

Implementation of Qualitative Evaluation in Japanese University EFL Classes

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Introduction

More and more Japanese universities implement student evaluation in many undergraduate classes. They usually administer a survey to students at the end of the semester or the end of the year. Then the results of the survey, with statistical or quantitative analysis, are distributed to the individual teachers. Each school spends a lot of time and money for this student evaluation; however, they never follow up on how teachers reflect on the evaluation and how each teacher improves his or her teaching performance in classroom. Consequently, the school's major goal for the evaluation becomes getting information and analyzing figures rather than improving the teacher's performance. Sanders (2000) says that getting information is not enough for evaluation. He expresses his concern that it will be a waste of time and effort if "an evaluation sits on a shelf or receives no follow-up" (p. 52).

One of the main reasons that teachers do not attempt to improve their performance is due to the problem of quantitative evaluation itself. For example, the survey one school conducts every semester, in which there are only closed response questions. According to Brown (2001), "closed responses are responses for which optional answers are presented as part of the question, and the respondents are required to select the answer of their choice" (p. 35). One of the questions on the survey is whether students are satisfied with the class or not. Suppose 60% of the students respond that they are not satisfied. Then the teacher may wonder why students are not satisfied. However, without finding out reasons for students' dissatisfaction, how can the teacher improve his or her teaching performance in class?

Regarding the limitations of the survey method, Patton (2002, p. 193) says:

What did people really mean when they marked that answer on the questionnaire? What elaboration can respondents provide to clarify responses? How do the various dimensions of analysis fit together as a whole from the perspective of respondents?

The purpose of this paper is to show how we can implement qualitative evaluation in Japanese universities' EFL classes and why it is an effective method for improving

EFL classes. In my paper, I focus on the qualitative evaluation of the TOEIC (Test of English as an international Communication) preparation class at Konan University, but this evaluation method can apply to many other EFL classes as well.

Differentiating Quantitative from Qualitative Research and Evaluation

With regard to the evaluation, it is useful to know the difference between quantitative and qualitative research and evaluation. Gall, Gall, and Borg (1999) say quantitative research is used when you deal with numerical data and statistical analysis. Qualitative research is used when you are involved in verbal data and subjective analysis. In addition, qualitative research is used when you would like to find out more about what is happening, what people feel and what their experiences are. For example, about two years ago, I administered a TOEIC preparation course survey to Konan University students who were enrolled in this course. In order to evaluate and improve this course in the future, I asked various questions regarding teaching, materials and exercises in general. Each question consisted of closed and open responses. More than three hundred students participated in this study. In each question, I was able to get a frequency distribution, for example, 20% of the students responded that the text was not good. Quantitative analysis allowed me to understand what the students generally felt about the course; however, this analysis had limitations. I was not able to find out why the text was not good. Open responses helped me better understand the students' experiences and feelings. Some students mentioned that the text was not challenging and the level of the text did not seem to match the level of the actual TOEIC test. With this information, I was able to find out why some students thought the text was not good.

Patton (2002) states, "Qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed information about a much smaller number of people and cases" (p. 14). He also says these methods allow us to get a deeper understanding of the cases and situations. For example, about ten years ago I worked at a large private English language school in Japan. We conducted a survey among English teachers about their classes. Many teachers responded that pair-work was working well and most students liked the pair-work in class. Later I group-interviewed students (a total of one hundred) and many of the students said the teacher spent too much time on pair-work. They said they wanted to talk to the teacher rather than their fellow students in class because that was the only time they had a chance to talk to a native-English speaking person. Once they got outside, they had no chance to speak in English (Tsuda, 1998). By interviewing students, I was able to find out more about students' experiences in classrooms as well as outside.

Implementation of Qualitative Evaluation in Konan University EFL classes

In December 2001, we conducted a survey in intermediate TOEIC preparation class at Konan University. Our survey consisted of both closed and open responses for each question.

Overall, the survey results were very positive; students thought that the TOEIC preparation class seemed to be helpful for learning test-taking strategies. However, the survey also elicited several things we needed to improve, and based on the survey results, we made the following changes (Tsuda, 2003):

1. We created three different levels instead of the current two levels.
2. We incorporated more challenging materials into each level.
3. We added authentic supplementary materials so that students would be able to better prepare for the TOEIC test.
4. We encouraged more students to take the TOEIC test.

Even though we made some changes, we still felt there was much more we could do to improve the TOEIC preparation class, and in order to improve this class, we needed to reconsider our formative evaluation method. First of all, in spite of students' responses to the survey, we could not get a full picture of what was going on in actual classrooms. For qualitative formative evaluation, Patton (2002) suggests observation and he mentions one of the advantages is that "through direct observations the inquirer is better able to understand and capture the context within which people interact" (p. 262).

