



EFFECTS AND EFFECTIVENESS OF LANGUAGE COURSE EVALUATION: A CASE STUDY NEEDS, PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT, AND EVALUATION

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Summary

Evaluation is a critical but frequently underutilized part of the (language) course development process. Instructors' reasons for avoiding it vary, but often include the concern that conducting evaluations will draw time and attention away from course content. Using All Write, a first-year writing course at the University of Antwerp, as a case study, this paper shows how mechanisms for feedback and evaluation can be incorporated into course materials with minimal impact, as well as demonstrates the benefits of evaluation as both a validation process and a guide for course revision. Moreover, it will show how the stakeholders may be drawn into the process and potentially benefit from it.

When designing a new language program, decisions have to be made taking into account information from different sources. Information is traditionally streamlined by carrying out a needs analysis (e.g. Brown 1995; Munby 1978) taking the form of both learner/teacher analysis (Dudley-Evans & St John 1998) and task analysis (Long and Crookes 1992, Jasso-Aguilar 1999, Flowerdew & Peacock 2001). While the learner/teacher analysis aims to wed demographic information about learners (e.g. age, nationality, home language) with their language and learning perceptions, goals, and priorities, task analysis (often including deficiency analysis, West 1997) specifies and categorizes the language skills needed to perform real-world communicative tasks, mapped onto the knowledge and skills present. As such, task analysis follows learner/teacher analysis in trying to answer questions like:

- Why do you wish to learn the language;
- What is your academic context like; and
- Which skills and knowledge do you need in order to accomplish this?

On the basis of the data obtained, objectives can be formulated. Examples include encouraging learners to develop confidence in using the L2 (an affective goal), to enhance skills in monitoring performance in written language (a learning goal), to establish and maintain relationships through exchanging information, ideas, and experiences (a communicative goal), and to develop the ability to study at university (a cognitive goal). In the course of program development, overall goals have to be translated into instructional objectives while ensuring that they are appropriate to learner needs (and preferences), as well as address real-world limitations like the constraints of the educational system and institution, and the length and scope of the program.

However, once a needs analysis has been completed and a program has been designed, the development process is not over. The course (outcome) must be assessed, evaluated, and revisions must be implemented in a course update, as “the heart of the systematic approach to language curriculum design is evaluation: the part of the model that includes, connects, and gives meaning to all the other elements” (Brown, 1995, p. 217). Unfortunately, in practice, evaluation is often treated as an afterthought rather than a process of validation integral to the course.

Ideally, program evaluation should be ongoing, and the assessment data should be collected from as representative a sample as possible. Since evaluation may be considered a “never-ending needs analysis, the goal of which is to constantly refine the ideas gathered in the initial needs analysis such that the program can do an even better job of meeting those needs” (Brown, 1995, p.233), data on student needs and performance should ideally be collected throughout a program’s lifespan, and be used to periodically undertake appropriate revisions of an established program.

Course designers and instructors may be hesitant to undertake evaluations of their classes for a variety of reasons. Some fear negative results, such that students dislike the course or find it ineffective; others are concerned about the potential impact of such an endeavor given limited course time, student attention, and resources. Here, we intend to show that incorporating evaluation into a course does not have to be “costly”, and that “negative” feedback can be used to inform productive revisions of course structure and materials.

In the next section we will elaborate on how an evaluation process has been integrated into a writing program for tertiary language students at the University of Antwerp.

Case Study: *All Write*

All Write, an introductory writing course for first-year students, was created as a direct response to writing produced by undergraduates at the University of Antwerp. A few years before the course’s inception, a systematic study had shown that the students’ writing was

not up to the standards of university staff, and that the students' skills did not improve over time, nor did students know how to improve them (Van de Poel & Brunfaut, 2004). However, in the existing university curriculum, students were not explicitly taught to produce "academic" writing.

Before this first year Bachelor's course was designed, a thorough needs analysis was conducted along three major axes: 1) institutional perception of needs (i.e. the expectations students were held to in the new three-year Bachelor's curriculum); 2) staff perceptions of student needs (i.e. areas in which the staff perceived deficiencies in current students' performance); and 3) student perceptions of their own needs. While each group's perceptions were not always given equal weight in every step of the course design process (e.g. staff views of student needs as evaluated through second-year students' assignments were given more weight than students' perceptions of content suitability), a good faith attempt was made to address the views of all stakeholders.

