

Great Expectations: Investigating Learner Preconceptions of Roles and Goals in Native Speaker Taught EFL Classes

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ABSTRACT

Concerned by lack of specific proper study of this area since Horowitz (1988) and Shimizu (1995), the author decided to investigate the following research questions: How do L2 learners conceive of their 'role' in a native-speaker-taught tertiary EFL study program? What expectations do they have of tertiary EFL programs? What goals do learners bring to tertiary EFL? Are these goals reasonable and achievable given what tertiary EFL classes currently offer? Do high school English syllabi appropriately and adequately prepare college and university freshmen for tertiary EFL study? This paper reports and discusses results of a questionnaire developed in order to address these questions. Combining closed and open-ended items, the instrument was distributed to over 300 Japanese university freshmen at 3 different tertiary institutions immediately prior to their first university EFL class meeting. Results quantitatively and qualitatively demonstrate an alarming degree of confusion among students as to what is expected of them as L2 learners, and paint a pessimistic picture of learner perceptions of what they hope to do and achieve in a tertiary EFL classroom. Most worrying for educators, it appears that many learners are demotivated and perplexed regarding their 'role' and 'goals' before they enter tertiary EFL classes. University and college entrants demonstrably hold shared preconceived ideas regarding native speaker EFL teachers and classes. But how are these 'schemata' constructed? The author will argue that high-school learners are exposed to certain versions of native-speaking 'teachers' and 'teaching' of which we, as responsible educators and cultural-linguistic-educational models, need to be aware and refrain from perpetuating or adding to in our professional conduct. This paper's findings have significant implications for anyone working in EFL - be it in Japan, Asia, or elsewhere - particularly those teaching at high school, college, and university level.

Keywords: Student role, preconceptions, learner goals, EFL

Introduction

In 25 years of full-time EFL teaching at Japanese universities, I have often been struck by the palpably varying attitudes displayed towards myself as a teacher, and to my classes as Native Speaker (NS) taught EFL classes, by respective student types and their sundry dissembling, vague, confused, or naïve responses to my asking them their purpose in studying English. In the same elective EFL class, different students will state their goal as being one of a fairly standard but scattershot spread of options: 'overseas study', 'to communicate with foreigners', 'to get a foreign girlfriend/boyfriend', 'to watch American movies', 'to travel to foreign countries', 'to get a good job', 'to get a course credit so I can graduate'. Similarly, once a course is underway, the inconsistent adoption of varying types of classroom role or attitude from student to student has been a constant feature. Both these aspects often cause problems in course and activity organization, as apparent learner

needs and subsequent modes of interaction with classroom tasks and activities vary so much from one learner to the next. Active or passive, serious or light hearted, taciturn or vociferous, sullen or enthusiastic: it is impossible accurately to predict the mindset adopted towards the educational environment (teacher and class) of the next student who will walk through the door, and his or her attitude will combine with those of the other learners comprising the group to set the tone of the class and thus define the learning experience to a great extent.

While the range of role-influencing student attitudes is alarming, I have been equally struck, by the wide range of course content and pedagogic approach offered by NS teachers in EFL courses at the tertiary institutions at which I have taught. Under the umbrella headings such as ‘General English’ or ‘English Communication’ and under the supervision of NS educators with different qualifications and academic backgrounds, an impressive variety of activities appear to be taking place in classrooms at Japanese universities and colleges. I once taught a first-year university ‘English Communication’ course, as one of 4 part-time native speaker EFL instructors comprising that course’s teaching team. I used a coursebook from the Heinle *Innovations* series supplemented by handouts of my own creation; another teacher played the students pop songs. The third member of the team used a reading comprehension textbook called something like *The Unchanging Face of Britain*, and the fourth teacher taught with a graded reader, a version of *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, as core text. (To be fair to us all, the (it must be said, not unusual) response to our queries as to what we should teach in the course had been, “Up to you. Use whatever you like...”) Content does not condition methodology, and variety is the spice of learning, perhaps, but what kind of image or identity, if not a fragmented and unfocused one, is this conveying of NS EFL classes to L2 learners arriving at university from high school and about to experience a NS-taught English class for the first time? How would the ‘role’ (if any) that language learners saw as appropriate to themselves at this stage of their learning career and brought with them from high school to university fit with the kind of classes they could expect as part of a first-year college EFL course? And who among them would be right, and who might be disappointed? And why?

