (Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011) which influence students' performance and readiness to study and learn another language (Wesley, 2012). Notably, attitudes play a pivotal role in language acquisition. As Viet (2017, p.1) points out, "A learner's attitude toward language learning is a critical factor determining success or failure," and these attitudes can either obstruct or promote language learning. Beliefs also hold considerable significance, having a direct connection to success in language learning

(Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011). According to Knouse et al., (2021), "beliefs, attitudes, and expectations can considerably impact learners' achievement and motivation to study a language" (p. 2).

The exploration of students' expectations and attitudes has been a focal point of interest for several decades. Many scholars have pointed out the critical need to comprehend students' expectations due to their significant influence on attitudes and the learning experience (Lin, 2012; Haque, 2014; Lobo & Gurney, 2014; Geiti, 2020). Attitudes pertain to individual thought patterns and emotions towards language learning, as well as the circumstances surrounding the learning process (Wesley, 2012). These attitudes can catalyze learners to select and engage with literature and interact with others using a foreign language (Geiti, 2020). Furthermore, they may positively influence academic achievement (Weinburgh, 2000) and expedite learning when students hold positive attitudes towards the language they are learning (Yang, 2012; Chambers, 1999), especially when that language is English (Al Samadani & Ibnian, 2015; Al Mamun et al., 2012; Latifah et al., 2011).

Expectations and attitudes are linked in the context of language learning. Expectations involve both learning procedures and outcomes (Bordia et al., 2006), holding a substantial role in the learning process (Haque, 2014). Therefore, expectations ought to be accurately identified and understood within the context of language acquisition (Knouse et al., 2021). They can influence a student's "willingness to embrace, actively participate in, and persist in responding to intellectual challenge" (Schilling & Schilling, 2005, p. 110). Students' expectations profoundly shape their motivation and behaviors, both internally and externally (Haque, 2014). When met satisfactorily, they "generate a greater level of motivation, classroom participation, confidence in using the language" (Eriani et al., 2021) and reduce stress among students (Lobo & Gurney, 2014). The ability of teachers to meet students' expectations may have a significant impact on the materials they select and design as well as their choice of methods. This can potentially yield improved performance and foster autonomous learning among students (Chu and Huang, 2007).

Language learners often formulate expectations based on prior language learning experiences, as well as their future goals and needs (Ketsman, 2012). These expectations are largely shaped by their past interactions (Lin, 2012). They encompass aspects such as teaching and learning methods, course content, language skills, fluency, note-taking, presentation skills, and communication activities (Haque, 2014; Bordia et al., 2006). Learners also anticipate encountering instructors who embody both humanity and professionalism, rather than being mere "knowledge deliverers" (Al-Issa, 2017). Thus, instructors should be willing to adapt their teaching styles to align with students' interests (Chu and Huang, 2007).

Upon students' enrollment in universities, it is advisable that staff members and administrators possess a comprehensive and deep understanding of students' expectations and aspirations. This understanding yields positive ramifications for both instructors and their students. To select appropriate and relevant curricula, teaching styles or pedagogies, and professional faculty members, English departments within universities must consider the expectations and perceptions of English language learners. Addressing this issue necessitates a broad, inclusive review of the expectations of students enrolled in these departments.

In the mid-1990s, the Palestinian authorities made a strategic decision to introduce English as a foundational subject starting in the first grade (age 6), rather than delaying its introduction until the fifth grade (age 11) as was previously practiced. As put by (Dajani & McLaughlin, 2009):

Curriculum developers, policymakers, teachers, and parents would like Palestinian children to learn English from the early stages since the English Language is the language of science and technology, a fundamental tool for pursuing higher education, and a means for communicating with a wider community (p. 44).

Despite English being a mandatory subject in both schools and universities in Palestine, it continues to be taught and learned as a foreign language. Students' proficiency in the English language exhibits considerable variance, attributable to factors such as their readiness, abilities, motivations, and expectations, the quality of teacher performance, the design of English language learning programs, and the policies of educational institutions. When students' expectations are adequately fulfilled, this engenders a climate of mutual understanding and rapport between teachers

and students. Moreover, the availability of well-structured syllabi and supportive educational institutions prompts students to actively engage in the learning process. Such conditions ultimately foster high levels of self-confidence and assurance in language learning (Bordia et al., 2006).

To gain admission into a Palestinian higher education institution, students are required to secure a General Secondary School Certificate, achieving a performance rating of no less than 65%. The competition is particularly intense during the admission proceedings for some faculties—including Business, Health and Welfare, Education, and Engineering—and for key departments such as English, Accounting, and Computer Sciences (see Table 1 for further details). Some academic institutions stipulate that applicants must undergo English Language proficiency assessments, with their placement in English courses contingent on their performance in these tests (National Report Palestine, 2016). In total, the Palestinian educational system comprises 15 universities, 16 university colleges, and 18 community colleges.