All Write aims to serve as a basic introduction to formal writing in an academic context, prepare students for written exams in their first year (and beyond), and prepare students for writing essays and other exercises. The course's core textbook (which is supported with reflection and practice materials on the learning platform *Blackboard*) consists of six chapters which focus on foundational skills in writing. *All Write* takes a "bottom-up" approach: each chapter builds on skills and material from previous chapters, with the sixth (final) chapter bringing together the previous five chapters' material through the introduction and explanation of the writing process.

Course Evaluation

Multiple mechanisms for evaluation were built into the course materials, as evaluation was considered a critical component of the course from its inception. With each chapter, students were posed "reflection" (open-ended) questions in the course text, completed a series of "reflection" and "reinforcement" (multiple-choice, closed) exercises on *Blackboard*, and completed a feedback questionnaire (included in appendix). Reflection and reinforcement exercises (which were not marked; students received credit for completion only) primarily focused on course content, providing a window on how students understood the material presented. However, each set of reflection exercises concluded with the following question:

What did you learn from this chapter? You may want to focus on: Theoretical or practical content; your time-management in dealing with the reflection tasks, reinforcement tasks, etc.; your attitude to writing and learning about it; your learning

routes (how do you try to internalise this material); etc. Is there anything you missed in this chapter and you would like us to include next time?

The feedback questionnaire asked students how much time they spent on various aspects of the materials and learning process; how difficult and useful they found particular course elements (on a Likert scale); what they learned that week; whether they found any mistakes in the course materials; and for any further comments for the course designers.

At the end of the one-semester course, students were given a general feedback questionnaire (included in appendix) asking them how frequently they used different parts of the book; how useful they found these parts; how they felt about the online (*Blackboard*) components; if they had used the course material outside of class; if they thought they would use the material in the future; and for any further comments for the course designers. Lastly, as a final exam, students were asked to write an outline for a short academic paper evaluating the course.

All of these forms of evaluation were integrated into the coursework, and had minimal impact on the course's content, time allocation, and resources. Simply asking students to reflect on the course (content, related learning routines, outstanding questions) as a weekly assigned exercise provides course designers with an excellent source of feedback (i.e., evaluation data) while providing students with an additional opportunity to review what they have learned and, through this reflection, to increase their awareness of their own learning (content and routes/routines) and learning outcomes (what they have (not) learned so far), skills they will need when compiling a CV or European Language Portfolio^{*}. This encourages students to be active participants in the learning process, fostering a sense of co-ownership in their own education, a key transition for students to make as they move from secondary school to university.

Because *All Write* was an entirely new course serving a new function in the curriculum, additional feedback was also solicited outside course materials. Six months after the conclusion of the course, an online follow-up survey was sent to all course participants to see how students viewed the course materials after having completed their first academic year in university. Finally, faculty who worked with students in related courses were asked if *All Write* had noticeably affected the overall quality of writing students were producing. This "data", however, were impressionistic and preliminary. A more systematic evaluation of student work by faculty is currently being undertaken.

^{*} The Europass Language Passport was developed by the Council of Europe as part of the European Language Portfolio which consists of three documents: the Language Passport, the Language Biography and the Dossier. http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/europass/home/vernav/Europasss+Documents/Europass+Language+Passport/navigate.action?locale_id=1

As a final note, it should be emphasized that it was made clear to students that their marks in the course were not affected by the nature of the feedback (positive/negative) they gave. Students were given points on the basis of participation (were the exercises and evaluation forms completed) for the six chapters, and then for the structure (did they follow appropriate conventions constructing an argument and an academic paper) of their final outline-exam. While the content of these tasks was read and analyzed for the purposes of evaluating the course, as described herein, it was never the basis for any student's mark. Linking the content of a student's feedback to an evaluation of his or her performance in the course would render any data collected inherently biased and therefore useless.

Evaluation Results

Feedback from students of *All Write* was overwhelmingly positive. A majority of the course components were well received, with relatively consistent results between chapter-by-chapter evaluations and the general feedback questionnaire^{*}. An overwhelming majority of students (>80%) rated the chapters' primary components—an outline of objectives and outcomes; theory; applications; and summaries—(very) useful. Students were somewhat less enthusiastic about lexical resources (with (very) useful ratings for terminology explanations and word banks just above 50%), but were quite positive about both book- and *Blackboard*-based exercises (nearly all considered (very) useful by more than 80% of respondents). This feedback affirmed that both the overall course content and format were on-target and appropriate.