Secondly, this survey research had limitations since some students never responded to open questions. For this reason, we could never clarify the meaning behind their closed responses. Patton (2002) says that follow-up interviews of respondents can give more detailed information and make it easy to interpret survey results. For our subsequent evaluation, we incorporated classroom observation and interviews in order to find out what was happening in classrooms and how students felt about the class. Then, the resulting of qualitative data would help us improve TOEIC preparation course in the future.

Classroom Observation

Wajnryb (1992) says that the main purpose of classroom observation is to help teachers develop their performance and grow. Day (1990, p. 43) states the following goals of classroom observation:

- developing a terminology for understanding and discussing the teaching process
- developing an awareness of the principles and decision-making that underline effective teaching
- distinguishing between effective and ineffective classroom practices

In spring of 2003, we had a TOEIC preparation class meeting and I made the announcement that I would observe each teacher's class for 40 to 45 minutes. The purpose of classroom observation is to find out more about what is happening in class and see how we can improve our teachers' and students' performance. I observed 12 Intermediate TOEIC teachers in May and June and I used Richard's (1998) guidelines to focus my observations.

1. How the teacher starts a lesson

Since this is the TOEIC test preparation class, most teachers started out the lesson by giving students a quiz that is related to the content of the text, which was either vocabulary, grammar or reading comprehension. In some classes, the quiz lasted five to ten minutes. After the quiz, students exchanged their quizzes with the student sitting next to them and corrected and graded their quiz.

2. How the teacher allots time within a lesson

Most teachers had students spend their time working on exercises from the TOEIC textbook. Exercises were either grammar, reading comprehension or listening comprehension. After students completed their exercises, the teacher went over the answers and made additional comments such as grammar explanation and vocabulary definition.

In addition to using the text, some teachers brought supplementary material. A couple of teachers passed out a transcript of music and had the students listen to music and fill in the blanks. One teacher had the students listen to the tape and write down sentences. A few other teachers gave out a handout of grammar exercises and had the students work on them. Another teacher brought a vocabulary-building handout and had students memorize useful sentences in class. Overall, those teachers who spent time using supplementary materials tried to reinforce students' grammatical skills, vocabulary, listening and reading comprehension.

3. How the teacher assigns tasks to students

Most teachers simply explained to the students what they were supposed to do and how much time they could spend on exercises. Before assigning tasks, some teachers had the students pay attention to the focus of the exercises. One teacher wrote some examples and asked some students to make sure they understood the objective of exer-

cises and what they are supposed to do in exercises.

4. How the teacher interacts with students and how students interact with other students

Because this is not a speaking class, many teachers simply assigned the students to work on exercises such as listening to the tape and answering questions or working on grammar or reading comprehension exercises. In other words, a lot of time was spent on individual work. Then after this individual work, the teacher elicited answers from students and added extra information or clues to answers.

Some teachers incorporated pair-work and group work. For example, one teacher assigned pairs or groups and had them figure out reasons for their choices. Another teacher pre-assigned a group of three or four and always had them work together to come up with correct answers. One teacher assigned pair-work and had each pair read aloud the transcript of the tape and had them figure out meanings and answers.

Overall impression of classroom observation

Many teachers challenged students by giving assignments such as listening to the tape and working on various exercises, reading passages, memorizing sentences and working on grammar. Compared to other EFL classes, students seem to have a lot more things to do in these TOEIC preparation classes. Students looked well-prepared for class and serious about learning.

Meanwhile, I was able to see several things that I couldn't learn from the previous survey. First of all, some teachers simply gave away answers and explained to their students rather than having students figure out answers. For example, in one class the teacher asked several students to come up in front and write answers on the board. By the time the students completed the answers, the teacher started to explain the answers. What was the reason for the students to come up in front and write the answers on the board? All the students seemed to lose an opportunity to figure out the answers. In another class, the teacher asked an individual student for an answer and she added comments on the answer. This activity simply eliminated students' participation and opportunity for discovery. The teacher could pair-up students and have them compare answers and figure out reasons for their choices. Then the teacher could elicit answers and reasons from students.

Harmer (2001, p. 75) says, "instead of explicitly teaching the present perfect tense, for instance, we will expose students to examples of it and then allow them, under our guidance, to work out for themselves how it is used." Harmer points out that this discovering method is very effective in teaching, but from my observation, only a few

teachers practiced this method.

Another thing I learned from observation is that some teachers did not remember their students' names and some did not even call students by name to respond. They also had a lack of eye-contact with students. Concerning eye-contact with students, Harmer (1998) and Clark (2003) stress the importance of eye-contact with students because the teacher becomes aware of how students feel about their learning experiences.

