Questionnaire Design
—— Some Ideas for Eliciting Effective Course Feedback ——

Tyler BURDEN*

Abstract

This paper set out to examine the factors influencing an effective elicitation device for gaining feedback on a course of study. To do this, a course questionnaire was critically examined. The questionnaire was found to contain a range of problems, principally in the employment of leading or ambiguous questions that weakened the value of the information gathered. Two principal suggestions for remedying this error were proposed, both of which involved the students at the design stage of the questionnaire.

Introduction

Course and programme evaluation, despite its importance, is a somewhat neglected area within the language teaching profession. Whilst a great deal of attention has been focused on language testing, comparatively little has been focused on evaluation and the effective elicitation of course feedback. In fact, often the subject is omitted completely from TESOL training programmes with the result that there is a comparative lack of expertise in this area amongst practicing language teaching professionals.

This paper attempts to examine some of the issues involved in eliciting such feedback via a questionnaire approach and to suggest ways in which the procedure may be improved. To do this the following section examines some background issues relating to questionnaire design and implementation in general. It is followed by a section which critically analyses one specific questionnaire and suggests various ideas for its improvement. The paper concludes with some proposals for an approach involving students in the design stage of the questionnaire.

*Lecturer, Department of Regional Studies, Toyo University, Japan

Why to evaluate?

There is a wide range of reasons why an instructor may choose to evaluate a course of study. It may simply be to assess whether one method of instruction is better than another. For example Palmer (1992) describes a project to determine whether first year students of German more effectively acquired language following a method based on Krashen's theories. This was compared to a control group of students learning German through more conventional means.

A common reason for evaluating a course of study is to assess the extent to which the students are satisfied with what is being offered. This is particularly relevant to paying customers who may be encouraged by procedures which evaluate whether services are appropriately provided. Instructors, for their part, may wish to assess how well they are doing in the eyes of their students and the extent to which they are meeting their students' perceived needs. In addition, they may have their own aims for a course and would like to see how well these aims are being achieved, or, they may have plans for the future which an evaluation may help to inform. In most cases, the principal reason why evaluation is undertaken is to improve the standard of educational services being offered.

What to evaluate?

There are a great number of issues on which an evaluation can focus. Perhaps of greatest interest to the instructor is the extent to which the students have acquired the language they have been taught. Success in this regard may be gauged by administering a test before and after the course. If the students have improved it may be assumed that, at least to some extent, the instruction was a success.

Of concern here is how to gain feedback on both the teacher's performance and the course programme. This can be a sensitive issue, particularly when curriculum decisions are based on the information gathered and the teacher's position is influenced by a positive appraisal.

Traditionally, questionnaires have been the popular instrument of attaining such information. However, Rea-Dickins (1994) warns that questionnaires should not be used without caution, as there are a number of problems associated with their use. It is well documented, for example, that one drawback is respondents' willingness, or lack thereof, to give critical or sensitive information. Such prob-

lems may be exacerbated in institutions (e.g. such as universities or high schools) where the person administering the questionnaire is also the person responsible for grading the students.   In these situations, respondents may feel that frank and fair criticism of the course will affect their chances of successfully passing it.

In addition, cultural factors play a role in mitigating the objectivity of responses.   For example, in Japan, where teachers enjoy a relatively high status compared to that of the students, and negative politeness together with off-record (indirect) politeness strategies are the norm (Brown and Levinson, 1987), elicitation of direct and effective feedback may be further hampered.

Many instructors will have had experience of administering course feedback questionnaires.   Areas that typically come into focus are the coursebook/materials used, the teacher's style, balance of skills practiced, methodology, classroom facilities and so on.   Also, questions on somewhat ambiguous areas such as overall satisfaction are frequently included.   What becomes clear from viewing such questionnaires is that the person responsible for designing the survey wields enormous power over the information gathered.   For example, if there is an area in which they know they are weak they can simply not include it in the evaluation sheet.   Thus, it is possible to present oneself in a more positive light to management and course administrators.

