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A Framework for Developing an Outgoing Student-Opinion Survey for Master's Programs in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

Imost all universities in the USA require that degree programs be evaluated at least once every four or five years. For example, degree programs in the California State University system must be evaluated both internally and externally at least once every five years. Internal program evaluation may consist of many components. Of these, graduating student opinion is one of the most important. Since a program's success or failure very much depends on how students feel about it, especially at the time of their exit, it is important that student opinions are obtained every semester from graduating students.

Most departments offering a master of arts degree (MA) in teaching English as a second or other language (TESOL), however, choose not to elicit student opinions on their programs every semester since this requires additional faculty and staff time. The heavy teaching load and increasing demands to take part in faculty governance leave faculty and staff very little time for collecting and analyzing data. At the same time, the alternative (i.e., obtaining student opinions only once every four or five years, especially only at the time of mandatory program evaluation) may not reveal the true nature of the programs. Data sets collected under such conditions tend not to accurately reflect student opinion for two reasons: (a) The instruments used to obtain student opinions tend to be developed ad hoc; and (b) even if these instruments happen to be reliable and valid, the data reflect only the opinions of the student population at that time.

If there were an existing analytical framework and a sample-survey format that required only minor modifications for use in their respective contexts, then all MA TESOL programs could collect student opinion data on their programs every semester. The proposed framework and the sample survey serve to fulfill that need.

Advantages and Appropriateness of Using a Survey

Student opinions can be obtained using a variety of instruments such as one-on-one interviews, open-ended questions, surveys, group discussions, and open forums. Of these, the survey format is considered to be the best for various reasons. A survey is defined by Henerson, Morris, & Fitz-Gibbon (1988) as "a highly structured interview that need not take place in a face-to-face situation" (p. 24). The major advantage of using a survey is its uniformity. An unaltered instrument administered to a group of students is highly reliable compared to instruments such as a face-to-face interview. Also, with a survey, it is possible to collect a wide range of required information, assuming the evaluators are able to translate all the required information into appropriate items. The importance of uniformity in the construction of the instrument is self-evident if one understands that it enables the participating programs to exchange comparable information about their programs. A second advantage is the practicality of a survey. Given an exit rate of 50 to 80 students annually (i.e., the actual exit rate in some of the California State University MA TESOL programs), it is not feasible to interview all graduating students since that requires an enormous amount of time, not only for interviewing but also for transcribing, coding, and analyzing the data. Interviews also involve additional expenses such as the purchase of cassettes and the hiring of student researchers for transcribing and coding the data. A third advantage of surveys is that they give students a sufficient amount of time to respond and permit anonymity, thus increasing the chances of receiving responses that accurately represent the students' feelings. Last but not least, the data collected in a survey format can be more easily analyzed and interpreted than the data collected in oral face-to-face interviews or via open-ended questions.

Graduating MA TESOL students are an appropriate target population for this kind of survey for three main reasons: (a) The participating graduating students have sufficient self-awareness to provide the necessary information; (b) the students have gone through the entire program at the time of the survey administration, so they are in a position to give unbiased feedback on the program; and (c) the students can provide the required information with little anxiety because they have completed all the important academic requirements at the time of submitting their response. In the program at San Jose State University, a workable procedure would be to have students receive the survey questions at the time of submitting their comprehensive examination answers and return their responses at the time of receiving their scores for the comprehensive examinations. This timing would provide the students with about 10 days to respond, which should be more than sufficient. The survey would hopefully elicit truthful opinions from them since they would have completed their last requirement before responding to it.

Objectives of this survey

This survey has three purposes: (a) to collect career-related background information about the students who enroll in the program; (b) to measure

student opinion about the program's success in preparing them for a teaching career or a higher degree objective such as a Ph.D. in TESOL, applied linguistics (including second language acquisition), linguistics, or education; and (c) to assess the effectiveness of the program including the effectiveness of instruction, fairness in assessment, and instructional sensitivity to the various academic and cultural needs of the participating students. Generally speaking, the goal of administering a student opinion survey is not only to seek internal validation for accredition purposes but also to explore how the program can be continually redesigned and restructured to attract both local and foreign student populations.