Overall, by observing all the teachers' classes, I was able to gain knowledge of what was exactly happening in class and how teachers and students were performing.

Interviewing Students

According to Rubin and Rubin (1995, p. 83), the major goal for interviews is to "get the depth, detail, and nuance." In order to obtain more detailed information about students' classroom experiences in the TOEIC preparation class, I conducted a group interview as follows:

Procedure: I asked several teachers to ask students to participate in a group interview session (four students in class). I interviewed four students from the same class at one time with a total of 23 students (one class ended up with three students). After the interview, each student received a five hundred yen book certificate as an incentive.

Method: For each group I asked the following six questions:

1. Is the level of the class appropriate?
2. What do you think of the text?
3. Is the class useful for taking the TOEIC test and improving your English?
4. What exercises would you like to have more of and less of in class?
6. What is an ideal TOEIC class?
7. Any other comments or suggestions.

In order to keep an accurate record of the interview, I asked students for permission to use a tape recorder during the interview. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes.

Results of the Interview

1. The level of the class

From the year 2003, the intermediate TOEIC class was divided into three different levels: PI (pre-intermediate), IM (intermediate) and AV (advanced). However, we were wondering if the students were placed in an appropriate class or not. As a result of the interview, most students said that the level was just right. Here are some representative comments: "Neither too difficult nor too easy." "If I prepare, the class is not dif-

ficult.” “The level is a little higher than my level, but this is much better for me.” “I’m not good at English, but as long as I do my homework, I can keep up with the class.”

2. What do you think of the text?

Most students said the level of the text is about right, but since the textbook has no Japanese explanation, some students find it difficult to comprehend. One student said, “Because there is no Japanese in the text, I often don’t know the objectives of exercises until my teacher explains during the class.” A couple of students made positive comments about the text written only in English. One student said that she could remember main points better and another student said that it is good reading practice because the explanation and instructions are written in English. Some students mentioned that the text is useful for learning English related to business.

Judging from the students’ comments, the level of the text is appropriate and the content seems to be useful for the students. However, since the text has no Japanese language support, the teacher plays an important role in helping students understand what they are supposed to do, what they need to understand and what they need to accomplish during the class.

3. Is the class useful?

All the students said that the TOEIC class is useful for building vocabulary, improving listening and grammar. Some students felt that in addition to learning TOEIC strategies during the class, doing homework and preparing for quizzes, such activities as listening to a tape and memorizing vocabulary are very useful. One student said, “Listening to the tape and working on the dictation at home as homework is very useful.”

Some students made the following comments: “I’m getting used to listening to English. I’ve gradually increased my vocabulary.” “My teacher spends a lot of time for listening comprehension during the class. I think I’ve improved my listening a lot.”

4. What exercises would you like to have more and less in class?

Regarding what students would like to have more and less of in class, students’ responses reflected on what was actually taking place in the class. For example, in one class, a couple of students pointed out that because the teacher spends a lot of time for listening practice, they would like to have more reading exercises during the class. In another class, students would like to have more TOEIC-related exercises than spending a lot of time memorizing vocabulary during the class. In one class, students complained about using the supplementary material. They said that since the material has clear explanation in Japanese, they did not want to spend much time on it. They would

rather spend more time working on the main text.

Many students said that they would like to have more exercises during the class in order to prepare for the actual TOEIC test and several of them wanted to find out how much time they should spend on each part of the reading section. Overall, they would like to spend more time on practical exercises and how they cope with the time, and spend less time on unrelated practice such as memorizing vocabulary or exercises that they can do by themselves outside of the class.

5. What is an ideal TOEIC class?

Several students said that their classes are ideal because exercises are well-balanced, the teacher uses various techniques to help students improve their English and students can actively participate. According to the students' comments, an ideal TOEIC class consists of the following:

- Students can actively participate, give their opinions, ask questions and make comments.
- Classes are practical, useful and students can attain a substantial TOEIC score.
- There is a friendly atmosphere and students are easy to talk to their classmates.
- Students are motivated to improve themselves.

6. Any other comments or suggestions

In this section, students made positive comments as well as suggestions for improvement. Some positive comments are: "The teacher is very kind, so I'm not afraid of asking her questions." "The teacher gives extra information for the answers." "I really like my teacher. She is willing to answer any questions that students ask during the class." "I always feel a sense of accomplishment in this class." "The pace of the class is just right."

Students who made the following suggestions for improvement: "Some students cheat on a quiz and the teacher doesn't seem to be aware of it." "Pacing is slow." "I want the teacher to make this class more active so that the students don't feel like falling asleep." "The tape recorder is of very bad quality." "The classroom is chilly."