As noted by Bianchi & Abdel Razeq (2017), "Palestine presents a very complex ELT context (p.29)." Although Palestinian universities employ English as a medium of instruction, the proficiency of students to effectively utilize English in this capacity has been a subject of debate among educational professionals. There is a pressing need for the integration of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) within the curriculum to foster the development of students' language proficiency and enhance their language skills. University personnel and administrators have advocated for the creation of career-specific skill-related EFL curricula (Qaddomi, 2013). Students should be offered opportunities to actively speak EFL and listen to authentic material (Aby Alyan, 2013), engage with a variety of writing tasks and materials that build on their previous experiences (Abu Shawish and Abdelraheem, 2010), and participate in intensive reading programs (Saleem, 2010). The successful acquisition of language skills requires both the competent instruction from teachers and instructors and learners' committed practice (Dajani, & McLaughlin, 2009).

This article seeks to investigate and analyze the attitudes and expectations of first-year English majors at An-Najah National University towards English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. This study is particularly valuable as it focuses on the attitudes and expectations of English majors towards EFL, a group that has often been overlooked in favor of investigating students at different academic levels (e.g., secondary, tertiary, etc.) or students majoring in disciplines other than language or linguistics. This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the attitudes of first-year English majors towards EFL learning?
2. What are their expectations regarding EFL learning?
3. Are there statistically significant differences in the attitudes and expectations of first-year English majors towards EFL learning that can be attributed to demographic variables?

## **2. Methods**

### *2.1. Sample of the Study*

The sample for this study was composed of 244 first-year English majors at the chosen local university. This cohort comprised 37 male students (15%) and 207 female students (85%), all coming from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, all participants had completed 34 or fewer credit hours, adhering to the study's criterion stipulating that participants must be in their first year of study.

### *2.2. Study Tool: Questionnaire*

A descriptive online questionnaire was developed to investigate the attitudes and expectations of 244 first-year English majors at An-Najah National University towards English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. In coordination with the dean of the Faculty of Humanities, the study tool was distributed to the study sample. The questionnaire was then distributed to the designated study sample. The questionnaire comprehensively covered various aspects of EFL learning, divided into

four sections. The first section collected demographic information from the participants, including gender, high school type, place of high school education, and language of high school education. The second section focused on participants' prior experience with English, while the third section explored their expectations in EFL learning. The fourth and final section measured participants' attitudes towards EFL learning at the university level.

### 2.3. *Semi-Structured Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine the attitudes of first-year students towards learning the English language. These interviews are based on a pre-established set of questions, while maintaining a conversational style between the interviewer and the interviewees in order to gather information (Harrell and Bradley, 2009).

From the initial pool of potential participants, a purposive selection process was employed, resulting in the inclusion of 13 students (10 females and 3 males) who willingly volunteered to participate in the semi-structured interviews. The selection criteria focused on students enrolled in the English Department, with a deliberate consideration of those who had completed 34 credit hours or less. Prior to the interviews, the researchers provided a clear and comprehensive explanation to the participants, elucidating the study's primary objective. The aim was to track the attitudes and expectations of Palestinian first-year English majors towards EFL learning at the university level, with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of English language education and enhancing students' readiness to engage with the language.

Each interview encompassed six distinct questions, which were as follows:

1. Why have you chosen to study English?
2. In your opinion, how many hours per day should one dedicate to studying in order to achieve success in a language course?
3. As you embark on this semester, what aspects of the language learning process do you anticipate to be the most enjoyable? Conversely, what aspects do you expect to be the most challenging?
4. How do you plan to overcome these anticipated difficulties during the current term?
5. What are your attitudes towards English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the university level?
6. What are your expectations regarding the benefits of studying EFL?

The interviews were scheduled and conducted individually at the convenience of the participants. The researchers engaged in conversation with each participant, also assuming the role of an observer, taking note of the participants' general attitudes, including their speaking skills and fluency, the language (Arabic or English) they chose to use during the interview, and their understanding of the questions. In some cases, the researchers offered clarifications of question phrasings. It is worth mentioning that the language of the interview was determined by the participant, with the interviewers using either Arabic or English based on each participant's request. The interviewers also aided in facilitating the data collection process by providing interpretations of the questions when necessary to ensure the utmost accuracy in preserving the data's quality. For example, when students were asked about the aspects of the language learning process they anticipated to be the most challenging, the interviewer highlighted the keywords "anticipate" and "challenging" and paraphrased them using other synonyms such as "expect" and "difficult," respectively. Similarly, another question, "What are your expectations of the benefits of university EFL study?" was mostly reworded as "What are the benefits of studying English?" Lastly, the question "What are your expectations of the university for EFL class environment?" was rephrased as "How should English be taught at the university?"

