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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE of SCIENTIFIC PAPER
AFASES 2013
Brasov, 23-25 May 2013

BUILDING AN END-OF-COURSE SURVEY – AN EFFICIENT MEANS OF ENSURING QUALITY

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Abstract: *In order to make a course as successful as possible, it must be constantly monitored, reviewed, and renewed. This statement is common knowledge and it applies to all types of courses, on any educational level. However, this need of finding out what a course was really like and how well all the aspects it involved were addressed is even more obvious and imperative when starting a new study program or implementing a new course. This may ensure that the course itself (goals and objectives, learning outcomes and contents, length, syllabus) as well as the manner of teaching it are appropriate and up-to-date and meet the expectations of the stakeholders. The present paper presents a few ideas about the usefulness of surveys applied at the end of any course, emphasizing the necessity of devising a questionnaire for teachers. The final part consists of a number of questions we considered of particular significance, as their introduction in such a questionnaire is meant to reveal teachers' feelings and opinions regarding the latest foreign language intensive courses.*

Keywords: *language program, assessment, end-of-course, teacher questionnaire*

1. INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, end-of-course surveys are conducted or at least should be conducted at the end of any course or module within a study program. This always provides good opportunity for students to express their opinions on the course and the way it was taught. The results of the end of course critique or course feedback, as it is sometimes called, are, at least theoretically, used afterwards by the teacher who teaches the course, a supervisor, a member of the faculty management, or anyway, one of the decision makers regarding that course in order to analyze the overall quality of the course given by the teacher's performance and the degree in which the goals and objectives initially set were also met. Starting from these conclusions, anyone who is interested in the

course and also in a position to do so will take the necessary measures to amend the syllabus, the resources used, and even the way of teaching in order to have better results in the future.

No teacher should ever be afraid of designing and applying such end-of-course questionnaires. It is well known that a good teacher teaches and learns at the same time. No matter if the teachers are new or experienced, if they have taught the course for the first time or the tenth time, evaluating their own teaching is anybody's core duty. Only thus, could they identify the strong aspects of their practice, as well as their weaknesses which may need to be solved somehow. Besides, even if the results show at a certain moment that a teacher is excellent with respect to course materials, course activities, and learning outcomes, he/she will still have to be

ready at any time to act in order to revise the course so as to suit the needs of the beneficiaries, the current circumstances, and the diversity of their students.

Usually, the end-of-course survey is centered on the following main aspects:

- standardized questions regarding students' background;
- students' feelings with respect to the degree in which the course goals and objectives were achieved;
- the relevance of the materials used and the degree in which they were adapted to the students' level, students' interests, and course goals and objectives;
- the general manner in which the course was taught with respect to issues such as the amount of time dedicated to every skill, the amount of homework given and self-study time allotted, types of activities, etc.;
- the teacher's performance, judged as objectively as possible, with respect to issues such as subject matter knowledge, course organization, classroom dynamics, class management, teaching techniques, fairness, accessibility, flexibility, enthusiasm, willingness to constantly provide feedback, positive attitude towards the students and the course contents, etc.
- the venue where the course was held, the resources available, plus any other "administrative" issues of interest to the way the course was conducted.

Any course critique is focused on two main aspects: what the students liked and what they disliked about the course. Obviously, each issue addressed may be as detailed as possible in order to provide an accurate assessment of the situation. For instance, learning activities or tasks may be listed and students may be asked to tick or circle those which were particularly useful in helping them meet the learning objectives of the course: reading materials, listening activities, pair or group work, group debates, case-studies,

writing tasks, homework, etc. On the other hand, students may also be asked to specify any factor or situation that had a negative impact on the course or even impeded their learning. Moreover, students may be asked to make an overall assessment of the effectiveness of the course and the teacher, using certain scales of quantitative scores. Any course feedback usually ends by asking students open questions such as "What did you like most about this course?", "What did you dislike about the course?" end even expecting them to make suggestions in order to improve the course in the future or make it a better learning experience.

Course evaluations are an important tool for the teacher and for those in charge with the respective study program if they are designed properly. Actually, the purpose of using surveys at the end of any course, module, or study program is that of **safeguarding the quality** of that course, module, or study program. Thus, strengths and weaknesses are identified, an assessment of the degree in which goals and objectives were accomplished is made, the areas that need attention, support, revision, improvement are identified, and the strategies which may be used for obtaining better results in the future are analyzed.

