

Using Course-Specific Questionnaires to Determine How to Improve Students' Experiences in EFL Classes

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Abstract

Data were collected via course-specific questionnaires from 294 Japanese first grade university students to determine how best to improve their learning experience in English communication classes. Among the types of questions asked were whether students enjoyed their classes and enjoyed communicating in English, whether they thought that English was important for their future, whether they were motivated and if their attitude toward English had improved during the course, as well as questions relating to the various class components. Though the students tended to need a lot of prompting to speak English during their lessons, they reported that English communication was both enjoyable and important for their future, and that the classes and content provided a positive learning experience. Other questions included what was best about lessons and how students thought their class experience could be improved. The data suggested that there was little in the way of negative experiences, though that may not be what is reflected in terms of actual student engagement in class. This raises further questions about how to narrow the gap between teacher perception of the success of a course and actual student experience. To investigate this in more detail, this paper discusses the implications of collecting this kind of data to better understand what can be done to achieve better results in class, and to determine what students might actually need to improve their English skills.

Keywords : Course-Specific Questionnaires, Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Needs Analysis

1. Introduction

Students benefit from content and teaching approaches that cater toward their learning needs. Knowing what works best in the learning environment is crucial and especially so in contexts where students are required to interact with one another in a foreign language. It is common for general surveys to be distributed at tertiary level in Japan to collect information on attendance rate, the amount of time spent on homework, the clarity and accessibility of course and grading information, and appropriateness of

teaching approach and materials. Knowing whether a course and its components are functioning efficiently and effectively is important as it can better inform teachers how to provide support for students and can contribute to improving teaching practices overall. However, what is sometimes overlooked in general surveys is what students experience on a specific and individual level, such as how they reacted to tasks, how they related to other class members, how much they were able to express themselves, and their particular style of learning. This information can be invaluable to teachers, allowing them to gain insights into underlying

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processes of a class and its participants, and can help narrow the gap between what is perceived as successful learning outcomes and tangible improvements.

It is common practice for data collected via institution-wide questionnaires to be processed by administrative staff, after which it is passed on to teachers for review and self-assessment. Unfortunately, student feedback tends to be overly general and often does not provide information on specific classroom experiences that can inform individual teachers how to best achieve successful learning outcomes. Though communicative language teaching is an important subject being taught nationwide in Japan and is gaining more support from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), eager to prepare students for a globalized society, general questionnaires distributed in universities may be overly focused on the specific majors of that particular university and therefore do not provide enough precise details to improve practices unrelated to that major. With a view to making improvements at an individual course level, this paper discusses how a course-specific questionnaire provided clearer details about the experiences that were being had in English communication classes by Japanese university students, paving the way for a better understanding of what was happening at classroom level and providing valuable feedback on what students might need to help improve their English education.

2. Review of Literature

It is commonly accepted that students vary considerably in learning styles and needs when studying English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL), so conducting any form of needs

analysis (NA) about their experiences and preferences can be beneficial. Richards and Schmidt (2010) define NA as “the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities” and that “a needs assessment makes use of both subjective and objective information (e.g., data from questionnaires, tests, interviews, observation) (p. 389).” Brown (2016) concurs, adding an NA is “the systematic collection and analysis of all information necessary for defining and validating a defensible curriculum (p.4).” There is a long history of conducting NA in foreign-language teaching and West (1994) highlights several of these from the mid-70s to the late 90s. Though, as Long (2005) points out, this area of research is still limited in scope as it does not provide a great amount of generalizable detail to draw inferences from and even less that specifically refers to research in foreign language learning (p.20-21). Davies (2006) discusses how gathering information from class participants can inform teachers how to approach teaching in a more productive and successful way, stating that “logic suggests that we first of all need to discover far more about our learners than we might assume we already know (p.4).” As is often the case, however, teachers tend to rely on intuition rather than evidence gathered from their students when it comes to decisions that get made on a curriculum design and class-based level (Tarone & Yule, 1989). Even though a teacher may have years of experience, this may not be much help if they do not understand the subtle or overt mechanisms that exist in the day-to-day workings of their classes, meaning that the use of course-specific questionnaires may help reduce the gap between teachers’ pedagogic intentions and learner expectations (Kumaravadivelu, 1991, p.99).

