

Two Problems for SE/HE Research: Contextual Solutions from a Communicative English Program

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Abstract

Within Higher Education circles, student experience research is increasingly seen as a solution to a number of problems. With a number of developed countries currently facing demographic changes, rising education costs, millennial students' approaches to learning, and limited employment prospects for students after graduation, many stakeholders including education ministries, university administrators, and learners themselves want greater openness regarding students' reports of their college experiences. However, the drive to research and publish findings in time to assist incoming freshmen with their decisions each year has led to a situation in which a wide number of terms is being used to discuss student experience (SE), and, when not considered carefully, the different interpretations of these terms can cause misunderstandings between colleagues, students, advising staff, and other participants in the education process.

A second issue is that the measures used to assess the Higher Education (HE) student experience are typically employed at the point of graduation meaning that they lack context in terms of improving specific stages of students' education, and that also little is known about any problems until it is too late to remedy them. Put simply, although they are supposed to, large scale surveys fail to help individual instructors improve their own classes or programs.

The first purpose of this paper is to show how the instructional staff of one program have contextualized common student experience terminology in order to have a shared understanding of SE issues, and the second is to introduce grade-specific measures that capture the most salient aspects of student experience, thus creating the potential for timely and focused program-wide improvements.

Keywords: student satisfaction, student experience, higher education, communicative language teaching

Introduction

The English Communication Course at Kyushu Sangyo University accepts approximately 20 students per year, and runs from the students' 2nd grade until graduation. The course aim is to provide a practical, internationalized education which will effectively meet the needs of the current generation of students both before and after they graduate (Kakimoto, Carter, & Miura, 2013). To reach this aim, the course instructors research their own and the students' performance continually. Our research takes two forms; firstly, a static approach that tries to capture a snapshot of a facet of our work at one point in time, and the other is a dynamic attempt to track affective domains through time, which are more similar to moving pictures. Previous examples of the first situation include proficiency test scores, and female students' involvement in study abroad programs while a forthcoming project of this type is our plan to look at the extent to which the course's existence influenced students in choosing KSU. An example of the more complex form of research that we do is our work on student satisfaction and its drivers (Carter, Kakimoto, & Miura, 2014).

These approaches are highly contextualized to the course, and enable us to identify problems. Once identified, we can aim at solutions. One example of this has been our recent initiative to create a shared understanding of ideal graduate attributes that we think will help our students achieve their post-graduation goals, considering the wide range of goals that our students have. The attributes will be explained at length in a future paper, but for now we can say that we aim to increase the students' capacity for hard work, their skillfulness, and their flexibility through a high quality education.

Domain specific terminology

Success, motivation, satisfaction, and engagement are all key words frequently used to discuss the quality of the education a student receives. While they undoubtedly overlap in some respects, it is also desirable to distinguish them somewhat in order to reduce potential confusion. Some

of this confusion is caused by regional variations, specifically between “engagement” and “satisfaction”. On one hand, *student satisfaction* is the preferred term across Europe for assessing students’ self-reported experiences within their institutions, with specific examples including the Careers after Higher Education: a European Research Study (CHEERS) study in which 12 European nations participated (Paul, Teichler, & Van der Velden, 2000), and the UK’s own National Student Survey, which is conducted every year in order to rank university performance across a number of benchmarks. In the US, however, the term “engagement” is used for the same purpose (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008), mostly through the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Kuh, 2008). As Bryson notes, the size of the NSSE, which is taken by students at over 1500 colleges in the US and Canada, has led to similar terminology being adopted for surveys in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and China (Bryson, 2014). A further problem with the adoption of engagement is that top level researchers in Higher Education use it to mean something quite different from satisfaction (see Kahu, 2013, for a review of the range of definitions in current use).

A second issue in terminology is that of the difference between motivation and satisfaction. Although second language teachers frequently enjoy teaching the more motivated students, the connection between motivation and satisfaction is often weak. In fact, there is often a negative correlation between the two, as highly motivated individuals are prone disappointment with average (or even quite good) results. Indeed, what experienced teachers may know to be an excellent outcome for a given learner can actually seem to be a bitter blow to the student.

Another area in which there is a clash between conceptions is that of what constitutes success. To language learners and teachers, success is often connected to language development, test score improvement, making friends from the target language background, or even simply the ability to enjoy foreign music and movies. However, these rarely lend themselves well to the kind of data that universities around the world use as “success” criteria, such as timely graduation, the percentage of students who found work upon graduation, or students’ post-graduation salaries. When success is defined in

narrow ways such as these, language programs tend to look bad, for example because a student who moves abroad straight after graduating does nothing for the university’s data collection, despite perhaps having achieved a lifelong ambition.