Questionnaires applied simultaneously to all the teachers teaching the same course or module as part of the same study program, no matter the foreign language center in which they teach, may provide a comprehensive picture that would reflect their general opinions and can be efficiently administered in terms of time and resources. On the other hand, just as it happens with end-of-course questionnaires, the survey has to be carefully designed so as to avoid confusion and negative reactions from the teachers (if they think they are being evaluated in order to be criticized, not in order to be helped to optimize their activity or to optimize certain aspects of the course).

A first step that must be taken in designing the end-of-course questionnaires for teachers should be analyzing key aspects regarding the manner in which questionnaires are built. Research on the internet [1] revealed



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interesting perspectives and significant tools to be used and thus, we considered it useful to devote the next part of the paper to the most important factors to be taken into account when designing a questionnaire.

2. USEFUL TIPS FOR MAKING A QUESTIONNAIRE

It is common practice in the business world to give questionnaires, to perform surveys, in order to gain information from a target audience. People use this tool in marketing, in media, in politics, and in various other domains. The results can lead to re-branding, decision-making and policy changes depending on the feedback. (www.wikihow.com) The types of questions asked and the style used will largely depend on the audience and the information the initiators are attempting to obtain. It is very important to design the questionnaire properly; otherwise, the results may prove irrelevant or worthless.

The first step is deciding what exactly you are interested in finding out from the questionnaire. By asking yourself how you will use the data obtained you can infer the questions you must ask and the order in which to ask them. Also, one must keep in mind that the shorter the questionnaire, the better chances it will have to be completed properly, fully, and in due time. This, however, should not lead to questionnaires which are too short or who lack certain questions that may reveal key aspects of interest to the one who designs and applies the questionnaire.

Any questionnaire should be preceded by an introduction which should be both short and comprehensive and should include the following issues (www.accesscable.net):

- The purpose of the survey and its relevance for the one who initiates it and even more so for the one supposed to complete it;
- What may be done with the results and what possible impact the results may have;
- Due date for response;
- Person of contact.

In most cases, questionnaires range in design from those using open-ended questions, where the people asked are able to give their full opinions, to those using simply yes or no questions. In both cases, the questions and answers (where applicable) must be phrased using as few words as possible. Open-ended questions are relevant because they tend to bring more feedback as they are bound to offer insight from the target audience. Yet, if the goal is to obtain specific answers to questions, these may not be so useful, as people may be more guided toward answers by closed questions. The closed questions have several answers given and the respondent should tick or circle one or sometimes more than one answers. A questionnaire made up of this type of questions may be easier to decipher and interpret, but it may be less meaningful than the other type. Moreover, the list of questions needs to be quite long. It is equally true that most of times an effective questionnaire consists of both open-ended and closed questions as this is the best way to get a lot of information and in-depth feedback. Regarding the open-ended questions, plenty of space should be left for the respondents to answer, however without exaggerating, as too much space may be considered intimidating by some people who might think "oh, what am I going to fill all that space with?"

The next step is prioritizing questions: starting from general to specific, from the most important to the least important ones, or the other way around, depending on your goal and on the target audience (as long as you know its basic characteristics). The multiple choice answers can be scaled (www.ehow.com), ranging from “I fully agree” to “I completely disagree” or from “excellent” to “very poor” or complete answers such as “I learned a lot” to “I learned nothing”. One should keep in mind the fact that words always tell more than numbers, so it will always be more useful to allow the respondents to answer using words rather than rating some items on a scale from 1 to 5 for instance. Still, when using ranking on a numerical scale, the instructions must be very clear with respect to what each number means.

3. CASE-STUDY – A POSSIBLE QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ENGLISH TEACHERS IN MILITARY FOREIGN LANGUAGE CENTERS

Starting the academic year 2012-2013, it has been decided to introduce a new type of study programs for foreign language learning, made up of modules and abiding by the Common European Framework. The syllabi have been designed as such and foreign language teachers have been instructed so as to carry out their teaching using them. The general idea was that, given the assumption of an adequate selection process, in order to optimize the training process, the duration of each face-to-face module should basically decrease and should necessarily be followed by an on-line module. This type of blended learning is supposed to make students reach the 2222 STANAG level at the end of the intermediate course and the 3333 STANAG level at the end of the advanced course. In order to have an overall picture of the way in which these new syllabi, as well as these new periods of instructions, and finally the program in itself are functioning, we considered it beneficial to develop a questionnaire for teachers. The questions were discussed on

various occasions within the Foreign Language Department, “Carol I” National Defense University.