The interviews were audio recorded to ensure accuracy, and subsequently transcribed using an orthographic transcription method, capturing all spoken words in their respective languages. The researchers then proceeded to the coding phase of the analysis process.

"Thematic analysis" is defined as "a method for analyzing qualitative data that entails searching across a data set to identify, analyze, and report repeated patterns" (Kiger & Varpio, 2020, p.2; Braun



and Clarke, 2006). This type of analysis was chosen because it is useful in setting key themes induced from data while allowing for interpretations along the process. The study adopts the six-phase approach to thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

#### **Step 1: Getting familiarized with data.**

Audio recordings were listened to twice and all spoken words were transcribed. It has been noticed that female students were more comfortable choosing to speak English while male students preferred to be asked and answer in Arabic while inserting some English words or phrases into their Arabic sentences. This behavior was attributed to their varied speaking skills. Overall, all participants seemed passionate about learning English and this was manifested in the excitement with which they were responding to the questions.

#### **Step 2: Coding:**

The second phase of the analysis entails the application of codes to the collected data. Coding serves the purpose of summarizing the essential content of the data and lays the foundation for the emergence of key themes (Braun and Clarke, 2012). In this study, the researchers employed a combination of descriptive coding and value coding techniques. Descriptive coding involved using single words that captured the participants' attitudes and expectations, effectively encapsulating the main ideas expressed in the recorded data. This approach facilitated the concise and meaningful representation of the data extracts.

#### **Step 3: Theme building:**

A theme is a 'patterned response or meaning' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82) that emerges from the data and provides valuable insights into the research question. In this study, the researchers derived themes from the coded data by carefully examining, combining, and analyzing patterns of responses.

#### **Step 4: Reviewing themes:**

Following the identification of themes, the researchers assessed whether to integrate, edit, delineate, or eliminate them based on their relevance and coherence.

#### **Step 5: Defining and naming themes:**

During this stage of analysis, the collected data undergoes a meticulous process of filtering and categorization. The researchers carefully examine the data, seeking out common patterns, recurring ideas, and distinctive categories that emerge from the dataset.

#### **Step 6: Producing the report:**

To enhance the interpretability of the analysis, the researchers employ pertinent, robust, and vivid examples that effectively illustrate key themes.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

#### *3.1. Quantitative Results*

##### **3.1.1. Demographic Characteristics and students' Attitudes and Expectations**

The study analyzed 244 students at An-Najah National University, focusing on English Language and Literature. Demographic variables, such as gender, EFL experience, studying abroad, and time spent outside classrooms, were considered in the analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze responses and determine the enjoyment or challenge of the language learning process. It was observed that female respondents (207) outnumbered male respondents (37). This gender imbalance in the university enrollment can be attributed to the perception that males are more inclined to enter the labor market rather than pursue a 4-6-year study program and wait for scarce job opportunities in an occupied country (Jabali, 2022). Despite this trend, the attitudes and expectations of the participants, both male and female, were found to be optimistic and ambitious.

A significant number of students (109) spent 11-14 years learning English before joining the university, indicating a substantial exposure to the language before enrollment.

The study found that 14.3% of respondents had experienced being abroad in an English-speaking country, while the majority (209 students) had not been. The researchers hypothesized that extracurricular English language learning activities could influence students' attitudes and expectations towards English as a Foreign Language (EFL). 130 students spend 4-6 hours daily studying English, while 104 devote 1-3 hours daily, while 130 spend 4-6 hours daily. Finally, the study considered the aspects of the language learning process that students anticipate to be the most enjoyable, which were believed to influence their attitudes and expectations at the university level. The study results showed that (85) students predict that speaking would be the most enjoyable and interesting skill, while (83) students consider listening to be more enjoyable. The study showed that reading scored the least number of responses with only (22) students, writing with (26) students, and finally, (28) students expect to be attracted to grammar. The results are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Demographic Features of Respondents and Results of Students' Attitudes and Expectations towards EFL.

		Count
Gender	Male	37
	Female	207
<b>Previous experience of studying or learning English among participants prior to enrollment in university.</b> <b>*Study is understood here as any form of institutional education rather than self-study.</b>	3-5 years	60
	6-10 years	46
	11-15 years	109
	more than 15 years	29
Have you been to a country where the English language, which you are studying, is spoken?	Yes	35
	No	209
The amount of time dedicated to studying English outside of formal classroom settings, measured in hours per day.	1-3 hours	104
	4-6 hours	130
	7-9 hours	0
	more than 10 hours	0
Which aspects of the language learning process do you expect to find most enjoyable during this semester?	Listening & Understanding	83
	Speaking	85
	Reading	22
	Writing	26
	Grammar	28

These findings could give insight to decision-makers in the English department to perhaps allot more courses to enrich students' experience in learning speaking and listening skills. This, in turn, increases students' motivation toward learning English as a foreign language while equally develop alternative more enjoyable methods in teaching reading and writing skills.