A note of caution is necessary at this point. The primary purpose of this survey, at this stage of its development, is to function as a formative rather than a summative evaluation. In the initial years of its administration, the data collected could enable program administrators to identify potential problems well in advance, recognize areas that might need improvement, and periodically monitor any attitudinal change in the students towards the structure as well as the usefulness of the program. Once the program has been restructured to the satisfaction of faculty and students, then the survey could be used for both formative and summative evaluation. Such a goal is in line with the claim made by Henerson et al. (1988), who state that the initial goal of program evaluation is to "find or produce well-conceived instruments which are sensitive measures of the program's effects" (p. 11).

My intention in doing this research is to assist MA TESOL programs to gauge their strengths and weaknesses and to monitor the needs and requirements of their students. As a result of the surveys I propose, programs would also be able to perceive (a) what kinds of local, out-of-city, and foreign students come to the program; (b) what kinds of programs different student populations need; (c) which of the required subjects students feel are important for their future careers; and (d) which elective subjects the majority of students prefer to take. A common framework and survey format will also allow programs to share information. For example, in California, 12 universities offer MA TESOL degree programs and three universities offer MA degrees in linguistics with a teaching-English-as-a-second-language (TESL) concentration (Ching, 1993). A uniform framework would allow these programs to compare information and determine why enrollment is higher or lower in some programs than in others. This information is very crucial since departments must constantly defend the existence of programs, especially at times of budget crises.

The Structure of the Opinion Survey

The present format of the survey is derived from feedback I received from students in my graduate-level curriculum and assessment classes from Fall 1996 through Fall 1999, a span of seven semesters. This class is a required course for students in the MA TESOL program at the California State University where I teach. During these seven semesters, hundreds of

items were discussed in class and hundreds were also eliminated as irrelevant. Only those items that the students repeatedly felt to be necessary for authentic assessment of an MA TESOL program were retained and used in the development of this framework. (See Appendix for a sample survey, edited from the original.)

It should be noted at the outset that the present format is broad in scope. It does not attempt to evaluate any specific faculty member or any individual course. The questions have been developed in such a way that student response to each item contributes in some degree to the evaluation of the whole program.

The survey has been developed along the context-adaptive model suggested by Lynch (1996) for language education programs. Note, however, that teacher education programs are significantly different from language education programs and that the student-opinion survey is only one of the instruments that can be used in the overall evaluation of a program. The survey consists of four parts: (a) the cover letter; (b) items related to background information about the student; (c) items related to information about the available services and the various components of the program, department, and university; and (d) items related to the overall nature of the program. What follows is a brief description of each of these parts.

The Cover Letter

The cover letter should be written by the TESOL program administrator. The letter should specify that the purpose of the survey is to improve the quality of the program the student has just completed and assure the student that all feedback will be kept confidential. The confidentiality statement should be highlighted to emphasize that the right to privacy will be respected as per state law. The letter should also ask the respondents not to add any comment—such as their work place or native country—that may reveal their identity. Finally, the letter should contain instructions for completing the survey and the due date.

Items Related to Information About the Student

Seventeen items (items 1 to 17) ask for background information and the academic profile of the student. The students are asked whether they are domestic or international students, full-time or part-time students, currently working as teachers of English or not, and whether or not they wish to continue in an advanced degree program after completing the MA TESOL program. They are also asked why they selected this university's MA TESOL program (i.e., was the choice due to the focus of the department or the university's location?). The survey, however, does not collect ethnographic information such as gender, nationality, age, or ethnic identity since such information is available to the respective departments in their student database and could jeopardize the confidentiality of the survey.

Items Related to Information About the Program, Department, and the University

This proposed survey has 66 items constructed as statements to which students agree or disagree in the process of evaluating the program. Student responses are placed on a Likert scale ranging from one to five: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = uncertain, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. These items deal with the following aspects of the program: (a) the quality of the orientation given at the beginning of the students' registration in the program (questions 18 to 23), (b) the student's satisfaction in the first semester (questions 24 to 27), (c) the student's satisfaction in the program from the second semester to the final semester (questions 28 to 82), and (d) the usefulness of the required and the elective subjects offered in the program. Of these four sections, the section on the student's satisfaction in the program from the second semester to the final semester is fairly long covering the following aspects: (a) class schedules and enrollment; (b) faculty and their interaction with students both inside and outside the classes; (c) the relevance and the availability of the prescribed reading materials; (d) the usefulness and the relevance of the invited speakers from outside; (e) the available resources in the department and the university, and the students' knowledge about these facilities; (f) the faculty expectations, requirements, and assessment of the students; and (g) the usefulness of the required courses and the elective subjects. Finally, following survey format conventions, the students are also given an opportunity to provide an open-ended response to any of the aspects of the program.