Objectives

In a groundbreaking study, ‘The Roles of Teacher and Learner’, Widdowson (1987) hypothesized that classroom role for learners comprised two elements: *identifying* role (a function of ‘occupation’ i.e. ‘student’, as ordained or classified by external classification, thus socially constructed) and *incidental* role (a function of ‘activity’ i.e. ‘learner’, as product of tasks and objectives taking place in the course and classroom). Classroom dynamics are thus composed of two overlapping and interrelated kinds of engagement between teacher and student. The first of these Widdowson terms ‘interactional’ engagement between instructor and learner, based on culturally inherited identifying roles (thus revisable, confirmed or modified at each new formal developmental stage of the learner’s education) which will thus be brought to a subsequent classroom as preconceived notions to apply to the ‘microcosmic school version of the macrocosm of social life’ (Widdowson, 84). Widdowson calls the second form of engagement ‘transactional’, realized by the set of activities and objectives and strategies that occur in an organized learning situation. It is my argument that these transactional elements at pre-tertiary level will contribute to learners’ conceptions of NS classroom presence and meaning, which then in turn become the preconceptions (socio-cultural plus classroom-created, then) they bring to the tertiary arena, coloring the roles and goals they see as appropriate for themselves as participants, yet for the first time, in an EFL course solely taught by a NS teacher.

Research Questions

With all the above kept firmly in mind, I wished to investigate the following two questions in the course of my research:

- a) What 'role' or 'roles' did freshman EFL learners with no experience of a NS-taught English class expected to be required to adopt in such a class?
- b) What personal 'goal' or 'goals' in learning English did these learners set for themselves at this new stage of their career as L2 learners?

I am not directly interested here in the nature of 'roles' and 'goals' that learners adopt or adapt to once their university NS EFL classes are underway. Rather, I am interested in their conceptions of 'role' and 'goals' *prior to* any first-hand experience of such classes. Learner *pre-conceptions* of L2 tertiary student 'roles' and personally appropriate 'goals' are the subject of this enquiry. These will necessarily be conditioned by the image that students have of themselves as L2 learners, and by their relation to the EFL course they are about to experience. This will, in turn, be effected and affected by preconceptions founded (among other things) upon knowledge of past learning experiences thought to be relevant and self-predicted to be likely to resemble experiences in an immediate future EFL setting.

Methodology

The ulterior motive for my study, which became more and more exterior as the research findings began to appear, its hidden agenda was and is not difficult to detect. Research studies on tertiary-level Japanese learners' attitudes to NS EFL teachers and their classes prior to my own study have hitherto concentrated on either

- a) the ways in which learners assess such teachers and courses after first-hand experience of both, midway through university career and/or in hindsight, and /or
- b) the ways in which learners' with direct experience of tertiary EFL teachers and courses, both NS and non-NS, respectively and comparatively evaluate NS and non-NS teachers and courses.

My research differs in an important point. I wish to identify how preconceptions of NS tertiary EFL teachers and classes are formed *prior to* learner entry to tertiary education and how these teachers and courses are anticipated and imagined and expected to be by learners with no first-hand experience of either. I suspect that those pre-conceptions are to a considerable extent generally culturally and ideologically formed, and in particular specifically and locally conditioned by pre-university exposure to EFL classes (i.e. at Elementary, Junior High, and High School level).

Literature Review

Almost 30 years ago, Gardner crucially observed that 'teachers and methodology can ... play an important role in shaping the nature of students' attitudes' (Gardner, 8); more recently, Littlewood has suggested that 'educational contexts' are more responsible for Asian learning styles than learners themselves. I think that both these assessments certainly hold true of Japan (Littlewood, 31). Moreover, I believe that, by identifying and understanding these general and particular pre-conceptions, EFL professionals from outside their learners' native culture may be able to understand those learners, their attitudes and motivations, better, and thus serve them more sensitively and more appropriately as educators.

There is considerable literature on L2 learner attitude and motivation (or lack of it), but a dearth of relevant research into pre-conceived notions of student roles and goals with

specific regard to NS tertiary EFL classes. As far as I am aware, mine is the first survey of its precise kind, but a review and understanding of related research in the area is necessary and instructive at this point.