To find out the level of students' attitudes and expectations towards EFL, a One-Sample t-test was conducted as shown in Table 2 below. The results showed that students' attitudes (total dimension) were first tested at a high level (4.2) and the mean was (M=2.83) and (SD= 0.40). As a result, the null hypothesis was rejected as the test statistic value was  $T(236) = -13.99, P < 0.05$ . When the attitudes were tested at a medium level (3.4), the null hypothesis was also rejected. However, the results yielded a positive test value where  $T = 16.45, P = 0.00$ . This means that there are statistically significant differences in students' attitudes toward learning English as a foreign language. Similarly, the expectations level was tested first against a very high level of 4.2 (M= 3.74, SD=0.45); the results showed that the null hypothesis was rejected as the test statistic value was  $T(240) = -16.03, P < 0.05$ . Then, they were tested against the medium level 3.4, and the result was to reject the null hypothesis again. However, the results yielded a positive test value where  $T = 16.45, P = 0.00$ . This means that there are statistically significant differences in students' expectations of learning English as a foreign language.

**Table 2.** One-Sample t-test of students' attitudes and expectations towards EFL.

	Test Value			4.2		3.4	
	M	S.D	Df	t	p	T	P
attitudes	3.83	0.40	236	-13.99	0.00	16.45	0.00
expectations	3.74	0.45	240	-16.03	0.00	11.68	0.00

To find out which variables yielded significant differences regarding attitudes, a multiple linear stepwise regression was performed to predict students' attitudes based on their gender and hours of study per day. As shown in Table 3 below, a significant relationship between the predictor variables (gender, hours of study per day) and dependent variable (attitudes of a student) was found because  $F(1,2) = 19.10$ ,  $P < 0.05$ . Meanwhile, the value of adjusting  $R^2$  is  $= 0.14$ . Consequently, the following model equation was formulated:  $Y = 3.03 + 0.37 \times (\text{gender}) + 0.07 \times (\text{hours/day})$ , where all predictors' levels are coded monotonically.

To find out which variables yielded significant differences regarding expectations, a multiple linear stepwise regression was performed to predict students' expectations based on being abroad. As shown in Table 4 below, a significant relationship between the predictor variable (being abroad) and dependent variable (expectations of the student) was found because  $F(1) = 6.767$ ,  $P < 0.05$ . Meanwhile, the value of adjusting  $R^2$  is  $= 0.028$ . Consequently, the following model equation was formulated:

$$Y = 3.343 + 0.213 \times (\text{being abroad}), \text{ where all predictors' levels are coded monotonically.}$$

**Table 3.** Multiple linear stepwise regression for students' attitudes based on gender and hours of study per day.

Model	B	S.E	$\beta$	T	p	$R^2$	Df	F	P
Constant	3.13	0.12		25.27	0.00	0.13	1	32.90	0.00
Gender	0.38	0.07	0.35	5.74	0.00				
Constant	3.03	0.13		23.05	0.00	0.14	2	19.10	0.00
Gender	0.37	0.07	0.35	5.66	0.00				
Hours/ day	0.07	0.03	0.13	2.18	0.03				

**Table 4.** Multiple linear stepwise regression for students' attitudes based on being abroad.

Model	b	S.E	$\beta$	T	P	$R^2$	Df	F	P
Constant	3.343	0.155		21.63	0.00	0.028	1	6.767	0.01
Being abroad	0.213	0.082	0.168	2.601	0.01				

### 3.2. Qualitative Results

In order to supplement the quantitative findings and further explore the attitudes and expectations of first-year students regarding the acquisition of English as a foreign language, the researchers engaged in a selection process, which involved 20 male and female students, for participation in a semi-structured interview. Despite this, only 13 students, consisting of 10 females and 3 males, voluntarily consented to contribute. The chosen participants were selected on the grounds that they were enrolled in the English Department and had completed 34 or fewer credit hours. Each interview was conducted on a one-on-one basis and was audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in the gathering of data. Subsequently, the recordings of all 13 interviews were transcribed in the language in which they were conducted. This data was then subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis, resulting in the sorting and categorizing of students' responses into six primary themes as follows:

- 1- Reasons for learning English.



- 2- The time needed to learn English outside classrooms.
- 3- Enjoyable language skills.
- 4- Challenging language skills.
- 5- Benefits of learning English
- 6- English teaching methods.