Considering its purposes mentioned above, this particular questionnaire should be directed less towards finding out things related to the teacher’s style and strategies and more towards finding out things related to the amount of time per module versus the amount of knowledge comprised in the syllabi, as well as students’ reactions viewed through their performance. This should be applied at the end of each face-to-face module and ideally should be completed by all the teachers, from all the foreign language centers in the Romanian armed forces, irrespective of the language taught. Obviously, it should be in Romanian.

Rules say that in order to receive honest answers, questionnaires should be given anonymously. However, in this particular instance, probably any teacher should have a stake in depicting the real situation and drawing conclusions which may improve in the long run the educational process. One final point to be mentioned is that in order to maximize the level of feedback received, all sorts of questions will be used (open-ended, yes/no, scaled, multiple choice).

The first few questions are meant to establish the respondent’s profile:

- **How long have you been teaching?**
- **How long have you been teaching in the military system of foreign language education?**
- **What module have you completed?**

The next questions will be related to the content of the respective module:

- **How often were the following activities a primary focus of instruction for your target group (on a scale including *never, less than once / week, 1-2 times / week, 3-4 times / week, every day*)?**
 - **Vocabulary**
 - **Language functions**
 - **Reading comprehension**
 - **Listening**
 - **Grammar**



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- Writing tasks (in the classroom)
 - Exam tasks
 - In the module you taught (on a scale including *never, less than once / week, 1-2 times / week, 3-4 times / week, every day*) how able were you:
 - To communicate the subject matter appropriately
 - To stimulate students' interest
 - To motivate students
 - To "negotiate" course content by adapting it to students' real needs
 - In your opinion, which is/are the most difficult sub-skill/sub-skills to acquire:
 - In the module you taught, which was the skill you devoted the most time to? Why?
 - In the module you taught, which was the skill you devoted the least time to? Why?
- The next questions will address students' reactions as perceived by the teacher:
- Did students usually work hard for good results in your group?
 - _ Yes
 - _ No
 - Were there exceptionally passive or demotivated students in your group? If so, how many?
 - _ Yes students out of
 - _ No
 - In your opinion, were there students who failed to reach the objectives of the module for all / at least three skills? If so, how many?
 - _ Yes students out of
 - _ No
 - Why do you think they failed?
 - _ lack of motivation
 - _ health problems
 - _ lack of effort
 - _ lack of time because of job-related duties
 - _ lack of a previous language course
 - _ difference in level or of other nature from his/her colleagues
 - _ some other reason
 - Please, specify the reason:
 - How often did you assign homework and self-study activities?
 - _ every day
 - _ 3-4 times / week
 - _ 1-2 times / week
 - _ seldom
 - _ never
 - Please, specify the reason why you never assigned homework:
 - How much time did you expect students to spend doing their self-study assignments?
 - _ 30 minutes
 - _ 1 hour
 - _ 2 hours and more
 - _ I did not assign homework
 - How often did most of your students complete the home assignments?
 - _ always
 - _ most of the time
 - _ seldom
 - _ never
 - How much time did you have to give feedback to students during the module you taught?
 - _ after every activity
 - _ only after group activities

- _ only after home assignments
- _ never

In your opinion, which are the strongest features of the way the foreign language learning program is structured? Which are the strongest features of the module you taught?

In your opinion, which are the weakest features of the way the foreign language learning program is structured? Which are the weakest features of the module you taught?

4. CONCLUSIONS

All the questions in the questionnaire for teachers may very well reveal useful insight not only regarding the way the course went, but also regarding teachers' subjective opinions and feelings. This information can be used to modify the content of the course, be more realistic about the objectives of the course and the possibility to fulfill them over a certain period of time. In addition, the questionnaires will shed new light on the students' needs and expectations and on ways to improve their motivation and commitment. By having a more comprehensive language program, the rate of success will also increase together with students' participation and motivation.

Cumulated further on with the data resulting from the STANAG evaluation of students after the course ends, the information

gathered from students' critique, and the supervisors' impressions, the decision makers may thus have an extremely useful tool for performing an overall assessment of the module and, by extension, the study program too. In the end, by analyzing the feedback, they will be able to alter or redesign the courses by polishing some of its rough edges and obtaining a better version that will meet both beneficiaries' and teachers' demands on the one hand and students' expectations on the other.

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