Evaluating Evaluations: Analyzing Students’ Responses to Teacher-Distributed Course Feedback Surveys

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Abstract

Can ongoing student feedback in a non-credit community college classroom provide valuable information that can formatively develop a course to help give students what they want? This poster will delve into research that analyzes this question, while looking at the benefits, complications, applications, and further inquiry of course evaluations.
Background: Motivation for this project

• Not understanding the noncredit ESL teaching context as a new teacher in FA16 → flustered and feeling too scared to check in with Ss
  – One day, they begged me for grammar
  – Led to grammar overload

• Feeling that Ss were asking for things that I was covering
  – Noticed myself doing that as a student

• Wanting to help Ss by doing what they identified as helpful: if Ss don’t think class is helpful, they won’t come
Ss helping shape the course through course evals

- Builds critical thinking, engagement with learning process
- Increases buy-in, motivation
- Fosters a dialogue between T and Ss to co-create course content
- Helps avoid teaching methodologies and lessons being improperly imposed on learners

Norton, Machon, & Ariely, 2012; Klenowski, 2009
Research Project

• Research Question(s): What trends emerge from evaluations that students submit?
  – What are students asking for from their ESL classes and instructors?
  – Do student requests change over time?
  – What implications and lessons can be gleaned from this research that can be applicable outside the immediate context?
Context: Program
Noncredit ESL

- Offered through a Community College in San Francisco at 7 of their campuses, plus other off-site locations
- Credit and other noncredit courses offered at campus and throughout institution
- Campus in study: location in a neighborhood with historically predominately Hispanic/Latinx populations, but currently one of the most gentrified neighborhoods in San Francisco
- Open/rolling enrollment, free of cost, no grades: rotating group of students, sporadic attendance
- Attendance is taken each night
- Mission from website: “The noncredit ESL program is tuition free and dedicated to the teaching of non-native speakers of English to enable them to have the language skills necessary to achieve a variety of social, academic, and vocational goals.”
Context: Course and Students

Course
• Co-taught class (each instructor 2 nights/week)
• M-Th, 7pm-9:05pm
• Textbook, with regular supplements: Passages 2
• “Level 8/9”: highest-level noncredit course offered at institution. Generally students finish with Level 8 and then move on to credit classes
• Attendance taken each night
• Instructors choose curriculum, text; must meet institution leaning outcomes

Students
• Varied language, education, and professional backgrounds
• High Intermediate/Advanced non-credit ESL students
• 60+ students enrolled, ~15-20 students each night
Collecting Data

Data Collection Instruments
- Early in semester (Wk 2, Th): Ss complete student info survey (n=22)
- Wk 4, Wed: Ss complete 1st evaluation (n=14)
- Wk 8, Th: Ss complete 2nd evaluation (n=15)
- All distributed at the end of class
- Explain rationale: “We want to make the class as useful as possible for you”

Student Info Sheets
- Open response: demographics
- Closed response: how Ss want to learn
  - Avoid vague answers
  - Help Ss understand all the possibilities

Evaluations
- Ss list optional name, date
- 3 parts
  1. Level of difficulty: basic introduction to task, easy snapshot
  2. “1 thing I learned this week”: help S think about previous week’s lessons, avoid suggesting things that were covered
  3. Suggestions: T can learn how to change class to meet S needs
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
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<td>Week 2</td>
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<td>Student Info Sheet</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 8</td>
<td>No Class</td>
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<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; Evaluation</td>
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</table>
Analysis Process

• Tallying closed responses to student info sheets
• Coding and tallying open responses to student info sheet and evaluations
  – Evaluation responses: writing Ss’ words by question type, allowing categories to emerge
• Comparing trends: 1st evaluation vs. 2nd evaluation
• Coding and tallying classroom activities by week
Student Information survey: Open responses
Student Information survey: Closed Responses

What is your goal with this class?

- Take credit classes at CCSF 9
- Transfer to a university 3
- Use English at my job 16
- Get a better job 11
- Get hours for my Visa 0
- Speak with friends/family 7
- Understand English media 10
- Improve my TOEFL score 8
- For fun 3
- To meet people 3
- for volunteer jobs* 1

What do you want to study?

- Reading 8
- Writing 11
- Listening 10
- Speaking 17
- Grammar 13
- Pronunciation 18
- Vocabulary 13
- Academic English 4
- Workplace English 3
- Informal English, Slang 5
How do you want to learn English?

Textbook 9
TV shows and movies 10
Music 10
Translation from my native language 4
Academic Writing (essays) 6
Creative Writing (stories, poetry) 2
Newspaper articles 10
Books 9
Short Stories 7
Informal Conversations 10
Organized Debates 8
Tests 2
Field trips 4
Teacher Lectures 4
Work with groups 11
Work with a partner 3
Work by myself 3
No selection: group, pair, self work 10
Use the computer lab 4
Give presentations 6
Role plays 3
Dictations* 1
What are some topics you like to use to help you learn English?