Gardner and Lambert (1972) pioneered a socio-educational model of L2 learner motivation that is still given great credence in the literature over 30 years after its conception. Their research classified learner motivation into two types: ‘instrumental’ i.e. that emphasizing ‘the practical value and advantages of learning a new language’, and ‘integrative’, i.e. that stressing ‘sincere and personal interest in the people and culture’ represented by the target language (Gardner and Lambert, 132). Using this model, Berwick and Ross (1989) conducted a longitudinal study of Japanese freshman L2 learners midway through their first year of university study that demonstrated how motivation to learn English peaks in the final year of high school then plummets dramatically upon entering college. This crash is attributed to both

- a) the intense and focused pressure high school students feel to pass the university entrance exam at the end of JHS final year (‘exam hell’), and
- b) the very different atmosphere they encounter in their first term of college education (‘leisure land’) where ‘there is very little to sustain [L2 learner] motivation, so the student appears in freshmen classrooms as a kind of timid, exam-worn survivor with no apparent academic purpose at university’ (Berwick and Ross, 206).

Subsequent studies (Benson, 1992; Long and Russell; 1999; O’Donnell, 2003; Ushioda, 2013; Yashima, 2013; Shea, 2017) have re-confirmed Berwick and Ross’s assertions, concluding that ‘once students’ primary motivation for studying is achieved, without reorientation of motivation, there is little purpose for continuing to study and improve proficiency’ in English (O’Donnell, 37). But ‘reorientation of motivation’ involves, I believe, ‘reorientation of preconceptions’ since, it appears, tertiary-level motivation to participate appropriately and effectively in a NS EFL class will be affected by preconceptions brought to that class.

In terms of Gardner and Lambert’s construct of motivation, instrumental motivation will have suddenly vanished when a Japanese student enters a first-year college EFL course. Whether integrative motivation remains or not will depend on the background and outlook of a particular learner. Important to my purpose here, Spolsky (1989) modified Gardner and Lambert’s model of language learner motivation to include a third factor attitudinally influencing motivation, that being student feeling towards the ‘language learning situation as a whole, including the teacher and the course itself’ (Spolsky, 154). I will clumsily call this factor ‘pre-conceptual situational motivation’ (PSM) and hope to show it greatly and silently influences and strongly and insidiously conditions the behavior and attitudes of Japanese tertiary L2 learners in ways of which we, as NS teachers, would be wise to be aware, especially since, as my research has shown, seemingly positive preconceptions of NS EFL classes may not be actually positive in terms of the effect they have on the roles and goals learners adopt for themselves when they enter our classrooms. Dörnyei (2001) offers a different motivational model, contrasting dichotomic ‘intrinsic’ (based on satisfaction or enjoyment of an activity for its own sake) and ‘extrinsic’ (based on perceived reward outside of and even unconnected to the task itself) motivation. This is useful but I think, in the case of Japanese high school graduates becoming university freshman learners, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations may be intertwined and connected to an extent that Dörnyei’s model does not allow, and so I have preferred to employ the other model for the purposes this study.

In 1995 Kathleen Shimizu, spurred by an impression that ‘students viewed me more as an entertainer than a teacher’ and ‘[i]n contrast to my Japanese colleagues ... my

classes are not taken seriously by my students' surveyed Japanese college students' attitudes towards EFL teachers, seeking to identify similarities and differences in the ways NS versus non-NS teachers were perceived by the 1088 respondents to an original questionnaire designed for the purpose (Shimizu, 5). Presented in Japanese as a series of closed items, Shimizu's questionnaire specifically canvassed to identify firstly student impressions of NS and non-NS EFL classes respectively, by soliciting simple Yes or No agreement or disagreement with a list of given possible class descriptors and, secondly, to discover what qualities and attributes were regarded as important and desirable in a NS and non-NS EFL teacher respectively, again from a given list of possible options. Shimizu's results are revealing and relevant to my study here.