Results of the Interview

Although I asked only 23 students, I received a wealth of information from them. In addition, the information from the students seems to be more profitable than the survey I conducted two years ago. Here are some things I learned from the interview:

1. It is OK to give an incentive to students.

There might be some pros and cons about giving students an incentive. In this TOEIC class interview, students who participated received a 500 yen book certificate. They were neither unusual nor extremely motivated students. Rather, they seemed to represent the general population of TOEIC class students.

John Reed (2000) who has had extensive experience on this issue made the following comments:

We have paid and not paid incentives for focus groups for low-income folks as well as professionals and corporate CEOs. The bottom line is that in most cases the incentive doesn't make a lot of difference in terms of participation rates, especially if you have well-trained interviewers and well-designed data collection procedures.

2. Make sure that interviewees understand the purpose of the interview.

This is very significant. Otherwise you will get a variety of answers that are not related to what you want to find out. I explained to students the purpose of this interview and what I wanted to find out. This short explanation at the beginning seemed to help them understand what was expected of them during the interview. They also seemed to be relaxed, and they shared their own viewpoints related to each question. Patton (2002, p. 371) says, "First, a preface alerts interviewees to the nature of the question that is coming, directs their awareness, and focuses their attention."

3. Standardized open-ended questions helped us set the directions of the interview.

Although I was a little concerned that my interviewees would answer each of my questions in only a few sentences, they elaborated on their answers by using clear examples. Then, as soon as they stopped talking, I was able to move on to the next question. As a result, I was able to cover all the questions in about 25 minutes. Furthermore, because I prepared questions beforehand, the interview seemed to go smoothly and efficiently. If I had conducted an informal conversational interview, we could not have focused on any particular topics and might have ended up going anywhere.

4. Clarification is a big advantage of an interview.

In my survey research experience, I often find it difficult to interpret students written comments in response to a questionnaire. If that happens, it is impossible to ask for further explanation from respondents. However, during the interview I often asked for clarification such as, "In other words...", or "What you mean is..." to make sure I understood what they said. I feel this is a big advantage of the interview method. I was

able to stop and ask questions for clarification anytime.

5. It is important to ask a closing question.

Patton (2002) recommends a closing question since this question gives an interviewee the opportunity to have the final say. My last question was, "any other comments or suggestions?" I'm glad that I asked this question because most students mentioned additional positive comments and gave suggestions for improvement. This information helped me expand my understanding of their learning experiences.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is to show how we can implement qualitative evaluation in Japanese universities' EFL classes and why it is an effective method for improving EFL classes.

With regard to judging the merit of qualitative evaluation, Brown (2002) uses the term credibility. Credibility is simply equivalent to internal validity in quantitative research and focuses on believability of results. In order to increase credibility, Brown recommends using triangulation. Triangulation refers to understanding some aspect of human behavior from different viewpoints, usually including both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Brown illustrates different types of triangulation and one of the types is called methodological triangulation, which attempts to gather multiple data by interviews, questionnaires, and classroom observations.

In my study, I used three different methods to evaluate our university's TOEIC preparation class. They were: student survey, classroom observation and student interview. The survey consisted of closed and open responses. For each question, there was space for students to write some comments. This enabled them to write reasons for their choice and helped us obtain more detailed information regarding the evaluation of the teacher's performance.

The student survey allowed us to see how the teacher performed in class in general. After getting quantitative and some qualitative data, we looked in more detail at teachers' as well as students' performance by observing their classrooms. I set the standards of what to look for in classrooms so that I basically looked for the same things each time.

Finally, students in the class were interviewed. Interviews helped us obtain in-depth information about how teachers performed in classrooms from the students' perspective. In addition, interviews were a good opportunity for students to talk about their experiences and revealed those feelings that we could not elicit in a student survey or a classroom observation.

Rather than using one method such as a student survey, using triangulation of three different methods increased credibility and gave us more of a “true picture” of teachers’ as well as students’ performance in classrooms. Then, as a result of obtaining the adequate information, we can finally start working on improving our EFL program.

Concerning the TOEIC preparation class, I chose a few good teachers I had observed and asked their permission to videotape their classes. Then I edited their videos and will use them for the upcoming TOEIC faculty meeting. Teachers I videotaped use a lot of student-centered activities and discovery methods. During the faculty meeting, teachers will watch videos and have opportunities to reflect on their teaching. Furthermore, they will be encouraged to use student-centered activities and discovery methods in their TOEIC classes. Then, I will report on the results of student interviews and discuss how teachers can improve their performance according to their students’ opinions. Finally, I will observe their classes in a few months to see how teachers are performing in class.

In conclusion, qualitative evaluation is a far more efficient tool for improving an EFL program than merely giving out a student survey and analyzing quantitative data, since teachers can get “a true picture” of what is happening in their class. This helps teachers to have clear ideas of what to do to improve their own classes in the future.

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