Initial, informal feedback from faculty also hinted that the course had been successful in raising students' awareness, one of the course's secondary aims. Instructors working with students in related first-year English courses reported that while they did not see marked improvement in the quality of writing students were producing as compared to previous cohorts, they did note that students were able to discuss their writing with greater ease. These preliminary data indicate that the course may have made students more aware of their own writing capacities, and given them both meta-language and a framework for thinking about their writing. A more systematic evaluation by faculty, currently being carried out, should yield further information and detail in this area.

^{*} Percentage of students considering the following content (very) useful:

1. Objectives and outcomes section: 88.8% to 97.5% (per chapter) vs. 89.5% (general feedback);
2. Theory section: 91.3% to 100% (per chapter) vs. 100% (general feedback);
3. Application section: 88.8% to 96.1% (per chapter) vs. 94.8% (general feedback);
4. Summaries: 84.2% (general feedback);
5. Terminology explanations: 57.2% to 78.0% (per chapter) vs. 52.6% (general evaluation);
6. Word banks: 50.5% (general evaluation);
7. Book-based reflection exercises: 88.6% to 96.1% (per chapter) vs. 94.8% (general feedback);
8. *Blackboard* reflection exercises: 83.8% to 88.3% (per chapter) vs. 78.9% (general feedback);
9. *Blackboard* reinforcement exercises: 86.3% to 97.1% (per chapter) vs. 86.8% (general feedback).

Giving students the opportunity to provide feedback following the end of the academic year provided an additional perspective on the utility of various course components. As might be expected, it was the course theory and the chapter summaries students found most useful in retrospect (with 46.7% considering each among the most useful sections for exams, while 48.4% and 58.1% considered theory and summaries, respectively, among the most useful components for their course work). Summaries were also the component students reread the most (62.1%) after the class was over. These data confirmed that students were continuing to use the course material (particularly its core components) as a reference, and that including chapter summaries—which were intended to be used as references—was an appropriate decision.

Student comments in open-ended feedback also provided an informative window on which content was particularly new or striking to them (e.g. plagiarism), as well as what changes they would like to see made to the course. In general, students requested more opportunities to practice their skills (more exercises both in class and on *Blackboard*; more writing assignments), more individualized feedback, and more progressive feedback (i.e. along the way, as students work through the course). Students also felt there was too much repetition between the various elements of the course (e.g. material covered in class followed the book too closely; similar or identical reflection tasks appeared in both the hardcopy book and on *Blackboard*). This feedback indicated specific areas in need of additional attention and improvement, and provided invaluable guidance for revising and updating the course.

Overall, the course was shown to have appropriate content and high face validity with students. This high face validity indicates that instructors in the extended environment of the writing course could also benefit from its materials (comparable to the second year academic writing course, *Scribende*, whose writing scale is currently used in the literature courses and has been adapted to other languages). Ideally, language curriculum cuts across literature, linguistics and language proficiency, which each have different traditions. Academic writing may be embedded in any of them, as writing is not done in a vacuum. The evaluation data indicate that students have already grasped this idea, as some used the *All Write* materials and insights for other classes and writing assignments

Conclusion

Any writing program has multiple stakeholders, each with their own long-term and short-term aims. Students are a program's primary beneficiaries; their perceived needs and desires must be addressed for them to consider the course relevant, and maintain their motivation and full participation. While an initial needs analysis provides direction in terms of addressing those concerns, evaluation—a critical and underutilized component of the

curriculum development process—tells us whether our strategies for meeting stakeholders' needs have been effective, and how we can further improve. Mechanisms for evaluation can be integrated into a course with minimal impact on the content and learning process; in some cases, asking students to reflect on what they are learning may even be beneficial.

In the case of *All Write*, a thorough needs analysis led to a course with high face validity that was generally well-received by students. Evaluation data confirmed that overall course content and format was appropriate for the target audience. Preliminary feedback from faculty also indicated that students seemed more aware of their own writing capacities and were able to communicate them more effectively with staff following the course. However, there is always room for improvement, and the evaluation data also indicated areas which could benefit from revision. On the basis of the feedback collected and analyzed, revisions of the course were undertaken; changes (including updated exercises, additional in-class examples, and—of course—updated evaluation instruments) are being instituted, so that the cycle may begin again.

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