Primarily, the motivations underlying students' decision to specialize in "English Language and Literature" hinge on two factors, according to their responses: the development of transferable skills and enhancement of English communication proficiency. Marah, a female interviewee, asserted that "I can interact with people from various linguistic backgrounds in both personal and professional settings by learning English. It improves my capacity to interact with people globally, whether for business, travel, or cultural exchange." Furthermore, Ali, a male student, with longstanding aspirations of pursuing education outside of Palestine, emphasized that "The language of instruction in many educational institutions around the world is frequently English. A greater variety of educational opportunities, such as attending universities in English-speaking nations or taking part in international exchange programs, are available to people who are proficient in English. Besides, learning EFL can be personally enriching and empowering. It broadens one's perspectives, enhances cognitive abilities, and fosters intercultural understanding and tolerance." Fatima, a third student, argued, "None can deny that the development of transferable skills, such as communication abilities, critical thinking, information literacy, adaptability and flexibility in navigating foreign linguistic and cultural contexts, etc., can be facilitated by learning English as a foreign language."

Indeed, the time investment necessary for learning English outside of structured educational environments is a pivotal consideration for students at Palestinian universities. Proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) varies considerably among students and is contingent upon numerous factors: initial language aptitude, pedagogical approach, dedication to academic pursuits, exposure to the English language, and the specific linguistic competencies they aim to develop — namely, speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Quantifying the precise number of hours needed is inherently complex, yet the widely accepted understanding among language experts and educators asserts that fluency in any language demands significant time and consistent effort. There were varying views among students regarding the appropriate amount of time to dedicate to studying outside of class hours. For instance, some students (e.g., Ali, Maha, and Zaynab) projected that their daily study commitment would be approximately 1.5 hours. In stark contrast, other students, such as Yazan, Suad, Lubna, and Ghada, advocated for a hefty six-hour study duration each day, a perspective influenced by their relatively beginner-level proficiency and a driving desire to prove their potential mastery of English to themselves and others. Echoing this sentiment, Ghada stated, "It's critical for students who want to succeed in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) to approach the learning process with commitment, consistency, and a growth mindset. They should create a study schedule that includes frequent practice and study sessions and set aside particular times for language-learning activities like speaking, writing, listening, and reading."

Thirdly, for most of the freshmen interviewed, the integration of enjoyment into language learning was crucial. They asserted that "Engaging in conversations, listening to songs, and watching films in English can be a fun and interactive way to practice language skills. We, as Palestinians, can socialize, exchange ideas, and improve our fluency by taking part in speaking events, language exchanges, or conversation clubs." However, diverging from this perspective, Maha expressed her preference for literary analysis, stating that "Literary analysis is frequently heavily emphasized in the English Department as part of language and literature courses. Because literary analysis is in line with the curriculum and academic requirements, I give it priority; it is a way to enhance my analytical, language, and critical thinking abilities while still receiving a formal education".

Fourthly, the discussion turns towards challenging language skills. For Suad and Yazan, certain aspects of English writing prove difficult. They express that "Writing abilities, such as grammar, sentence structure, and coherence, can be difficult. We also find it challenging to accurately translate our thoughts and ideas into written English due to the differences between Arabic and English's

sentence structures." Furthermore, the issue of pronunciation is not without its challenges. As Lubna said, "English pronunciation can be challenging for most Arab learners, including us in Palestine, due to the differences in sound systems between Arabic and English. Another difficulty is speaking naturally and fluently in English." Suad highlighted the complexities of understanding idiomatic expressions, explaining that "Idiomatic Expressions are very challenging because they call for extensive knowledge of cultural nuance and exposure to English in real-world settings." Interestingly, most students highlighted reading as a crucial tool to improve writing, hence underscoring the importance of the integrated-skills teaching approach. Ali emphasized that those who seek to overcome writing challenges should "read widely and extensively, create a regular writing schedule to practice, start with shorter writing assignments and work their way up to longer and more complex ones, and ask for writing feedback from teachers, peers, or native English speakers." Yet, when it came to solutions for difficulties with linguistics and literature, students were at a loss. Despite the interviewer's attempts to probe further, the participants only responded with silence and smiles.

Fifthly, the conversation gravitates towards the benefits of learning English. According to the students, the advantages of pursuing this major are intrinsically linked to their underlying reasons for choosing it: it offers the prospect of working in varied disciplines as proficient English speakers and enables interaction and cultural exchange with people worldwide. In the words of Fatima, "Learning English opens doors to interact with people from various cultures, helps gain access to a vast amount of information, resources, and knowledge across various fields." Ali added that "It opens up career opportunities in fields such as business, tourism, education, technology, diplomacy, and international relations, and empowers individuals to express themselves, share their ideas, and have a voice in a global context." Additionally, Lubna contended that learning English "enhances confidence and self-assurance, enabling individuals to participate actively in discussions, debates, and decision-making processes."