Validity

Validity in program evaluation refers to whether the instrument used is able to elicit truthful information from the respondents. Validity is of two types: construct validity and content validity. Construct validity in this context refers to whether the students who answer the survey feel that the survey items are representative of the structure of the whole program. For example, in the development of a reading test, construct validity refers to whether the test is a representative sample of reading tasks based on an underlying theory of reading as claimed by the test developer in the manual. In the present context, construct validity refers to whether the components of the survey when put together can serve as a representative sample of the components of an MA TESOL program. Since it is a graduate as well as a professional program, it is expected to fulfill the requirements of a graduate program as well as prepare students for a teaching career or for doctoral education. Questions on the overall nature of the program require students to evaluate these aspects of the program. Content validity in the present context refers to whether the survey items elicited responses about program characteristics such as the faculty, textbooks, and assessment.

An overview reveals that the survey has extensively covered the areas that would concern students, administrators, and faculty. From the students' point

of view, it is important that they can provide feedback anonymously about whether or not there was fairness and unbiased judgment about their work. For administrators, they are able to answer questions such as:

- 1. Were the students able to enroll in the classes they needed so that graduation was not delayed?
- 2. Were the class schedules convenient?
- 3. Did the departments make sure that students had information about the resources available in the department, the college, and the university?
- 4. Were the books available at the bookstore in the first week of the semester?
- 5. Were the students well informed of the requirements of the classes, the grading criteria, and the faculty office hours?
- 6. Were the students able to get assistance as needed from the supporting staff at the department and the university levels?

With the use of the survey, faculty and the department are able to discover answers to questions such as:

- 1. How do the students feel about the overall curriculum of the program, especially about the core and the elective requirements?
- 2. Do the students feel they are learning relevant subjects and obtaining the required skills in preparation for their career or for doctoral education?
- 3. Are the prescribed textbook materials appropriate for their levels?
- 4. Does the program prepare the students to be research competent?
- 5. Have the students had a satisfying social and academic experience in the program?

Lastly, it is recommended in the TESOL literature that teachers of English to speakers of other languages be trained to participate in several cultures, the mainstream along with various ethnic cultures. Students ought to have cross-cultural competency. Apart from learning to be culturally competent from textbooks, it is necessary that the programs themselves model such behavior to the students. Therefore, multiple items dealing with the cultural sensitivity of the faculty have also been included.

Survey Interpretation

Opinion survey results are generally interpreted in two ways: Either each item is considered an independent measure of a separate attitude, or several items in combination are considered as a whole—an index of an attitude. In the present framework, the approaches work in combination. For certain constructs, only one item has been considered to be adequate. For example, student opinion on the relevance of invited speakers and colloquia is obtained through only one item. On the other hand, student opinions on faculty interaction, cultural sensitivity, and fairness in assessment are obtained through multiple items. In a way, the number of questions about a component is an index of its importance. The survey analyses should allow both quantitative and qualitative interpretation.

Limitations of this Proposed Survey

The proposed survey is not without its limitations. Surveys are not flexible, and it is not possible to collect additional information, such as why respondents answered certain items in certain ways, even if needed. Furthermore, like other attitudinal surveys, this survey may also lack high reliability since attitudes the respondents convey depend on their mental framework at that point in time. In the context of my university, since the survey will be administered at the time the students submit their comprehensive examination answers, whether or not they respond positively to the items might depend on how difficult they perceive the comprehensive examination to be.

Research on student opinion surveys suggests that it can take three or more years to come up with a standardized format that works in a given environment. A possible trend in the student opinion could also be perceived only after conducting the survey for four or more semesters. As such, it might not be possible to produce a report after the initial administrations of this survey. If the programs plan to include the analyses of this survey as part of their accredition evaluation procedures, the programs should administer the survey for at least four semesters before including the results in their reports.