To summarise her findings, first for the 'Impressions of NS/non-NS EFL class' section, NS classes were evaluated positively. In terms of deviation, the items which students saw as particularly characteristic of NS classes and, by contrast, lacking in non-NS classes were: Humorous, Fun, Relaxed, Interesting, Friendly. EFL classes taught by Japanese teachers were evaluated most strongly by comparison with their NS counterparts as: Strict, Boring, Serious, Formal, Gloomy, Dead. Interestingly, though they resoundingly evaluated Japanese teacher classes as 'gloomy' and 'dead', and NS classes by contrast as 'interesting' and 'fun', the students (by a convincing 2:1 ratio) nevertheless stated that they felt more 'comfortable' in non-NS classes, found such classes 'easier to understand' and felt more at ease 'asking questions' than they were in NS classrooms.

Shimizu's survey findings in the area of attributes and qualities viewed as desirous in an EFL teacher are equally striking when results for native speaker teachers are set beside those for Japanese instructors. Reassuringly, both sets of teacher received almost identical scores in respondent assessment of importance (or lack of it) of gender, age, physical appearance, fairness (not favoritism), and respect for student opinion. But respectability and reliability, seen as by far among the most important attributes for a Japanese instructor, were considered among the least important traits for a foreign teacher to possess in his or her armory. It is illuminating to compare qualities seen as *least* important in an NS EFL teacher with those seen as *most* important in a Japanese EFL teachers:

Most Important in J Teacher

1. Knowledge of subject
2. Good pronunciation skill
3. Ability to explain subject
4. Intelligence

Least Important in NS Teacher

1. Intelligence
2. Knowledge of subject
3. Respectability
4. Reliability

Shimizu, I think correctly, concludes from these results that:

- a) students evaluate J and NS EFL teachers 'by different standards',
- b) NS teachers are 'not seen as serious teachers' to the extent that Japanese teachers are seen as such,
- c) students are more 'enthusiastic' about NS EFL classes but for reasons unconnected to properly learning the target subject,
- d) students feel that classes taught by foreigners are 'trivial' and thus 'might not seriously participate' in them, and
- e) NS teachers may feel 'burdened with having to fulfill student **expectations** that they are interesting cheerful and entertaining' (Shimizu, 7-8).

It must be noted that respondents to Shimizu's survey were assessing tertiary-level EFL teachers both Japanese and non-Japanese after direct personal experience of being

taught by both groups. Respondents to my survey were not. Shimizu extracted conceptions of NS EFL teachers based on direct quantifiable experience. My research aims to identify preconceptions and to locate their origins.

Declaring that '[k]nowledge of student attitudes and motivations is vital if one is to bridge cultural and pedagogical gaps, particularly for the instructor whose approach to teaching might run counter to common teaching methods at the secondary level', O'Donnell (2003) sought to discover how tertiary Japanese English learners 'attitudes may have been shaped by their language-learning experiences while in secondary school' as part of a wider exploration of university EFL student motivation, concluding that 'beliefs about both the general nature of language learning and learning and communication strategies continue to parallel many of the traditional practices of their secondary language experiences once they reach the tertiary level ... attitudes may have been shaped by their language-learning experiences while in high school' (O'Donnell, 54). Notional precedents are set, according to O'Donnell's survey findings (only 135 students were surveyed), at high school. So how might this affect or contribute to formations of the (pre)conceived ideas of NS teachers and classes, and their own goals and roles with regard to these classes, which the learners bring with them when they arrive at university? What image or model of NS EFL teacher and class and appropriate student role and goal within a NS-taught EFL course does high school experience instill in learners before they enter college. According to my survey, over 97% of university entrants have never personally experienced a class solely taught by a NS EFL teacher, and yet they have shared preconceived ideas of what to expect in a NS-taught course.

Pertinent to my purpose here, O'Donnell found strong student agreement (via respondent Lickert-scale rating) with two statements in his survey: that learning English is 'different from learning other academic subjects' and that '[y]ou can improve your ability in English by playing games' (O'Donnell, 52). Though O'Donnell also discovered that tertiary student goals in learning English are unfocused and vague and 'often contradictory' (to 'get a good job' was the only notably positive goal identified by respondents among a selection of unenthusiastically received alternatives including, somewhat contradictorily, 'useful in the future' and for becoming a 'respected' and 'knowledgeable' adult), he was able to conclude his research by declaring that 'after six years of [EFL] study, the students investigated here have most certainly developed specific attitudes about language learning and about English and its speakers.'