The collection of data from students in EFL contexts is wide-ranging and has been used to inform education professionals in many areas of research, from student motivational factors (Thompson & Lee, 2016) and self-regulation (Salehi & Jafari, 2015), to the analysis of the production of speech acts (Sasaki, 1998). Referring to the long-standing tradition of collecting classroom-level information, and it being common educational practice and core at tertiary level, Davies asserts, “the use of class-specific questionnaires is central to the course planning goal because they facilitate local plans for action and intervention that more globally oriented institution-wide surveys often do not make possible (p.3).” Though global questionnaires do provide some general information that can be useful to the administrative department at an institution, course-specific questionnaires are more likely to provide a teacher with a comprehensive and detailed description of students needs from which they can utilize and act upon to provide a better learning experience overall, as well as for individuals. Importantly, beyond simply collecting data from students, how a teacher interprets what is happening in their class based on that data is essential, and course-specific questionnaires offer a greater chance to tap into what is happening on a day-to-day basis, providing teachers an opportunity to know the essence of a course (Davies, 2006, p.4).

One of the main reasons for utilizing course-specific questionnaires is that doing so can initialize a long-term strategy of planning and fine tuning a course to maximize the benefits for students. Once we have established what works in terms of content over a period of time, we can make better decisions regarding our choice of materials so that they capture the interest of students and keep them engaged and motivated.

In the ever-changing landscape of culture and media, it is important to provide lesson content that stimulates student interest so that they engage in learning the foreign language emotionally and intellectually, as well as socially and physically (Vincent, 1984, p.40). To achieve this, it is ideal that we involve the students in the process of gathering materials and tasks most suited for their needs and interests, whether it be through trial and error or by simply gathering information from them and acting on it ourselves. By conducting course-specific questionnaires, we can elicit how students perceive and consume the content we provide, which later can inform us on which materials we choose or generate individually (Spratt, 1999).

The benefits of distributing course-specific questionnaires are numerous and can lead to specific and significant changes in courses, materials, syllabi, and teaching approach. Collecting feedback shows that you value student participation and contribution, and these valuable interactions with and responses from students provide an abundance of information that can benefit a teacher at a local level. The advantage of this, of course, is that teachers can fine tune content in order to facilitate positive learning outcomes. This, combined with an effective teaching approach, can go some way to maximizing learning opportunities, which is especially important in an environment where there is the potential for low engagement, a lack of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and often a negative attitude toward English brought about by previous learning experiences.

3. Method

Questionnaires were distributed via Google Docs at the end of a 14-week semester to 294 Japanese university students taking colloquial English

classes. Several questions were framed to examine the experiences of students, the classes of which were being taught by several teachers using *Interchange Fifth Edition Student Book 1* (Richards, Hull, & Proctor, 2017). Likert scales with a range of seven to one, with seven being the highest and one the lowest (Appendix 1), and yes/no questions (Appendix 2) were used to collect feedback in the first part of the questionnaire, and the remaining part contained questions with open answers, allowing students to give general feedback and suggestions (Appendix 3). All questions were translated into Japanese in order to avoid any confusion of meaning. Responses were collected anonymously. The results of the Likert scale can be divided into five categories (each roughly covering four questions): experiences in general, experiences with communication, changes in attitude and motivation, how non-communicative tasks were rated, and the teaching tools used.

4. Results

In general, it is suggested from the results that the students enjoyed the English course, with 84% responding positively (between five and seven on the Likert scale (from mild to strong agreement)), and that they felt that they had had a positive learning experience (70%). Students reported that the teachers' explanations were good (90%), and that the online homework helped them prepare for class (79%).

In terms of communication, students reported that they liked communicating in English during lessons (70%), they felt they had enough time to talk (91%) and rated the communication and speaking test practice activities highly: 70% and 79%, respectively. In terms of how attitudes and motivation toward English were at the end of the course, 70% of the students reported that their

attitude had improved and 73% reported that their motivation had improved. Non-communicative tasks also scored highly on the Likert scale, with Grammar Tasks (70%) and Vocabulary Tasks (68%) eliciting positive responses. Test-related activities (categorized as non-communicative tasks) also scored well, with Speaking Test, Grammar Test, and preparation for the TOEIC scoring 75%, 69%, and 64%, respectively. Tools used for and in class such as the textbook and the utilization of technology also received positive feedback, with the textbook scoring 64%, the online workbook component relating to the textbook scoring 73%, and technology scoring a high 80%. The orientation at the start of the semester was also a noted success, scoring a high 75% on the scale.