It is also possible that the reliability of certain items could suffer (and results might, therefore, be skewed) if students had only taken courses with a few professors and had not experienced the whole departmental faculty. Note that this survey does not attempt to evaluate individual faculty members but the program as a whole.

Lastly, surveys generally suffer from what is called social desirability, defined by Henerson et al. (1988) as when "respondents have an idea of which answers are socially desirable. Not wishing to appear deviant, they hide their true feelings and bend their answers to conform to a model of how they ought to answer" (p.135). Apart from social desirability, it is possible that due to cultural differences, certain items (especially items assessing the faculty effectiveness) may suffer from lack of validity. For example, in Asian cultures, a teacher is considered more sacred than parents; thus students coming from such cultures may not respond truthfully even after two or more years of exposure to American culture. Also, it is possible that some students might prefer to respond orally rather than by reading and responding.

In spite of these limitations, the attempt to assess outgoing students' opinions of their MA TESOL program via the proposed survey instrument is a valuable use of a program's time and effort. Results from the survey can be of great use in better addressing student needs and in refining the curriculum. MA programs should note that it is TESOL as a field that first suggested the effectiveness of student need-based curricula. In keeping with this belief, it surely behooves MA TESOL programs to evaluate student opinion of the MA program and adjust their programs, including curricula, accordingly.

Author

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Endnote

¹ For recommendations on the need for intercultural training for teachers of English to speakers of other languages, see the theme articles in this volume.

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Appendix

MATESOL Program Evaluation—Outgoing Student Opinion Survey

Dear Graduating Student:

We sincerely hope that you have had a productive stay at this university. Soon you will be graduating from this department.

At this time, we would like you to share with us your opinion about the program. We have developed this opinion survey for that purpose.

Your feedback will help us to improve the program. It is also possible that it could change the entire profile of this program and the department. It is therefore essential that you take your time to answer these questions.

To answer questions 1-17, please put a check mark $(\sqrt{})$ next to any item that you feel is the appropriate response.

To answer questions 18-83, please read the statements and then circle your opinion of these statements on the given scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = uncertain, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree.

Question 84 requires checkmarks and question 85 is an open-ended question. Please answer all the questions as truthfully as you can.

Remember that you should not put your name or any identifying remark on any part of the survey. Be assured that your feedback will be kept confidential.

The survey data will be available to you on request after a lapse of one semester.

Thank you and I sincerely appreciate your cooperation. Your feedback is very valuable to us.

A. Your background, your student status, your decision to join the program, and your future (including career decision)

1. I am a citizen of the United States of America.	Yes	No
2. I am a permanent resident in the United States of		
America.	Yes	No
3. I am an international student with no intention of	**	
returning to my country.	Yes	No
4. I am an international student with the intention of		
returning to my country.	Yes	
5. I am a full-time student.	Yes	
6. I am a part-time student.	Yes	No
7. I was working as a teacher (any field) before I came to		
the program.	Yes	No
8. I continued to work as a teacher of English while		
going through this program of study.	Yes	No
9. I was working in some other field (other than		
teaching) before I came to the program.	Yes	No
10. My decision to work as an ESL/EFL teacher was		
reinforced after I joined the program.	Yes	No
11. I intend to work as an ESL/EFL teacher after		
graduation.	Yes	No
12. I intend to work in a related field after graduation.	Yes	No
13. After graduation, I intend to pursue advanced doctoral		
studies.	Yes	No
14. If your answer to question 13 is yes, what will be		
your intended field of study in the Ph.D. program?		
(Select one or more fields below.)		
Methods and materials	Yes	No
Second language acquisition	Yes	
English for specific purposes	Yes	
Language testing and assessment	Yes	
Sociolinguistics	Yes	
Psycholinguistics	Yes	
Language planning and policies	Yes	
Culture and language learning	Yes	
General language education	Yes	
Other (please specify):		
4 1 37		

