Students' Voice in English Course Development at the University

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Introduction

*I*n a climate of higher education which is increasingly client-based, student needs and preferences are given more attention, and the sphere of student influence extends from recreational and infrastructural facilities to teaching and learning practices and administration. In teaching and learning, traditionally the repositioning of courses is a top-down directive but bottom-up feedback from lecturers is also instrumental in course development. In the course evaluation, the lecturers may not only take account of the requirements of the discipline and the profession but are compelled to consider student preferences. It is also common practice nowadays to obtain student views through end-of-semester course evaluation. However, there has been concern that course evaluation feedback has not been used:

> "Whereas persons who commission evaluations complain that the messages from the evaluations are not useful, evaluators complain that the messages are not used." (Cronbach et al., 1980: 47)

In client-oriented institutions of higher learning, students' views cannot be ignored but the issue which arises is how seriously should their views be taken.

The Study

This study evaluated the pedagogical soundness of undergraduates' views to determine whether their feedback should to be taken into consideration in the development of course materials. The course selected for the study was a foundation English proficiency course, Preparatory English 1 at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. The course aims to develop oral communication skills for social purposes in the tertiary setting, particularly for undergraduates who are in Malaysian University English Test (MUET) Bands 1 to 3. Social communication skills were taught using the genre-based approach with an emphasis on adequate building of background knowledge on the communicative purpose through listening texts and discussions, and explicit teaching of significant language structures in context before learners are guided to produce language output (Ting et al., 2007).

Feedback from 1,016 out of 1,396 undergraduates enrolled in this course was obtained via an end-of-semester course evaluation form comprising Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. A total of 1,803 descriptive comments were analysed for positive and negative features of the course.

Findings

The undergraduates' views on the usefulness of the course for improving their proficiency in English were from two aspects: positive outcomes and facilitating factors. Note that the numbers reported refer to the frequency of the comments, not the number of undergraduates giving the comment.

Out of 1,803 comments, 1,244 were on positive outcomes of the course (see table 1). Many of the undergraduates reported language gains (n=996), mainly in terms of general improvement in English but there was also mention of specific language skills, of which speaking ranked the highest, consistent with the focus of the course. The undergraduates were also alert to distinguishing traits of the course which are relevance to immediate real life situations for interactions with lecturers and peers (n=95), knowing more about English (n=65), and use of language appropriate to different social contexts (n=55). Looking at this, it is clear that the undergraduates were able to catch on to the main objectives of the course although they did not use the language teaching jargon in their course feedback Besides language improvement, the undergraduates also valued non-language related gains, with increase in self-confidence to speak English (n=121) and broadening of general knowledge (n=94) being on top of the list. The frequent discussions and role-plays in the course provided a conducive English-speaking environment for undergraduates who have the basics in English but lack the opportunity for practice as transactional encounters in the university setting often take place in Bahasa Malaysia. In addition, the undergraduates' report of better general knowledge affirms the benefit of having adequate background building and discussions of cultural appropriateness in the course.

TABLE 1: Undergraduates' views of positive outcomes of the English course

Positive outcomes of course	Frequency	%
Language gains	996	80.06
Increased confidence	121	9.73
Broadened general knowledge	94	7.56
Realised importance of English	21	1.69
Learnt soft skills	8	0.64
Made new friends	4	0.32
Total	**1,244**	**100.00**

On factors that are important to undergraduates for an English course to be effective, table 2 shows that having a 'nice', capable and helpful lecturer is much more

important to undergraduates than expected (n=90). The ability to make the English class 'not boring' was highly valued. This finding is similar to Mahadhir, Ting and Carol's (2006) study on a similar group of undergraduates where instructors' personality was found to be valued more than professional expertise. Comprehensibility of lessons (n=20) and good course materials (n=14) pale in comparison to the instructor factor in the classroom as far as the undergraduates were concerned.

Table 2: Undergraduates' views of factors that facilitated their language learning in the English course

Factors that facilitate language learning	Frequency	%
Nice, capable, helpful lecturer	90	65.69
Comprehensible lesson	20	14.60
Good course materials	14	10.22
Opportunity to talk	9	6.57
Helpful friends	4	2.92
Total	137	100.00

Practical Concerns Compromising Course Effectiveness

There were altogether 422 suggestions for improvement. 192 were on variety in teaching activities and materials, 148 on policy matters, 76 on logistics and six on instructor characteristics.

It makes good teaching sense to have variety in language learning activities and materials, as the undergraduates have rightly pointed out although their wish to have outdoor activities, movies and games was more difficult to accommodate. The learning units were cast in a similar mould based on the steps in the genre-based approach teaching-learning cycle from field-building and modelling to joint and independent construction. Much depends on the versatility of instructors to adapt the materials to suit learners' needs and interests, but it is not easy to strike a balance between preference for fun (n=114) and drills (n=78). The traditional examination-oriented practice is a comfort zone that many English teachers have difficulty moving out of too, particularly where the teaching of grammar is concerned (Asraf, 1996; Chung, 2006; Farrell and Lim, 2005; Pillay and North, 1997; Ting, 2007).

The results also revealed that the difficulty level of the course may have been pitched too low, particularly for those with MUET Band 3 (n=40) although there was a small number (n=7) reporting that the course was too difficult and 20 commenting that the course was just right. Getting the difficulty level of the materials right for a mixed-ability class of undergraduates with Bands 1 to 3 is a Herculean task, and again we fall back on the instructor to make the on-the-spot adaptations in class for undergraduates to feel that their time in the English course has been worth it.

In the same way, some policy matters may not be as easily addressed. The zero credit for a four-hour per week course was not well-received by the undergraduates, and has caused them to place a low value on the course. In addition, practical problems linked to clashes of English classes with core courses, course registration procedures and teaching facilities often minimised by faculty were found to be exceedingly important in contributing to a positive language learning experience for the undergraduates.

Conclusions

The study aimed to find out whether students' feedback should be considered in the development of English courses at university. The findings show that while undergraduates were perceptive of the language and non-language benefits of the course, only their suggestions for increased variety in teaching activities and materials should be considered, not those on the focus of the course as they are not experts in the field of language teaching. However, their feedback on practical problems in the administration of the course should be noted to create a positive environment for language learning.

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