

A CASE STUDY OF STUDENT SATISFACTION

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Abstract

Satisfaction in higher education is a known predictor of outcomes such as retention, timely graduation, emotional wellbeing, and post-graduation success. Despite its importance, student satisfaction has rarely been qualitatively studied at the university level. As such, students' conceptions of satisfaction and its drivers are poorly understood by faculty and institutions alike, especially with regard to development over time and gender. A further complication is that common methods of investigating student satisfaction are difficult to apply to language programs. Focusing on aspects that teachers can influence, this study used three separate methods of accessing EFL students' conceptions of satisfaction, with the long-term aim of producing instruments appropriate to language classes and students' grade level. The methods employed were a written response to prompts on satisfaction, semi-structured interviews, and a survey created with student assistance. Seven specific themes arising from the data are: teaching quality, student participation, program value, quality of relationships, richness of program content, a program-wide sense of continuity, and the opportunities the program offers. Furthermore, results include that - for these participants - satisfaction is more complex than any single L1 model suggests, is process-like, and can be better understood through shorter, more engaging surveys than those administered institutionally.

1 Introduction

University education is rarely out of the news: across the globe stories ranging from affordability, utility, and even the viability of the university system are reported on a daily basis. Prospective students and their parents must contend with a range of issues largely beyond their control, and no part of the world is exempt from this phenomenon. In the United Kingdom, for example, tuition rates have effectively tripled in the six years between 2004 and 2010. Meanwhile, in the United States only 50% of graduates find work that actually requires a degree (Van Horn, 2013). At the same time, it has been reported that of the approximately 600 private universities in Japan, up to 40% may have to voluntarily close, merge, or declare bankruptcy by 2019 (Goodman, 2009). Irrespective of location, such high stakes mean that universities cannot afford to be complacent with what they offer to their students. Whether the question is what you will get for your money, how well the career you embark on matches your qualifications, or simply does your alma mater have the resources to survive, educational satisfaction has never mattered more.

In theory, understanding and measuring students' satisfaction should be relatively straightforward, but in fact it is a complex issue, and one that is getting harder over time for both demographic and technological reasons (Couper, 2013). Intuitively, satisfaction and motivation would seem to

be similar constructs. In fact, however, teachers' daily experience suggests this is not true. Highly motivated students are actually more difficult to satisfy due to their expectations being more challenging to meet. Millennial students are widely reported as being harder to teach than previous generations, which only adds to the difficulty in understanding how they view satisfaction (Twenge, 2009). Furthermore, student perceptions of satisfaction change over time, in particular after they have graduated and moved on to the next stage of their lives. Studies in several countries and in numerous industries have found that that recent graduates' strongest regret about their university education is that they did not acquire sufficient soft skills to complement their more technical abilities (Andrews & Higson, 2008). While they may have been satisfied at the time with how well they were learning, once engaged in professional activities they find sources of dissatisfaction they had previously not considered. Post-graduation studies of satisfaction may be some of the most illuminating on the topic, but due to the fact that these take place a number of years after the participants first entered the university system, they are not reliable guides to – for example – the typical freshman conception of satisfaction.

Studies from around the world indicate that satisfied students will lead more productive lives while still at the undergraduate level (Cotton, Dollard, & de Jonge, 2002). Other studies have suggested that students who are satisfied with their undergraduate education are more successful in graduate school than their less satisfied peers (Ostergaard & Kristensen, 2005). Additionally, large-scale European studies show that satisfied students are better able to enter and compete in the global workplace (Vaastra & De Vries, 2007). As such, then, satisfaction matters both before and after graduation, affects current and future quality of life, and has an impact at the national level.

2 Defining student satisfaction

As no common definition of student satisfaction exists, and as models are derived from the business world (Elliott & Shin, 2002), it is important that students' voices be included in studies that aim to understand satisfaction as it pertains to education. If we want to understand student satisfaction, then students need to be part of the process; furthermore, student satisfaction cannot really be understood unless it is in terms students themselves can understand.

For undergraduate students, three conceptualizations of satisfaction have been proposed: customer service; investment; and, happy-productive (Carter, 2014). The happy-productive model likens students to employees, who, if they are satisfied with their working conditions will be loyal to the company, produce better work, and change employer less frequently (Cotton et al., 2002); the investment model (Hatcher, Kryter, Prus, & Fitzgerald, 1992) posits that students view their time and effort in the same way that investors do their money – in other words, they seek a return on what they expend; and the customer service model considers teacher-student interactions to be a “transaction or service encounter” (Athiyaman, 1997, p. 531). With antecedents in the business world, these perceptions of how student satisfaction is constructed may not be perfectly adapted to either L1 or EFL education; however, they are the best current guides available.