Nunan (1992) cites three features typical of badly designed questionnaires :
1 . Leading questions (where the researcher's own attitude is reflected and a required response is sought)
2 . Confusing questions
3 . Asking more than one thing at a time

With regard to 'confusing questions', Weir and Roberts (1994) analysis suggests three sub-categories : (i) difficult to answer questions, (ii) ambiguous questions, and (iii) over-general questions.   They also warn against the use of double negatives and jargon.

When to evaluate?

In general, courses are evaluated at the end, or at some time approaching the end, of a course of study.   In some respects, this is the least useful time to do it as it gives the instructor no chance to act upon the results for the benefit of the respondents.   In effect, the results may only benefit subsequent groups of students

(and whose needs may be largely different anyway).

One possibility to improve upon this state of affairs is to implement a system of ongoing formative feedback such as that suggested by Morrow and Schocker (1993) in which data was collected on a regular basis in order to inform course decisions at all levels. Although, in practice, most instructors may not have the resources to adopt such a rigorous approach, some quick and informal evaluation sheets to check student satisfaction should be possible.

One further possibility is to adopt a post-course evaluation system in which course feedback is elicited some period of time after the course has finished. This may be of particular benefit to, for example, trainee language instructors who may not be able to fully grasp the relevance of their course content until they have had a chance to put it into practice. It may also benefit language learners who pursue careers in which they need to use the language they have studied on the course. One positive aspect of this approach is that there may potentially be fewer problems of eliciting frank criticism of a course, of the sort described above, as the respondents may no longer feel a need to placate their instructors. However, a drawback to this approach is that students may simply have forgotten many of their most pertinent criticisms by the time the questionnaire is administered.

Questionnaire Analysis

The following questionnaire was administered to a group of teachers of Spanish who had been following a course of professional development. The participants were all re-training as Spanish language teachers in order to meet the demands of the institution in which they would be teaching. They were already experienced and qualified teachers who had significant Spanish language competence. The course was attempting to train the teachers in a communicative language teaching methodology. The questionnaire was administered at the conclusion of the course and participants were not required to write their names on the questionnaire. Its purpose was explained to them as being for formative feedback towards subsequent courses.

The questionnaire was selected for analysis, principally as it was felt to be representative of the genre.

1. To what extent did the course meet your needs in the following areas?

a) Spanish language practice :

b) Language Teaching methodology :

c) Materials development/ production :

d) Your specific teaching role :

The phrase 'To what degree/extent....' is used in this and some of the subsequent questions.   There is a problem with this approach in that responses may be difficult to quantify because there may be a wide range of words used by the respondents.   A clearer picture might be gained by providing a scale.

Furthermore, it is likely the respondents' answers would be modified due to sensitivity towards the people who trained them.

Question 1c) is asking more than one question.   Materials production and materials development are two separate issues.

Question 1d) is rather ambiguous.   There are no guidelines as to what ones 'specific teaching role' actually is.   Is this age range, student level, type of institution taught at or something else? Unless this is actually defined, then the data received is too general to be useful.   In other words, if, for example, some of the respondents found the course useless because they teach very advanced students, the questionnaire has not actually elicited this reason.

2. Do you consider that the balance between sessions led by the teacher- trainers and sessions for independent study/research was appropriate? (please comment)

There would seem to be a required response here, but, in any case, there are ambiguous terms in this question that make it difficult for the respondents to answer.   For example, what is the "balance" being referred to? Is it a balance of time, a balance between theory and practice or otherwise? Similarly, the word 'appropriate' is ambiguous (appropriate to what?).   The question could be further clarified if the aims of the course designers were specified with respect to why they have these two types of sessions.

3. One of the aims of the language sessions at this department was to provide examples of useful methodological practice. To what extent did the language sessions provide insights (if any) into "useful methodology"?

Some of the comments above about quantification of data and ambiguity apply here (for example: In what regard is the methodology 'useful'?). Also, one wonders what the evaluation team intended to do with the results. If they intended to remove less useful examples of methodology and replace them, then their purposes may have been better served by asking respondents to list, say, two examples of methodology that they felt were useful and two that they felt were not.