Quoting Gardner's 1985 assertion, cited above, that 'teachers and methodology can ... play an important role in shaping the nature of students' attitudes', O'Donnell proposes that while 'skilled' teachers can instill 'positive attitudes' in learners, 'it is equally probable that teachers' actions can bring about negative attitudes which hinder language development if the opposite conditions are present. This can be true for both high school and university instruction' (O'Donnell, 53).

Findings

For the purposes of this study, I personally developed a questionnaire that comprised 2 closed and 4 open-ended items. These are all reproduced later in this section, along with selected responses: see 'Questionnaire Items and Responses' below. The questionnaire was composed entirely in Japanese, and responses to open-ended items were similarly made in Japanese. All English translations of items and responses provided below were made by myself and thereafter separately checked and verified by two Japanese colleagues. The instrument was distributed to 306 Japanese university freshmen at 3 different tertiary institutions in class by a Japanese colleague immediately prior to the

commencement of their first university EFL class meeting, and collected by the same person 20 minutes later.

This process produced 285 fully completed questionnaires that were deemed usable. 3 questionnaires were unreturned; 4 were returned uncompleted; and 14 were returned partially completed. These 21 were discarded, leaving 285 completed questionnaires. Of these 278 respondents answered 'No' to item 2 (Have you ever taken an English class taught solely by a native speaker teacher before (ALTs excepted)?) and only these 278 were used for the final results. Thus $n = 278$. Results were collated, analyzed, and interpreted by myself.

Questionnaire Items and Responses

1. あなたが英語を学ぶ個人的な目標は何ですか？自由に書いて下さい。
(What is your personal goal in learning English?)

Speak to/communicate with/understand foreigners (featured in 32% of responses)
Future Career (19%)
Overseas Travel (12%)

2. あなたはこれまで ALT(外国人英語助手)以外のネイティブ教師だけの英語の授業を受けたことがありますか？ はい(yes) ・ いいえ(no)
(Have you ever taken an English class taught solely by a native speaker teacher before (ALTs excepted)?)

Yes (5%)
No (95%) (Only 'No' respondents' replies were used for other results.)

3. ネイティブ教師による英語の授業と日本人教師の英語の授業とはどのような点で異なると思いますか？自由に書いて下さい。
(In which ways do you think that a native-speaker taught English class might differ from a Japanese teacher's English class?)

Reference to NS use of real/living English (29%)
More interesting/funny (28%)
More speaking/communication/conversation/Less or no grammar (24%)

* The Japanese term used was '面白い', which can mean 'interesting' or 'funny'.

4. なぜそう思いますか？自由に書いて下さい。
(Why do you think so?)

Reference to NS providing/enabling 'real' English (32%)
Influence of HS ALT experience (26%)
Japanese teachers use of 'text' versus NS teacher's 'free' style (21%)
Japanese teacher = grammar/NS teacher = communicative (20%)

'My image of NS class is that it is not strict and enjoyable'
'Because my experience is that NS teachers are interesting/funny*'
'A Japanese teacher cannot teach good pronunciation'

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‘NS class is usually conversation class’

‘NS teacher can talk freely to us’

* The Japanese term used was ‘面白い’, which can mean ‘interesting’ or ‘funny’.

5. ネイティブ教師の英語の授業の内容についてどんなイメージを持ち、何をすると考えていますか？

(What image do you have of a native speaker taught English class, and what do you think you will do in the class?)

活動 (activity)	Mean, SD.
1. 発音練習 (pronunciation practice)	4.18, 1.15
2. ゲーム (games)	4.40, 0.93
3. 異文化理解 (learn about foreign culture)	3.62, 1.22
4. リスニング (listening)	4.12, 1.46
5. ライティング (writing)	2.67, 1.31
6. 映画を見る (watch movies)	1.79, 1.55
7. 文法 (grammar)	1.36, 1.27
8. 英語のみの授業 (class entirely in English)	4.44, 0.98
9. 英会話 (English conversation)	4.51, 0.89
10. リーディング (reading)	3.31, 1.46

6. なぜそう思いますか？なぜそのような授業になるとおもいますか？自由に書いて下さい。

(Why do you think so? Why do you think it will be that kind of class?)