15 I made the decision to join the program because		
(Select one or more answers below.)		
I live in this area.	Yes	No
I wanted to live in this area.	Yes	No
My spouse/partner has a job here.	Yes	No
It is easy to get admitted in this program.	Yes	No
My friends recommended this program to me.	Yes	No
I have heard great things about the faculty in this		
program.	Yes	No
I liked the program content.	Yes	No
Many of my colleagues had graduated from this		
program.	Yes	No
I wanted to teach English in foreign countries.	Yes	No
Many of my friends had graduated from this program.	Yes	No
I did my Bachelors degree at this university.	Yes	No
16. I had taken one or more linguistics courses here before		
I joined the MA TESOL program.	Yes	No
17. It took me four or more semesters to complete the		
program.	Yes	No
1 0		

B. The Program

We would like to have your input on almost all aspects of the program, from your program orientation to your graduation. Please circle your response to the following statements numbered 18-83 on the given scale. All your responses will be analyzed anonymously, and all information will be kept confidential. Thank you.

Scale: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=uncertain, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree)

Orientation Program

18. The orientation program given at the beginning of my					
first semester was very informative.	1	2	3	4	5
19. The orientation program gave me all the information I					
needed for early graduation.	1	2	3	4	5
20. The orientation program provided me with all the					
information I needed about the university.	1	2	3	4	5
21. The student handbook supplied at the orientation					
program provided me with all the information I needed					
to know about the department.	1	2	3	4	5
22. The student handbook supplied at the orientation					
program provided me with all the information I needed					
to know about the MA TESOL Program.	1	2	3	4	5
23. The orientation program was a waste of my time.	1	2	3	4	5

Your First Semester in the MATESOL Program	m				
24. I was able to get enrolled in all the classes I needed to move from conditionally classified status to classified					
status in the first semester. 25. The graduate advisor helped me plan my classes in the				4	
first semester. 26. I was able to meet with the other faculty to plan my				4	
classes and research during my first semester. 27. I was able to understand how the program was structured and how the graduate level TESOL classes were				4	
interconnected during my first semester.	1	2	3	4	5
Second Semester Through the Final Semester	•				
Class schedules and enrollment					
28. I was able to enroll in the classes I wanted.	1	2	3	4	5
29. The classes were scheduled at convenient times for me. 30. I was teaching/working elsewhere and the class schedules				4	
were not convenient for me.	1	2	3	4	5
Faculty and their interaction with students					
31. The faculty were available whenever I wanted to					
discuss the structure of my program (given reasonable advance notice).	1	2	3	4	5
32. The faculty showed concern for students and were sensitive to student needs.	1	2	3	4	5
33. The faculty were responsive/sensitive to the needs of international students.	1	2	3	4	5
34. The faculty were responsive/sensitive to the needs of		•	2	,	_
working students. 35. The faculty had very high expectations of students.	1	2	3	4	5
36. Students were invited to take part in faculty research					
projects. 37. The faculty were unbiased and did not show favoritism	1	2	3	4	5
when conducting classes.	1	2	3	4	5
38. There were very few instances of cultural miscommunication in the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
39. The faculty encouraged student discussion and	-	_		·	Ü
participation when conducting classes. 40. The students knew the research interests of the faculty	1	2	3	4	5
teaching in the MA TESOL program.	1	2	3	4	5
41. The faculty were concerned with student learning.	1	2	3	4	5
42. The pacing of the lessons in the classes was too fast.43. The learning activities were appropriate.	1	2	3	4	5 5
13. The learning activities were appropriate.	Т	4	5	7	J