Sixthly, in terms of effective strategies for English instruction, students proposed a shift of focus towards speaking and listening skills through conversation, as opposed to an emphasis on reading and writing. Yazan said that "instructors should use the communicative approach to develop students' capacity for effective communication in practical contexts." In contrast, Fatima and Zaynab suggested an alternative approach for English majors in Palestine. They recommended participation in content-based courses where students could study literature, linguistics, or other subjects taught in English. They believe that "This approach allows students to develop language skills while gaining knowledge in their field of study."

#### 4. Discussion

Recognizing the valuable insights that students' attitudes and expectations offer during the initial phase of their university studies, this article was designed to investigate the attitudes and expectations of Palestinian first-year English majors towards English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning at An-Najah National University. It is imperative for language instructors and policymakers to acknowledge that students approach language learning with unique beliefs, attitudes, and expectations. Thus, the research questions were framed to discern the diverse attitudes and expectations among these students, and to determine whether there were statistically significant disparities based on a set of variables.

The results of this study revealed that first-year English majors displayed a strong enthusiasm for learning English as a foreign language. Their attitudes were considerably positive ( $M=2.83$ ), while their expectations were notably high ( $M=3.74$ ). These findings are consistent with the results of prior studies (Eriani et al., 2020; Geiti, 2020; Knouse et al., 2021; Viet, 2017; Hague, 2014; Oroujlou and Vahedi, 2011). For instance, Eriani et al. (2020) pointed out that meeting students' expectations can enhance students' motivation, active engagement in the classroom, and boost their self-assurance in language usage. The present study's results also align with the findings of Al Samadani & Ibnian (2015), Al Mamun et al. (2012), and Latifah et al. (2011), who underscored the importance of students' attitudes and expectations towards English language learning.

It is noteworthy that the interest in learning English has seen a significant increase among the youth in Palestine. It has become highly prevalent, with many students, particularly females, choosing English as their major. Fluency in English may enhance social status, self-confidence, and self-esteem (Kassem, 2004). Students and graduates who are proficient in English are more likely to participate in international competitions and join prestigious associations and organizations (Jabali, 2022). The command of English is often seen as a valuable asset for future career prospects, assisting in securing desirable employment, facilitating overseas studies, and importantly, enabling the articulation of the Palestinian issue to a global audience.

The study results also indicated that both gender and hours of study per day were significantly more influential than other variables, leading to statistically notable differences among the study participants. The unrepresentative gender distribution may have affected these results, aligning with the findings of Knouse et al. (2019) and Wesley (2012). If a higher proportion of males were included in the analysis, the influence of gender as a predictor could potentially be modified. It's noteworthy to state that in the English Department at An-Najah National University, female students significantly outnumber their male counterparts. In the Palestinian context, females tend to exercise more selectivity when choosing their major, opting for fields that ensure plausible future careers locally, such as teaching and nursing. Moreover, they often demonstrate superior language learning aptitude and potential compared to males (Mori & Gobel, 2006). Further, due to societal norms and constraints, they spend more hours at home, utilizing their time for studying and learning.

Additionally, the researchers found out that first-year students exhibit a keen interest in studying in English-speaking countries and learning the language in a more interactive setting. A communicative classroom environment appeared to be particularly appealing to most of them. These findings concur with those of Knouse et al. (2021) and Gass & Selinker (2008). Students anticipate that studying English abroad would furnish learners with enhanced opportunities to practice the language with native speakers. They also believe that graduates would have a competitive advantage in the job market (Fauzan and Nadia, 2019), thereby facilitating a shift in focus from language accuracy to appropriate language usage (Fadila, 2021, p. 6). Such an experience could also boost self-confidence in using the language. Furthermore, exposure to English in this way would present the language to learners in a manner that is "less prone to mother tongue and native-culture chauvinism" (Alptekin & Alptekin, 1984, p. 18).

Finally, as prospective English language graduates, the respondents revealed differing viewpoints towards various language skills. The majority anticipated finding the skills of speaking and listening more enjoyable than reading and writing. This sentiment appears to be rooted in their previous educational experiences, where opportunities to actively practice these skills were limited due to a predominantly teacher-centric classroom approach. Looking ahead, they envision a communicative classroom environment that minimizes reliance on traditional grammar-translation methods and the predominance of Arabic. They also express the desire for instructors with extensive experience in English-speaking cultures, or those who have pursued their education in English-speaking countries. These expectations underscore the students' aspiration for a more engaging, contextually relevant, and immersive approach to English language learning.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the elevated enthusiasm among Palestinian first-year English majors at An-Najah National University for learning English as a foreign language. The robust attitudes and high expectations observed in these students indicate a strong motivation and interest in the subject. Factors such as gender, the number of hours dedicated to English learning, and the experience of studying abroad were identified as influential in shaping their attitudes and expectations. To further enhance student attraction and motivation, it is recommended that English departments consistently assess and respond to the attitudes and expectations of their students.