Reference to NS providing/enabling ‘real’ ‘living’ classroom English (31%)

Influence of HS ALT experience (28%)

Reference to ‘games’ as equated with NS class (23%)

Japanese teacher = grammar/NS teacher = communicative (22%)

Reference to NS teacher’s use of ‘only’ English (20%)

Have heard so from others (19%)

‘ALT played games to help us listen and speak in English’

‘NS teacher cannot speak Japanese so can only show us pronunciation’

‘NS teacher can’t teach about culture because can’t speak Japanese’

‘NS teacher only speaks in English so cannot teach us, just talk’

‘Because my ALT played games with us’

‘Japanese teacher cannot speak English, but NS can’

‘Japanese teacher teaches grammar, NS teaches conversation’

‘NS teacher is for conversation and games like my high school ALT’

Discussion

Findings both quantitatively and qualitatively demonstrate a disturbing degree of confusion among students as to what is expected of them as L2 learners, and convey a pessimistic picture of learner perceptions of what they hope to do and achieve in a tertiary

EFL classroom. A clear pattern emerges in the responses and replies to all 6 items in the instrument. Respondents express a perceived strong connection and correlation between NS teachers and communicative activity and instruction versus Japanese teachers and grammar-based learning. Sustained correspondence of conception, like that identified by Shimizu, between NS teacher/class as fun and enjoyable, whereas Japanese teacher taught classes are characterized as boring and serious, is also highly apparent. The results for Q. 5. clearly demonstrate that students expect 'games' and 'English conversation' conducted 'entirely in English' to be by far the main components of a NS taught EFL class: an accurate reflection of what they have self-confessedly experienced from a high-school ALT i.e. a native speaker of English commonly having no formal teaching qualifications and little or no experience of teaching.

Conclusion

For whatever combination of reasons, a version or a myth of NS teachers and classes and how to participate with and in these is being served up to pre-university Japanese EFL learners. It is a myth of which we, as responsible educators and (if you like) cultural-linguistic-educational models would do well to be aware of and wary of and, certainly, to refrain from perpetuating or adding to in our own actions and approaches. Whether this myth is based upon or, even indirectly, significantly influenced by secondary (or primary) educational classroom experience, by private-sector Eikaiwa 'schooling' experience or promotional publicity, or by the dumbed-down 'edutainment' masquerades as and passes often unquestioned for EFL instruction on national and local Japanese television, we need to remember Horwitz's words: 'If beliefs about language learning are prevalent in the culture at-large, then foreign language teachers must consider that students bring these beliefs with them into the classroom ... preconceived notions about language learning would likely influence a learner's effectiveness in the classroom' (Horwitz, 283).

Research studies on tertiary-level Japanese learners' attitudes to NS EFL teachers and their classes prior to my own study have hitherto concentrated either on ways in which learners assess such teachers and courses after first-hand experience of both, midway through university career and/or in hindsight, or on ways in which learners' with direct experience of tertiary EFL teachers and courses, both NS and non-NS, respectively and comparatively evaluate NS and non-NS teachers and courses. I wished to identify how *preconceptions* of NS tertiary EFL teachers and classes are formed *prior to* learner entry to tertiary education and how these teachers and courses are anticipated and imagined and expected to be by learners with no first-hand experience of either. My own limited study clearly indicates and demands that much more research should be made into this area. Holec has argued that language learners might usefully have to undergo a manner of 'psychological preparation or "deconditioning" to rid themselves of preconceived notions' (quoted in Horwitz, 283) before optimally effective L2 assimilation can begin to occur as they pass from one stage to the next in a graduated step-by-step educational system, such as making the move from secondary to tertiary study. My survey results indicate that this is indeed so but also indeed difficult for Japanese university freshmen. As O'Donnell concluded in his 2003 study: 'As students begin to study English in the university classroom, they may be taught by a foreign instructor for the first time. It is imperative that such instructors know how their students have been taught. Student and teacher expectations must be matched to rely on students' real experiences, rather than on the received understanding of past educational practices' (O'Donnell, 54).

Horowitz (1988) warned that 'if certain beliefs are an impediment to successful language learning ... it is necessary ... to make learners aware of their own preconceived

notions about language learning and their possible consequences' (Horowitz, 292). Without our anticipation, help, understanding, and action, the necessary deconditioning from damaging and unwholesome preconceptions into renewed and appropriate positive attitudes to and conceptions of roles and goals in tertiary-level NS EFL courses, might never take place, and that is, and will be, a tragedy.

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