Textbooks and course readers					
44. The recommended textbooks were readily available from the first day of the class at the school bookstore.45. The recommended textbooks were relevant and	1	2	3	4	5
contributed to my understanding of the subject matter. 46. The course readers (the required readings put together	1	2	3	4	5
by the professors) were readily available from the first day of the class.	1	2	3	4	5
Colloquia and invited speakers					
47. I found the colloquia given by the invited speakers very useful and relevant to the program.	1	2	3	4	5
Resources in the department and the university					
48. The department library was very useful to me. 49. The department library was readily accessible during the				4	
scheduled hours. 50. I was aware that the department's video camera was	1	2	3	4	5
available to students for collecting data. 51. I was aware that the department's cassette player was	1	2	3	4	5
available to students for collecting data. 52. I was aware that the department's transcribing machine	1	2	3	4	5
was available to students for collecting data.	1	2	3	4	5
53. The support staff in the department were very helpful. 54. The university library was a useful resource during the				4	
program for my class needs. 55. The staff in the university library were very helpful.	1	2	3	4	5 5
Assessment					
56. The faculty encouraged group projects.57. I was given constructive written feedback on the	1	2	3	4	5
assignments I submitted. 58. The faculty were unbiased and did not show favoritism in their student assessment/evaluation. Overall, the	1	2	3	4	5
assessment process was very fair. 59. The faculty expected very high writing standards from	1	2	3	4	5
the students. 60. The faculty expectations with regard to assignments	1	2	3	4	5
were made very clear. 61. The university writing requirement for classified status	1	2	3	4	5
was too demanding.	1	2	3	4	5
62. The comprehensive examination format is culturally biased.	1	2	3	4	5
63. The comprehensive examination is too demanding.	1	2	3	4	5

Overall Nature of the Program

- · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·					
64. The overall class atmosphere was very positive.	1	2	3	4	5
65. The graduate students in this program are highly	4	2	2		_
motivated.	1	2	3	4	5
66. The social climate surrounding the program is very	1	2	2	4	_
congenial.	1	2 2	3	4	5
67. The classrooms provided an excellent study atmosphere.	1	2	3	4	5
68. The student discussions in my classes were quite	1	2	2	4	_
stimulating and exciting.	1	2	3	4	5
69. I was able to take part in class discussions without any	4	_	2		_
inhibition or fear.	1	2	3	4	5
70. The courses were relevant to my interests and have	_	_	_		_
prepared me for what I want to do after my graduation.	1	2	3	4	5
71. There is good balance between theory and practice in					_
this program.	1	2	3	4	5
72. After completing this program, my critical thinking					_
ability has significantly improved.	1	2	3	4	5
73. After completing this program, my writing ability has					
significantly improved.	1	2	3	4	5
74. After completing this program, I have acquired the skills					
needed by the professionals in my field.	1	2	3	4	5
75. After completing this program, I am able to read and					
understand research articles in my field.	1	2	3	4	5
76. After completing this program, I am able to manage					
classes that are culturally challenging.	1	2	3	4	5
77. After going through this program, I am able to work on					
my own to develop curriculum for ESL classes.	1	2	3	4	5
78. After completing this program, I am able to review					
research for a scholarly journal.	1	2	3	4	5
79. After completing this program, I am able to give					
workshops and seminars to my fellow teachers.	1	2	3	4	5
80. After completing this program, I can give conference					
presentations.	1	2	3	4	5
81. The curriculum of the program does not take into					
consideration the needs of international students.	1	2	3	4	5
82. The overall curriculum of the program does not meet					
student expectations.	1	2	3	4	5
•					

Usefulness of the Required Classes and Elective Subjects

83. In my opinion, the following classes were very useful in preparing me for my career:

Required classes

a.	Introduction to Linguistics	1	2	3	4	5
b.	Patterns of English	1	2	3	4	5
c.	Teaching of Grammar	1	2	3	4	5

	d.	Developmental Reading/Writing	1	2	3	4	5
	e.	Second Language Acquisition	1	2	3	4	5
	f.	Intercultural Communication & SLA	1	2	3	4	5
	g.	Methods and Materials for TESOL	1	2	3	4	5
	h.	Developing TESOL Curriculum		2			
	i.	Testing & Assessment in TESOL		2			
				2			
			1	2	3	4	5
Ele	ectiv	e subjects					
84.	ful a	ich of the following MA TESOL electives, in your opi and relevant to you in preparing you for your career? F appropriate ones.					
		ssroom Techniques for TESOL Professionals				_	
	Fou	ndations of ESP				_	
	ESI	P Course Design				_	
	Spe	cial Topics in ESP				_	
		velopmental Reading & Writing: Principles and Practic	es			_	
		alyzing Classroom Language				_	
		sscultural Literacy				_	
	Eng	glish in the Global Context				_	
						_	
						_	
85.		nere anything else that you would like to share with us lity of this program?	to	imp	orov	ve t	he