The yes/no section also yielded some positive results. Based on the five questions, the majority of the responses were positive. The first, relating to the structure of the lessons scored an impressive 91% of "yes" responses. The atmosphere of classes was also notably positive, with 92% saying they enjoyed the atmosphere. Crucially, for communication-based classes, students responded that they enjoyed speaking in English with partners (93%) and reported positively about speaking test practice (88%), the part of the class dedicated fully to active communication. Finally, the students reported that they believed that English was important for their future (91% "yes" versus 9% "don't know"), and that they would continue to study English after the course was complete (78%), with 19% answering that they did not know.

The section left open for students to give feedback in general also yielded some interesting results (Appendix 3). For the question, "What would you like to do more of in class?" (Q26) the most frequent responses were that students wanted to

have more opportunities to converse in English, wanted to be involved in more group and pair work, and wanted to learn more colloquial terms for everyday conversation (N=81 out of 202 responses). Students also pointed out that they wanted more time talking with the teacher one-on-one. In terms of test-related content, students indicated that they wanted to take more practical lessons for TOEIC, wanted more preparation for speaking tests, and wanted to get feedback about how to get better scores on tests in general (N=16). Students also voiced their concerns about accuracy, with several suggesting more focus on grammar and pronunciation (N=22). There was also an interest in increasing vocabulary size (N=6) and improving listening skills (N=12). With technology readily available in class, students said that they wanted to spend more time watching videos and playing games (N=11), which are both becoming more and more recognized as effective language-learning tools. Within the miscellaneous category, some students said that they wanted to learn English in Japanese and wanted more active learning.

For the question, “How can the teacher make the lessons more enjoyable for you?” (Q27) students again responded that they wanted more time talking both with each other and individually with the teacher (N=48 out of 173 responses). In more specific terms, students wanted to speak everyday English and have more time talking with friends, and with the teacher they wanted to hear more anecdotes, including what the teacher had done recently and their life experiences in general. Responses to this question produced more general information than the others, ranging from having more simplified explanations to guaranteeing course credit. In this section, there was also an emphasis on how the teachers project themselves, with several students wanting the teacher to be more friendly

and to laugh or smile more often, and to tell interesting jokes or stories (N=17), highlighting expectations students might have, especially generated through the Japanese media, when being taught by non-Japanese teachers: there is a certain desire for “fun” in EFL/ESL. Students also said that they wanted the teacher to speak more slowly, occasionally use Japanese, give more attention to individuals, and simplify explanations. Though there were some minor criticisms where students wanted to change class or felt that they were under too much pressure when talking in groups of three, most students reported that no change was needed (N=31), with many in fact stating how much they enjoyed the lesson experience. Similar to Q26, students also reported here that they wanted more time playing games and utilizing technology (N=18), they wanted more focus on grammar, and wanted more time to prepare for oral tests.

For the question, “How can the teacher help you speak more English?” (Q28) there was a significant emphasis on teacher explanations and output (N=54 out of 165 responses). Students wanted the teacher to speak more slowly, explain nuance in more detail, give contextual and specific examples of English used in daily conversations, and focus on error correction, which would include explanations in Japanese and conducting drills. In terms of teacher output, students wanted more interesting and clear examples of language delivered slowly so they are easy to understand. Again, some students also reported that they wanted more one-on-one consultation with the teacher (N=8). In terms of student interaction, there were a variety of responses, but the most frequent were that the students wanted the teacher to increase opportunities for students to actively engage in conversation, wanted to speak to more people in class, and wanted more pair and group activities.

Similar to the suggestions mentioned above, students also wanted to be taught new or frequently used words, wanted to learn native-speaker phrases and easy-to-use sentences, expressions, and vocabulary, as well as pronunciation (N=16). Some students indicated they wanted more study time, including homework and number of lessons, and wanted to have more focus on speaking test practice. Several students also stated that no change was necessary (N=16).

For the question, “What was the best thing about the course?” (Q29) students were most positive about easy explanations from the teacher, and the class being easy in general. Students also enjoyed working and communicating with friends, allowing them ample time to improve their communication skills. Students pointed out that they enjoyed that others around them were at the same level, enabling them to have basic conversations in a comfortable environment. Students also responded that the atmosphere of the class was pleasant and fun (N=33 out of 199 responses).