The results of this study have important implications for English departments at An-Najah National University and similar institutions. Regular evaluation of student attitudes and expectations can provide valuable insights for program improvement, ensuring that the curriculum and

instructional strategies align with student needs. By tailoring the learning environment to meet the preferences and interests of students, English departments can attract a larger number of first-year students and promote greater engagement and success in learning English as a foreign language.

Despite the valuable insights provided by this research, certain limitations should be considered. The study focused solely on Palestinian first-year English majors at An-Najah National University, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Additionally, the sample size was relatively small, which may affect the representativeness of the results. Future studies should aim to include a more diverse population and expand the sample size to validate and generalize these findings. Furthermore, the study relied on self-report measures, which may introduce potential biases or inaccuracies in assessing student attitudes and expectations. Incorporating additional research methods, such as classroom observations or longitudinal studies, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing student motivation and proficiency in learning English as a foreign language.

## References

- Abu Alyan, Abedrabu 2013: Oral Communication Problems Encountering English Major Students, Perspectives of Learners and Teachers in Palestinian EFL University Context. *Arab World English Journal*, 4(3), 226-238.
- Abu Shawish, Jaber, & Abdelraheem, Mohammed 2010: An Investigation of Palestinian EFL Majors' Writing Apprehension, Causes and Remedies. Proceedings of the First National Conference on Improving TEFL Methods & Practices at Palestinian Universities, Oct. 20, 2010. [http://www.qou.edu/english/conferences/firstNationalConference/pdfFiles/drJaberDr Mohammad.pdf](http://www.qou.edu/english/conferences/firstNationalConference/pdfFiles/drJaberDr%20Mohammad.pdf)
- Al-Issa, Ali 2017: Meeting students' expectations in an Arab ICLHE/EMI context, Implications for ELT education policy and practice. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature* 6(1), 209-226. DOI, [10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.6n.1p.209](https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.6n.1p.209)
- Al Mamun, Abdullah, Rahman Mostafizer, Rahman mahbuber, & Hossain ashref 2012: Students' Attitudes towards English, The Case of Life Science School of Khulna University. *International Review of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2012), pp. 200-209. Available online, [http://irssh.com/yahoo\\_site\\_admin/assets/docs/20\\_IRSSH-264-V3N1.131231435.pdf](http://irssh.com/yahoo_site_admin/assets/docs/20_IRSSH-264-V3N1.131231435.pdf)
- Alptekin, Cem. and Alptekin, Margaret 1984: The question of culture, EFL teaching in on English speaking countries. *ELT Journal*, 38, pp. 14-20. 10.1093/elt/38.1.14.
- Al Samadani, Hashem & Ibnian, Samer 2015: The Relationship between Saudi EFL Students' Attitudes towards Learning English and their Academic Achievement. *International Journal of Education and Social Science*, Vol. 2 No. 1, pp. 92-102. Available online, <http://www.ijessnet.com/wpcontent/uploads/2015/01/11.pdf>
- Bianchi, Robert. & Abdel Razeq, Anwar 2017: The English Language Teaching Situation in Palestine. (2016). In Robert Patrick (Ed.), *English language Education Policy in the Middle East & North Africa*. The Netherlands, Springer, pp. 147-170. Palestine. 10.1007/978-3-319-46778-8\_10.
- Bordia, Sarbari, Wales, Lynn, & Pittman, Jeffrey 2006: The role of student expectations in TESOL, Opening a research agenda. *TESOL in Context*, 16(1), 10-17.
- Braun, Virginia., & Clarke, Victoria 2012: Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol. 2. Research designs, Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57-71). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>
- Braun, Virginia, & Clarke, Victoria 2006: Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. DOI, [10.1191/1478088706qp063oa](https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa)
- Chamber, Gary 1999: *Motivating language learners*. Bristol, Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Chu, Sau-Tung, Huang, Cheng-Hui. (2007). Meeting college students' learning expectations. Paper presented at the Sixteenth International Symposium on English Teaching, ETA/ROC (pp. 78-85). Taipei, Crane Publishing Co., Ltd.
- Dajani, Dua, & McLaughlin, Sky 2009: Implementing The First Palestinian English Language Curriculum, A Need for Teacher Empowerment. *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies*, 14(2), 27-47.
- Eriani, Efit, Pratolo, Bambang, Nailufer, Yuyun, & Astuti, Devi 2021: Students' expectations in EFL classroom, A case study at management department of a private university in Yogyakarta. UAD TEFL International Conference. 2. 129. 10.12928/utic.v2.5747.2019.
- Fidela, Sabina 2021: English for Study Abroad Students. Indonesia, *Institut Teknologi Sepuluh Nopember*.
- Gass, Susan & Selinker, Larry 2008: *Second language acquisition, An introductory course*. New York, Routledge.
- Getie, Addisu 2020: Factors affecting the attitudes of students towards learning English as a foreign language. *Cogent Education*, 7, 1, 1738184, DOI, 10.1080/2331186X.2020.1738184.