4. To what extent did the department's language sessions help to enhance your command in the four skills :

    Listening   *Reading*

    Speaking   *Writing*

In the form this stands, there may well be problems quantifying and acting upon the results, as a whole range of answers may arise. Also, it may be difficult for respondents to answer these questions, since it is likely there will have been some degree of overlap between the training in these four skills.

Furthermore, respondents are being led somewhat towards the researcher's desired response by the use of the word 'enhance'.

5. We would welcome suggestions to assist us in the future planning of our courses. In particular, we would ask you to consider the nature and the quality of the course in relation to :

    your needs :

    balance of activities :

    coherence :

    progression :

As in some of the above questions, there are likely to be differing interpretations of what these terms actually mean. One also wonders how these four categories for evaluation were arrived at. Was it through some pre-research that identified coherence, progression etc. as areas of concern, or are the researchers attempting to avoid criticism in other areas where they know their course is weak (but are unwilling to make changes)? Why are respondents being asked to make suggestions in only these four areas?

Again, the question is asking for consideration of more than one thing at a time, 'nature and quality'.

6. To what extent do you feel you were invited to contribute to the course (in sessions on language methodology etc.)? Was the level of participation adequate?

Here again respondents may not be willing to appear too critical.

7. Please comment on the pre-course induction days with suggestions for improvement :

8. Further observations/suggestions :

A problem with question 7 may be that respondents have forgotten what they did for their pre-course induction day. However, if the question had been asked immediately after the induction, respondents would not yet be in a position to evaluate its usefulness with regard to the course.

Both questions 7 and 8 are rather general and thus likely to elicit a wide range of responses. Question 8, however, is important, as there may be areas that the questionnaire designers overlooked.

Towards an improved design

What the above example demonstrates is the significant extent to which the questionnaire design influences the scope of responses gathered. There may have been numerous issues that were of more importance to the students but were simply not surveyed in this format. Although the final question does allow for other issues to be raised, given its open-ended nature, it is unlikely that enough people would raise the same issue for it to be considered important by the researchers.

One approach that may help to alleviate the above problem is to actually involve the students themselves in the design of the questionnaire. This can be done, for example, by the instructor giving each student a piece of paper and asking them to write down a question they would like to see in the course evaluation. The instructor then collates the questions obtained, adding his or her own questions (if necessary) and finally, gives one copy of the completed form to each student in the class to be filled out. Thus, the agenda is not set by the instructor but by the

students themselves.

A further problem that emerged from the above analysis was the difficulty of getting unambiguous, quantifiable information from which firm conclusions may be drawn. This problem may also arise when students write their own course questionnaire items, as suggested above. One technique that avoids this problem, and at the same time involves the students, is to have each student (anonymously) write down two positive and two negative sentences about the course. These sentences are then collated and put on a cline of "Strongly Agree/Agree/Neither Agree nor Disagree/Disagree/Strongly Disagree". The students are subsequently invited to respond to all the sentences gathered. The advantage of this approach is that not only is the agenda set by the students, but also the information gathered is quantifiable. In other words, the instructor could with some confidence use the information to inform future courses. From my own experiences of teaching English in Japan a combination of both a formal questionnaire drawn up by the instructor and an informal one drawn up in collaboration with the students, provides the most effective system. This way issues valued by both students and teacher are assured inclusion.

Conclusion

This paper looked at questionnaire design for eliciting feedback on a course of study. Due to constraints of space, a wider range of evaluative methods, such as informal interviews, has not been discussed.

Through a critical evaluation of a typical questionnaire a wide range of problems was identified that affected both the validity and reliability of the data gathered. Two proposals were suggested to counter these problems which involve the students in the actual design stage of the questionnaire. As one commentator notes, very often, in her experience, evaluations stop after the data collection (Rea-Dickins, 1994). The approach suggested in this paper, it is proposed, would help prioritize issues of importance to the course participants themselves and, thus, arm instructors to use the data gathered in order to positively inform subsequent teaching decisions.

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