For the question, “What was the worst thing about the course?” (Q30) the main problem for the students was their inability to understand instructions in English (N=16 out of 144 responses). There were also some concerns about other students’ concentration, suggesting that motivation and engagement level can be affected by others in the classroom environment. Some students reported that the topic was not interesting at times, sometimes lessons were a little too easy, and the textbook was boring. In general, students reported that they spoke to the same people too much of the time, some of the language used was a little too repetitive, there was too much reversion to Japanese by students during speaking tasks, and that there was too

much emphasis on speaking test practice sessions. Despite these grievances, the majority of students reported that there was nothing negative to report about classes (N=90).

Finally, for “any other comments”, there were a variety of answers, but most students used this space to say thank you or that they will do their best to continue to study English. There were a couple of small issues relating to the motivation of others, similar to comments made above, and that the students wanted more Japanese used for explanations. However, the majority of positive feedback in this section centered around the ideas that motivation had increased in general, the classes were interesting and had been enjoyed, students were getting used to speaking in English, and they would do so more in the future.

5. Discussion

The results of the study were overwhelmingly positive, and it was encouraging to see the students expressing a desire to improve their English through more active speaking activities. For the three authors of this paper, the results were also somewhat surprising. The reason for this is that the students at this particular university are not usually very outgoing and expressive in the classroom. Most of the students are science and mathematics majors who come from high schools that put a heavy emphasis on these subjects and not so much on English communication. Nearly all the students surveyed were first year students. Therefore, the English classes they attended are very likely the first time they have interacted with a Foreign English Teacher (FET) as opposed to a Japanese Teacher of English (JTE). The high percentage of students who expressed satisfaction with the speaking activities probably were experiencing this for the

first time in a formal classroom setting. So, while the results of the survey are largely positive in regard to conversation activities, they must be assessed in the context that these students simply have not had much experience with interactive English classes focused on verbal communication as opposed to classes taught by JTEs that focus on test taking strategies and written grammar rules and vocabulary.

The authors of this paper have taught at other universities where the average student's speaking level is more advanced than the university surveyed in this study. Our assessment of the students at the university surveyed in this study is that they are well behaved, quick to follow instructions, and also generally very hesitant to ask questions or speak out in class. In fact, getting the students to ask questions in a group situation is very difficult. Most of the students are reluctant to speak in front of their peers in English and often have to be prompted by the teacher to answer questions during lectures and discussions. To facilitate more effective communication, students are put into pairs or groups of three to give them chances to speak and interact with each other in a more comfortable learning situation. This leads to good results as seen in the survey. However, most of the students still remain fairly reticent and shy in these conversational activities. In addition, all three FETs participating in this project have noticed that during the English discussion activities, nearly all the students revert to Japanese for the majority of the time allocated. This is not rare by any means in the English teaching profession in Japan, but it does stand in contrast to the students request for more English-speaking activities and more one-on-one time with the FET.

Considering the above analysis, one might ask

what the reason is for this gap in the students' self-assessment of their performance in the classroom and the FET's observance of their relatively limited ability to express themselves in English up to a level that would allow them to communicate effectively in English. There is a high chance that the students wanted to give their FET's a positive assessment of their experience in their classroom to be respectful to the FET, but also because of their relative lack of learning English in the interactive setting provided by the FETs at this institution. The second factor is most likely the lack of chances and/or opportunities to speak English in real world situations, such as on a homestay or even just travel in a foreign country. As stated earlier, these classes are often the first chance for the students to be using English actively in speaking exercises and other activities. So as much as the FETs appreciate the positive results of the survey, the fact is they know that most of the students in their classes would struggle with simple interaction with native or near native speakers of English if and when they find themselves with a chance to have to perform basic tasks like checking in to a hotel or asking for directions in a foreign country.

Therefore, how can this self-perception in English performance by the students be compared to a global standard needed for effective communication in international situations where the English level is much higher than the average level in Japan and certainly at the university surveyed in this study? The simple answer would be more exposure to international situations that require a global standard of English. However, this raises another issue of how to expose the average student in Japan to more authentic language experiences when, in general, they tend not to seek out chances to communicate in English and also seldom leave

the comfort of their own country for study abroad opportunities. Recently, there have been numerous videos posted on sites like YouTube that highlight this gap in English speaking ability in Japan and what is really necessary to be effective when speaking English in an international situation. One advantage of these videos is that they are produced by Japanese who have first-hand experience of these situations and are making the video to help their fellow Japanese to prepare for the reality of using English in foreign countries. As mentioned in the results above, there was a desire for more video resources to be integrated into lessons. If, for example, students were introduced to this kind of media, where they can see near peer role-models using English effectively, it might have an impact overall, and especially on those who lack confidence and self-efficacy, increasing levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, as well as having an effect on individual perceptions of English in general. This is one small example of the type of media that could be incorporated into classes on a regular basis to demonstrate how learning goals can be achieved and that a good level of English fluency is not out of reach. With further encouragement like this, building confidence and showing examples of language learning successes, it may be possible to encourage Japanese students to break the mould that is often holding them back in the classroom and beyond, leading them to venture out into the global society that inevitably awaits them.