<table>
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<th>Topic</th>
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<td>International politics and news</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
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<td>Pop Culture</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>The Environment</td>
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<td>Everyday skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Business*</td>
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<td>Childcare*</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Activities done in class
**Student Evaluation Responses:**

1 thing I learned this week

→ In this graph, an analysis of the responses to “things I learned this week” were matched to the prior activities and when those activities occurred.
Student Evaluation Responses: Suggestions for future classes

First Survey (n=14)
Second Survey (n=15)
Analysis

• First impressions=inaccurate
  – Responses that jumped out at first reading didn’t match numbers

• Difficult to accommodate student goals
  – Highest reported goal: English at work, English to get a better job
  – Occupation: most diverse demographic
    • Au pair (most represented occupation): non-traditional noncredit ESL student
  – Also: students least interested in workplace English

• Clashing opinions
  – Ex: speaking in groups vs. less speaking in groups
  – Wide variety of suggestions
    • Though maybe good, since we do a lot of activity types in class
Analysis

• Students became more of a community
  – More compliments
  – Students suggested wanting more group work
• Students got “better” at surveys
  – More specific, fewer general things learned
  – Fewer “no response”
  – First survey: listed things that couldn’t change as suggestions (only 1 instructor, less variance in student levels), but not on second survey
    • Or, possible complacency? Or Ts/Ss meshing together better?: More Ss listed they wanted the course to stay the same
• Students like speaking
  – Most prominent activity, remains suggested activity
Limitations

• Sporadic attendance → sporadic data
  – Thai, Vietnamese, Chinese, European, etc. students also attend class, but not reflected in student info survey
  – Students who filled out info sheets, 1\textsuperscript{st} survey and 2\textsuperscript{nd} survey are all different students

• Possible overwhelm, lack of understanding about how to complete tasks

• Ss maybe uninterested in task, their responses maybe provide uninformative/distracting responses that skew data
• Reporting classroom activities: source was worksheets & textbook pages, which don’t reflect the richness of how the activity happens in the classroom
  – how the instructor steps something out and adds unlisted components
    • ex: pronunciation during vocabulary activity
  – how the students might carry out the activity in small groups, pairs, or individually
• Follow-up for clarification, addressing specific concerns eval responses often not possible
  – “it’s okay”=what does that mean?
• Difficulty of application to other contexts
  – With such flexibility, very important for me to fit course to Ss’ needs/suggestions
  – Without the luxury of such flexibility in other contexts, is getting such information really so helpful?
Next Steps

• Electronic format on phones
  – Possible issue for Ss with limited plans, no smartphone

• Closed response evaluations

• Make optional

• Next evaluation:
  – Give guidelines for “good” responses and “bad” responses
  – Review week’s lessons beforehand
Use this in your classroom!

Prep

• Use this form
• Design your own evaluation
• Less flexibility in your curriculum?
  – Customize your evaluation form accordingly
    • Ex: you could complete a task by watching a video or conducting an interview, ask Ss about their preferences
  – Be prepared for requests you can’t accommodate, complaints you can’t do anything about
• Explore electronic formats (Kahoot, Verso, Socrative, Poll Everywhere, etc)
Use this in your classroom!

In the classroom

• Thoughtfully Introduce the task
  - Let Ss know that grammar & spelling aren’t important
    • Unless you want to use it as a way to collect info about their writing, grammar, spelling, etc level
  - Explain rationale
    • “I want to make this class useful for you”
    • “I want you to think about your learning”
  - Review the week’s activities beforehand (if relevant)
    • Even if your evaluation form does not request information about what Ss learned in prior classes, helps Ss add to or comment on existing activities, instead of suggesting things already in place in curriculum
– Elicit qualities of helpful/good responses vs. unhelpful/”bad” responses. Or, give examples of good and bad responses to open-response questions

  • Unhelpful:
    – vague, unlikely to change, irrelevant to course goals
    – “I didn’t like class”, “it’s good”, “I want more activities to help me improve my English”, “I don’t like working with Steve”, “Please help me get into university”

  • Helpful:
    – specific, feasible
    – “Please speak more slowly”, “more grammar exercises after the grammar lesson”, “I want feedback on my pronunciation”

– One possibility: give sentence starters

  • Avoid evaluation fatigue: don’t distribute too often
  • Make name optional
Use this in your classroom!

• Take brief moments to check trends in Ss’ answers
• Remember: you can’t please everyone
  – Try to pre-empt this with bad or unhelpful evaluation response examples
  – Or, appreciate the insight; offer explanations as needed. Ss might not understand course limitations
  – One possibility: turn unattainable Ss’ suggestions into lessons
• Use it as a formative process: if unhelpful, what changes can be made to the evaluation to get helpful responses?
  – Variety of evaluation forms → Decreased likelihood of evaluation fatigue