Contextual Solutions

Returning to the differences between these four terms, the English Communication Course has made it a policy to focus on student satisfaction, as we believe this has the longest lasting impact on the students’ lives and the program’s image and popularity. Specifically, the other terms have weaknesses that instructors can do little about; “success” is defined by administrators or bureaucrats, and has little to do with students’ personal goals. Furthermore, each institution has its own mission and target population: an open access university in a rural area is unlikely to have the same conception of student success that a highly selective, research intensive college located in a major city does. “Success” is also tied up with the duration of the students’ stay at the school, as in fact are motivation and engagement. It is difficult to describe oneself as motivated or engaged a number of years after one has graduated. This is not the case for satisfaction. Students can be satisfied both during and after their time in a program and they reflect their satisfaction – or its lack – to friends, family, former teachers and classmates, and can thus enhance or damage a program’s appeal.

It is important, then, for colleagues to share the same idea of what a term means, and, as a collaboratively created and managed program (Kakimoto,

Table 1

Key terms in student experience research

<u>Term</u>	<u>Explanation</u>
Student success	Defined by administration: highly context dependent
Motivation	Relates to students' efforts within the classroom
Engagement	Includes both classroom and other on-campus efforts
Satisfaction	Related to all of the above: continues beyond graduation

Carter, & Miura, 2013), the English Communication Course at Kyushu Sangyo University has tried to achieve this. Table 1 shows our common understanding of what the four terms mean in the context of our course. We believe that such an agreed understanding allows us to better teach and advise our students, as well as work together in a coherent manner.

As can be seen from the table, engagement has a wider meaning than motivation as it can include things like students' club activities. Only satisfaction makes sense as a long-term aim; motivation and engagement may certainly be contributing factors, but it seems to us that there is more to satisfaction than a combination of the other terms.

Student satisfaction in the English Communication Course

This question of what satisfaction is led us to conduct our initial study (Carter, Kakimoto, & Miura, 2014), which suggested that seven factors were important to our students. These seven were course value, teaching quality, participation level, the opportunities available, students' sense of continuity in their studies, and the quality of the relationships formed (p. 61-62). Based on the results of the pilot study we then interviewed six 4th grade students (3 male and 3 female) to understand more about their total student experience (Harvey, 2000), a term which includes not only the students' classes within

Table 2
Instrument for assessment of student satisfaction at three grade levels

	2nd grade	3rd grade	4th grade
1. Gender	1. Gender	1. Gender	1. Gender
<u>2. Satisfaction with program choice</u>	<u>2. Satisfaction with program choice</u>	<u>2. Satisfaction with program choice</u>	<u>2. Satisfaction with program choice</u>
<u>3. Comparison with 1st grade TSE</u>	<u>3. Comparison 2nd grade TSE</u>	<u>3. TSE over three years of program</u>	<u>3. TSE over three years of program</u>
4. Intellectual development this academic year	4. Intellectual development this academic year	4. Satisfaction with post-graduate outcome	4. Satisfaction with post-graduate outcome
5. Quality of course content	5. Quality of course content	5. Specific courses that helped development	5. Specific courses that helped development
<u>6. Quality of grade specific courses</u>	<u>6. Quality of grade specific courses</u>	<u>6. Recommendation/ity of program</u>	<u>6. Recommendation/ity of program</u>
7. Transition to next grade	7. Transition to next grade	7. Licenses and other qualifications achieved	7. Licenses and other qualifications achieved
<u>8. Recommendation/ity of program</u>	<u>8. Recommendation/ity of program</u>	<u>8. Soft skills development over 3 years</u>	<u>8. Soft skills development over 3 years</u>
9. Advice for a new member of the course	9. Advice for a new member of the course	9. Advice for a new member of the course	9. Advice for a new member of the course
10. Improvement suggestions	10. Improvement suggestions	10. Improvement suggestions	10. Improvement suggestions

Note: Underlined items employ 4-point Likert-type scale. Items 2 - 10 allow students to provide as much commentary as they wish.

Bolded items allow for within-cohort comparison of satisfaction over time.

our program, but also their interactions with other parts of the university as well.

The interview data enabled us to create grade-specific surveys for 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grade students, which contrasts with the current paradigm of only asking graduating students about their total student experience, an approach which prevents real improvement and makes helping cohorts with genuine grievances an impossibility (Richardson, 2005). As can be seen, the diachronic nature of the instruments shown in Table 2 means that each academic grade receives items specific to its situation, and it now becomes possible to track qualitatively track program-level satisfaction throughout the duration of the learners' education.

Conclusion

If we want to produce skillful, flexible, and hard-working graduates, the course instructors need tools to work with. These include a shared understanding of what satisfaction is and why it is important, and instruments that help us understand our students' experience throughout the duration of the program. When used together, we can create a satisfying learning environment for our students that helps them reach their post-graduation goals.

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