6. Conclusion

In summary, understanding the individual needs of students is an important consideration to better develop an effective learning environment in which to study a foreign language. Introducing course-specific questionnaires (as opposed to general, institution-wide questionnaires that are

more commonly used) allows students to voice their opinions on more specific aspects of their learning experiences and enables teachers to gain a clearer insight about those experiences being had in English communication classes.

It is important to note that the data gathered for this paper is somewhat limited, as questionnaires were only distributed to first-year students, with the majority being male, science and mathematics majors, at one institution. However, the results suggest that the majority of students found their English language classes to be a positive experience, and in particular, classroom interaction was rated as a highly enjoyable aspect of lessons. As noted above, however, this has not always been reflected in the actual experience of teachers observing student participation in class and is somewhat contradictory to the requests for more English-speaking activities and more one-on-one time with the FET. This raises questions as to how to rectify the problem of perceived satisfaction of students compared to what is actually going on in class. If this gap is reduced through more examination of individual classes and the participants within them, it might help the teachers in this study, as well as the wider teaching community in similar situations in Japanese universities, to apply more effective communicative language activities and suitable content in general based on students' needs and may help to harness some of that positive energy and engagement into successful learning outcomes.

7. Appendix 1 – Likert Scale Questions

Questions 1-19	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
1. Did you enjoy the first semester?	36%	25%	23%	10%	4%	1%	1%
2. How much did you learn?	15%	18%	37%	21%	6%	2%	1%
3. Has your attitude toward English improved?	20%	23%	27%	22%	5%	2%	1%
4. Has your motivation to speak English improved?	23%	19%	32%	17%	7%	1%	1%
5. Do you like communicating in English in class?	23%	27%	23%	16%	9%	3%	1%
6. Did you have enough time to talk in class?	43%	29%	19%	7%	1%	0%	1%
7. Did the homework help you prepare for class?	33%	23%	21%	13%	7%	1%	2%
8. Rate the following: Grammar Tasks	17%	21%	32%	21%	7%	1%	1%
9. Rate the following: Vocabulary Tasks	15%	20%	33%	24%	5%	1%	2%
10. Rate the following: Online Workbook	23%	24%	25%	19%	6%	1%	2%
11. Rate the following: Communication Tasks	17%	22%	31%	22%	6%	1%	1%
12. Rate the following: Speaking Test Practice	28%	23%	28%	11%	6%	2%	2%
13. Rate the following: Speaking Test	24%	25%	26%	16%	5%	2%	2%
14. Rate the following: Grammar Test	21%	21%	28%	18%	7%	3%	2%
15. Rate the following: TOEIC Practice	17%	17%	30%	21%	9%	4%	2%
16. Rate the following: Orientation	22%	27%	26%	20%	4%	1%	0%
17. Rate the following: Teacher's Explanations	43%	27%	20%	6%	3%	1%	0%
18. Rate the following: Technology in Class	22%	31%	27%	17%	3%	0%	0%
19. Rate the following: Interchange Textbook	18%	22%	24%	29%	6%	0%	1%

8. Appendix 2 – Yes/No Questions

Questions 20-25	Y	N	DK
20. Did you enjoy the structure of the lessons?	91%	4%	5%
21. Did you enjoy the atmosphere of the lessons?	92%	4%	4%
22. Did you enjoy speaking English with your partner?	93%	3%	4%
23. Did you enjoy speaking test practice?	88%	7%	5%
24. Do you believe English is important for your future?	91%	0%	9%
25. Will you continue studying English after the course?	76%	5%	19%

9. Appendix 3 – Open Answer Questions

Questions 26-30
26. What would you like to do more of in class?
27. How can the teacher make the lessons more enjoyable for you?
28. How can the teacher help you speak more English?
29. What was the best thing about the course?
30. What was the worst thing about the course?

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