

A Program Evaluation Journey: Does continuous change reflect student needs?

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Considering the recent trends in any field of research, such keywords as ‘ongoing assessment’ and ‘constant change’ immediately reflect the extent to which evaluation has been an integral part of any program as it helps its construction and reconstruction. In the field of education, the importance it wields doubles as the main aim is to create a meaningful change in students’ behaviors so any program evaluation can be perceived as the ‘lifelong learning process’ the program itself undergoes.

The present study emerged as part of a wider curriculum renewal project (CRP) in the School of Foreign Languages (SFL) of the Middle East Technical University (METU), where English is the medium of instruction. The Department of Modern Languages (DML) has the mission of equipping the METU students with the necessary English language skills to carry out academic studies at international standards. DML offers four integrated-skills courses aiming to improve students’ academic language skills. In line with CRP, an extensive needs-analysis study was conducted for each course and suggested modifications were applied in terms of materials, objectives, teaching practices, and evaluation procedures.

In 2005, an academic oral presentation course (ENG 211) was evaluated in terms of whether changes CRP brought about were successfully implemented considering the achievement of objectives, the effectiveness of teaching activities and materials, and the success of the assessment procedures. The curriculum committee has been arranging idea-sharing sessions among instructors in order to address the most crucial problems emerged as a result of this evaluation. However, whether the recent alterations reflect the student demands is a vital issue to be addressed. Thus, this paper explores the extent to which students’ needs and perceptions are reflected in the current revisions and how these perceptions can be implemented in the

ongoing process of change. More specifically the following research questions have been addressed:

Both instructors and students have been consulted via questionnaires and written feedback (see App. 1 for research tools) aiming to detect their perception about the ongoing evaluation and its effects. More specifically, with the help of questionnaires, instructors were asked whether they had been observing any changes in the curriculum, and whether or not these changes addressed students' needs and the urgent problems related to the course. Students, on the other hand, were asked to rate the course in terms of its relation to their academic needs. Also, they were asked whether they demand changes to solve the problems about the course. In order to identify whether both instructors and students would come up with similar expectations or problems, we collected written feedback throughout the semester. The rationale was not only to figure out whether students were aware of their own needs but also to see whether instructors correctly inspected and reflected their students' needs and problems. More specifically, the following research questions were investigated:

- To what extent are students' needs and perceptions reflected in the current revisions?

- How can these perceptions be implemented in the ongoing process of change?

Data from quantitative analysis show that 64 % of the students (Figure 1) and 40 % of the instructors agreed that the course effectively addressed students' academic needs (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Student Response to Needs

“ENG 211course effectively addresses my needs in academic presentation skills.”

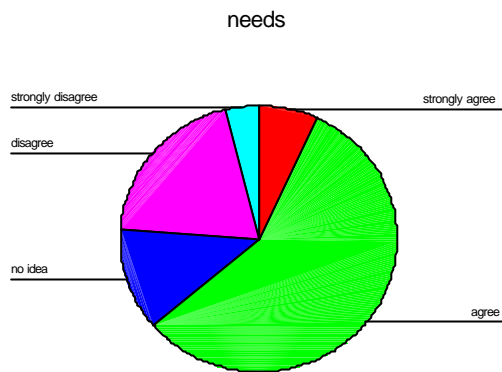
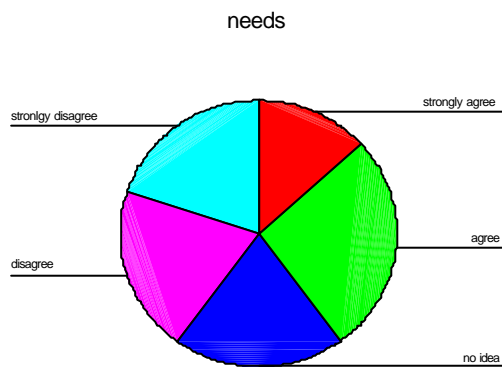


Figure 2: Instructor Response to Needs

“The recent changes reflect our students’ needs.”



On the other hand, only 19 % of the students graded the course as problem-free while 57 % announced that they had urgent problems to be solved about this course (Figure 3). However, instructors presented a different attitude by agreeing 40 % of the time that the recent changes in the course had addressed their urgent problems (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Student Response to Problems

“There should be changes to solve my urgent problems in this course.”

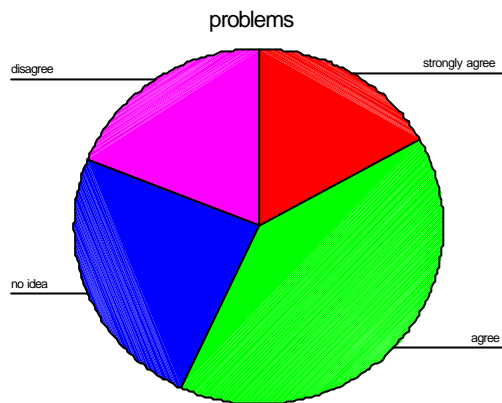
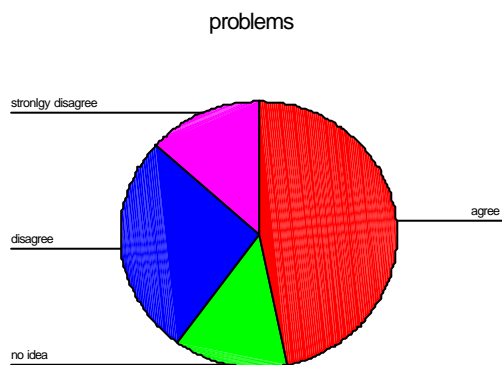


Figure 4: Instructor Response to Problems

“The recent changes effectively addressed our urgent problems.”