- Haque, Saifia 2014: Expectation of tertiary students of Bangladesh from ELT classrooms. *Journal of NELTS*, 19(1-2), 56-64.
- Harrell, Margaret & Bradley, Melissa 2009: Data collection methods. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Rand National Defense Research Inst Santa Monica ca.
- Jabali, Oqab 2022: Language of Medical Instruction in Palestine, A Mixed Method Approach of Students' Perceptions. *BioMed Research International*, (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1155/2022/8999025>
- Kassem, Ahmed 2004: Learning in English makes sense. *Student British Medical Journal*, 328(Suppl S4), pp. 133-176.
- Kiger, Mechlle, & Varpio, Lara 2020: Thematic analysis of qualitative data, AMEE Guide No. 131. *Medical teacher*, 42(8), 846-854. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2020.1755030>
- Knouse, Stephanie, Bessy, Mariana & Longest, Kyle 2021: Knowing who we teach, Tracking attitudes and expectations of first-year postsecondary language learners. *Foreign Language Annals*. 54. 10.1111/flan.12510.
- Latifah, AbdolLatif, Mansor, Fadzil, Ramli, Barhoom, Wardah, Mohammad, & Ng Man, San 2011: The Role of Motivation, Attitude, Anxiety, and Instrumental Orientation in Influencing Learners' Performance in English as Second Language in OUM. Available online, [http://eprints.oum.edu.my/565/1/role\\_motivation.pdf](http://eprints.oum.edu.my/565/1/role_motivation.pdf)
- Lin, Li-ching 2012: Measuring adult foreign language learners' anxiety, motivational factors, and achievement expectations, A comparative study between Chinese as a second language students and English as a second language students. Unpublished doctorate dissertation, Cleveland State University, USA.
- Lobo, Ana & Gurney, Laura 2014: What did they expect? Exploring a link between students' expectations, attendance, and attrition on English language enhancement courses. *Journal of Further & Higher Education*, 38(5), 730-754.
- Mori, Setusko and Gobel, Peter 2006: Motivation and gender in the Japanese EFL classroom. *System*, 34, 194-210.
- O'Rourke, Polly, Zhou, Qian., & Rottman, Isaac 2016: Prioritization of language education in the United States, State requirements for high school. *Foreign Language Annals*, 49(1), 789-800. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12232>.
- Oroujlou, Nasser & Vahedi, Majid 2011: Motivation, attitude, and language learning. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 29. 994-1000. 10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.11.333.
- Qaddomi, Hussam 2013: English for Specific Purposes in Palestinian Context, Determining EFL Cadets' Needs at Al Istiqlal University. *Theory & Practice in Language Studies*, 3(7).
- Saleem, Basema 2010: Impact of Extensive Reading on Literacy Perceptions and on EFL Writing Quality of English Major Students at the Islamic University of Gaza. MA Thesis. The Islamic University.
- Schilling, Karen, & Schilling, Karl 2005: Expectations and Performance. In M. L. Upcraft, J. N. Gardner, & B. O. Barefoot (Eds.), *Challenging and supporting the first-year student* (pp. 108-120). Jossey-Bass.
- Viet, Vo 2017: Undergraduate Students' Attitude Towards Learning English, A case Study at Nong Lam University. *VNU Journal of Science, Education Research*. 33. 10.25073/2588-1159/vnuer.4119.
- Wesley, Pamela 2012: Learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs in language learning. *Foreign Language Annals*, 45(1), 98-117. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2012.01181.x>
- Weinburgh, Molly 2000: Gender, Ethnicity, and Grade level as predictor of Middle School students' Attitudes toward Science Journals/1998 acts/ Weinburgh.
- Yang, Xiang 2012: Attitude and Motivation in L2 Learning among UM Master Students. *International Journal of Management and Sustainability*, 1(1), 13-22. Available online, <http://www.pakinsight.com/pdffiles/ijms%20pp.13-22.pdf>.

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.