3 The research context

Such educational satisfaction research is conducted at one of three levels: the course, program, or institution level. Course-level research is usually defined as investigating individual classes students take; institution-level research asks about the students' entire experience, including aspects teachers have little to no control over, such as costs, facilities, and administrative staff performance. Program-level research, on the other hand, is where teachers have the most influence and includes drivers of satisfaction such as teaching quality, academic support, and perceptions of program value. Set up in 2008 with the aim of providing a practical, internationalized education (Kakimoto, Carter, & Miura, 2013) the English Communication Course at Kyushu Sangyo University utilizes a student-centered, communicative program over 3 years, from 2nd to 4th grade. It is at the program level that the Course's teachers have been working to understand satisfaction from a student point of view. Our long-term aim is to create instruments that are sensitive to students' grade-level and gender; to get to that point will take time and an element of trial and error, for which reason we have started with only three questions, aimed primarily at 4th grade students as they have the most experience in the program, and are best positioned to discuss the extent to which they are satisfied with it. The three questions we have worked on in the last 2 academic years are these: 1. Do students recognize the models (customer-service, investment, happy-productive) as fitting their experiences? 2. How do graduating students conceive satisfaction? 3. What are the main drivers of satisfaction in the case of graduating seniors?

As a pilot, the question of whether the models from the L1 literature match their experience students (n=23: male = 11) in the 2nd grade were asked to respond to written prompts in two stages. The first stage asked them to describe what they expected would lead to them being satisfied at the time of their graduation. Two tendencies were observed. The first was that female participants most frequently used the word "memories" in describing perceived satisfaction in the future, while male participants described "activities", specifically citing the university clubs they belong to. The second tendency was for greater elaboration from female participants; one example is that while both genders talked about securing post-graduation employment, many female students specified the characteristics they hoped for in their future colleagues.

After looking at the responses, a second prompt was created, asking students to consider the three models. Participants were asked whether they felt that any of these three matched their feelings about satisfaction, or whether something else explained satisfaction better. 65% of students self-reported that the investment model was the closest to their current perception of student satisfaction. Second grade students were asked to participate in this activity as they still had time left in the program, and to ask 4th grade students might confound the data we hoped to obtain in the next two stages.

Based on a reading of the L1 literature on program-level features that teachers can influence, a 10-item survey aimed at tapping three constructs was produced. The constructs in question were teaching quality, perceptions of program value, and student participation. Three graduating students were invited to discuss the items on the survey, to judge whether they tapped the intended construct, and to suggest changes and improvements that would help the survey better

engage their peers. After progressive piloting and focus group discussions with the three participants, the survey was distributed online to half of the graduating cohort (n=12: male = 4).

In addition to strong support for the existence of these three areas as important to student satisfaction as EFL learners, four further themes emerged, specifically: quality of relationships, richness of program content, a program-wide sense of continuity, and the opportunities the program offers. The opportunities include exchange programs abroad, hosting foreign students, and field trips within Japan accompanied by foreign guests. The sense of continuity was mentioned in two ways; overlap between classes in the same grade (i.e. 2nd grade students receiving complementary content from more than one instructor) and a deepening of content over time, for example 2nd grade content being revisited more deeply in 3rd grade. Students frequently described the classes offered as matching their career aspirations, and described the content as “rich”, in the sense of it being deep and plentiful. Finally, a strong theme that emerged was that of relationships not only between teachers and students, but also between students of different grade levels. 4th grade students were grateful to have had positive relationships with students older than them and derived satisfaction from recreating that situation with the course’s younger members. For full results see Carter, Kakimoto, and Miura’s (2014) paper.

Regarding the 3rd question, main drivers of satisfaction, three 4th grade students (2 male) who had taken no part in either of the previous research activities were asked to participate in a 3-stage exploration of student satisfaction, comprising written prompts, a semi-structured interview, a think aloud protocol and a final written prompt. The first written prompt asked the students to define satisfaction as they believe it pertains to EFL students in a general sense. The interview asked them to expand on this, and in some cases clarify their meaning. After this, they were shown three cards, and asked to choose one at random. Each card had one of the three L1 models printed on its reverse, and students were asked to respond to each one just after they read it. After they had responded to all three individually, participants were asked to comment on them as a whole. Each session ended with a few more questions based on their reactions to the three models, and how they did or did not connect with their generalized description of satisfaction. The final stage was a written prompt asking them about their own conceptions of satisfaction, and to be as specific as possible. Findings from the “main drivers” question are still provisional at this point, but all three students strongly rejected the customer service model, in contrast to their 2nd grade counterparts. They each said that investment was useful at times, for example with teachers from other courses, but that they preferred learning environments where happy-productive styles were possible. Both initial and final descriptions of satisfaction suggested that it was a process that evolved over time, which could account for the discrepancy between 2nd and 4th grade answers.

4 Conclusion

This paper introduced preliminary steps in creating instruments that will help to understand and assess EFL students’ satisfaction with their programs. Both gender and age appear to be issues that affect students’ conceptions and drivers of educational satisfaction, and the instruments will need to take this into account. It is clear that a longitudinal approach is required to deal with this, perhaps in the manner of some qualitative studies into EFL students’ motivation. We would

conclude by saying that we have come to believe that motivation is what students bring to their program; satisfaction is what they do – or don't – look back on it with.

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