	57 % (agree)	40% (agree)
Table 1: Summary of the results	Students	Instructors
Are there any urgent problems?	19 % (disagree)	46.7 % (disagree)
Are the needs addressed?	64 % (agree)	40% (agree)
	24 % (no idea)	13.3 % (no idea)
	24 % (disagree)	40 % (disagree)
	12 % (no idea)	20 % (no idea)

To summarize, although a great number of students agree that the course is in line with their needs, instructors are less optimistic than students in thinking that the course meets students' needs. This picture definitely raises several questions. First of all, as far as the perceptions about needs are considered, student responses indicate that they show undeniable amount of appreciation for what the course has been offering so far whereas instructors find the course less successful in meeting the students' needs. This might be due to a perfectionist approach among instructors.

However, the percentage of instructors who have no idea about whether the course addresses the needs is so high that it might be pointing to an underlying problem. The reason behind this type of approach could be certain degree of uncertainty among instructors about the course objectives or student needs. If this is the case, the department should seek ways of training its members to have homogeneous expectations in terms of course aims and objectives. Alternatively, one could also maintain that a group of instructors do not make enough reflections on this issue or they might be considering the course as a ready and perfect package to teach. Those instructors might have a point in having this type of an attitude as the whole process of constructing and renewing the courses in our department has been based on extensive needs analysis and constant evaluation of the program. Yet this might well be a sign of a serious problem. That is, some instructors might be taking their role as a mere practitioner who should have no say in the construction or evaluation of the course. To see if that is the case, it is certain that a further study should conduct a more detailed analysis and should try to come up with various ways of motivating those instructors to participate in every level of program construction. Also important to investigate is to see whether this trend among 20 % of instructors is due to a lack of faith in the possibility of constructive and positive changes within the program, which would be even a more serious problem to be tackled with.

As for the perceptions about urgent problems, majority of students think that there are urgent problems that should be solved immediately, which stands in opposition to their positive attitudes towards the question about the needs. Instructors, on the other hand, seem to present a consistent approach as those finding the course problematic in terms of addressing student needs also think there are problems that need urgent attention.

At this point it is important to highlight one concern: although changes are being made in line with the previous program evaluation and needs analysis results, most of the stakeholders still demand changes. Moreover, students and instructors come up with different needs and problems (see App 2 for the list of needs and problems provided via written feedback). For instance, while most of the instructors mark standardization as an urgent problem, only three out of hundred students do so. Similarly, most of the students see the work load and unrealistic expectations as their primary concern whereas none of the instructors come up with this issue. Interestingly, the instructor responses are in line with the previous course evaluation results but student responses do not reflect it at all. This might be due to data collection tools used in the previous evaluation studies in which guided questions rather than open ended items were used. For instance, students were asked whether they would have received the same grade if they had taken the course from another instructor, which was an item which elicited a positive response. In the current study, guiding questions for written feedback were quite open-ended, which provided an open forum for bringing up any ideas.

Another interesting issue is the fact that some instructors substantiated their view that there are no problems with the course by reminding the extensive needs analysis conducted previously. We suggest that this results from varying perceptions among instructors about the program design process. That is, some instructors regard it as a state rather than a process. Here, it should be noted that the fact that there has been a needs analysis does not eliminate the possibility of emerging needs or problems.

To sum up, most of the instructors voice the ideal needs rather than the real needs of their students. What is the nature of real needs? They reflect real problems rather than predicted ones. Here, we don't underestimate the value of teacher perception but we underline the importance of student inclusion in every level of decision-making (i.e. curriculum design and evaluation). How about the instructor perceived needs? They tend to reflect needs that are desired to exist in an ideal context. This also causes "we, the knower" and "them, the ignorant" dichotomy. If students are considered unable to realize their needs and problems, they should soon to forget their existing ability. To tune our voice with "the other" to have more participatory evaluation studies it is crucial to empower students to be aware of their needs and problems and to encourage willingness to offer suggestions.

How about needs analysis? We think they are effective tools to understand the mainstream tendency but we need to make it an integral and ongoing part of our curriculum rather than considering it as a procedural stage that should be conducted before curriculum design. We conduct needs analysis, and design our curriculum, but each cohort reflects very unique expectations. Then the only alternative is to make each curriculum a modular one that adjusts to some aspects in line with the arising needs.

Appendix 1

Student Questionnaire

1- I think the ENG 211 course effectively address my needs in academic presentation skills.

- Strongly Agree Agree No idea Disagree
 Strongly Disagree

2- I think there should be changes to solve my urgent problems in this course.

- Strongly Agree Agree No idea Disagree
 Strongly Disagree

Student Feedback Guiding Questions

1. Could you please list your needs in terms of academic presentation skills?
2. Could you please name the urgent problems in this course as you see them?
3. Are there any points you would like to raise?

Teacher Questionnaire

1- I think there have been changes in the ENG 211 course in the last two semesters.

Strongly Agree Agree No idea Disagree

Strongly Disagree

2- I think the recent changes effectively addressed our urgent problems.

Strongly Agree Agree No idea Disagree

Strongly Disagree

3- I think the changes so far reflect our students' needs.

Strongly Agree Agree No idea Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Teacher Feedback Guiding Questions

1. Which aspects of the ENG 211 course have been changed?
2. Could you please list the current problems that have to be solved urgently?
3. What do you think our students need in terms of oral presentation skills?
4. Are there any points you would like to raise?