Expanding the English Curriculum at Wayo Women's University: A Needs Assessment

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Abstract

This paper reports on an education survey project conducted at Wayo Women's University that used an online questionnaire to collect data from first and second year non-English majors concerning their attitudes towards continuing their study of English after their first year at the university. The paper first describes the steps taken to construct the questionnaire, then reports the results of the data, and finally, makes suggestions for expanding the English curriculum at the university.

Keywords: Needs assessment, questionnaire survey, curriculum

Questionnaires are “any written instruments that present respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they are to react either by writing out their answers or selecting from among existing answers” (Brown, 2001, p. 6). We have become so familiar with questionnaires that have become omnipresent throughout our daily lives. Customer satisfaction, online product feedback, job satisfaction, performance reviews, and event feedback surveys are just a few examples of how questionnaires are used during our everyday lives. They are a popular and frequent source of data collection in marketing research for companies trying to better understand consumer preferences and interests. They are also prevalent in social research and regularly used by teachers and researchers in various educational institutions. Dornyei (2010) states that in the field of second language research questionnaires are one of the most common methods of data collection. He remarks, as a research tool only language proficiency tests are used more frequently than questionnaires and their popularity stems from being relatively easy to construct, versatile, and capable of collecting large amounts of data quickly (p. xiii). This paper reports on an education survey project conducted at Wayo Women’s University that used an online questionnaire to collect data from first and second year non-English majors concerning their attitudes towards continuing their study of English after their first year at the university. The paper will first describe the steps taken to construct the questionnaire, then report the results of the data, and finally, make suggestions for expanding the English curriculum at Wayo.
The planning of the survey project

Brown (1995) astutely points out that in educational institutions learners are clients and their needs should be served (p. 20). This survey project was conceived in order to better serve the needs of our clients, the students at Wayo Women’s University. Currently, the majority of non-English majors at the university only have the opportunity to take four English classes during their course of study at Wayo. They are required to take two Eigo A classes with native teachers and two Eigo B classes with Japanese teachers, all during their first year. After they have completed those classes there are no further possibilities for them to study English. The members of the curriculum committee of the foreign language section would like to address this “hole” in the curriculum at the university that excludes students outside the English Department from studying English after their first year.

In the summer of 2010 the members of the curriculum committee put forth the idea to write a reform proposal that would expand the English program for non-English majors at Wayo starting in 2013. The goal of the proposed expansion would be to give non-English majors at the university the opportunity to continue their study of English through self-selected elective classes offered throughout their second to fourth years. However, before starting to write a reform proposal to expand the curriculum the committee first wanted to learn how interested students actually were in continuing their study of English after they completed their required English credits.

To determine what kind of demand there was for such an expansion of the English curriculum a needs assessment needed to be performed. Typically conducted in the initial stages of curriculum development, a needs assessment (or needs analysis) is the “systematic collection and analysis of all subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum purposes that satisfy the language learning requirements of students within the context of particular institutions that influence the learning and teaching situation” (Brown, 1995, p. 36). In this case, the needs assessment would help the committee determine the practicality of expanding the current curriculum to address the needs of those students presently being overlooked. To accomplish this, teachers (with the help of assistants) in the English Department jointly developed a questionnaire that students were to complete online. The questionnaire was designed to investigate students’ attitudes towards continuing their study of English after their first year and aimed to answer seven specific research questions:
1. What percentage of students (non-English majors) would like to continue to take English classes after their first year?
2. In what year of their studies would students most like to take more English classes?
3. Which English skills would students most like to improve?
4. Why do students want to continue their English studies?
5. What kinds of English classes would students be interested in taking?
6. Would students be interested in participating in events held by the English Department?
7. What English Department events are students most interested in?

Note. In the Department of Psychology and Social Studies students majoring in Global Social Studies have the option of taking one elective English class in their second year and another elective English class in their third or fourth year. These are the only students in the university outside the English Department who have access to English after their first year.
Method

Participants

As mentioned above, the participants in this survey project were the first and second year non-English majors at Wayo Women’s University. This included all first and second year students from five of Wayo’s six departments: Japanese Literature and Culture, Psychology and Social Studies, Costume and Art, Health and Nutrition, and Life and Ecology. Students from the English Language and Literature Department were of course not involved in the survey as they continually study English throughout their four years at the university. Only the first and second year students from each of the departments were sampled in order to understand the attitudes of those students who had taken all or most of their required English classes, yet still had two to three years of study at the university remaining in which they could possibly have the option of studying English again if the curriculum were to be expanded.

Materials

The questionnaire used for the needs assessment in this survey project was developed in the following stages:
1. Brainstorming started in early September 2010. Teachers on the curriculum committee discussed the possibility of expanding the English curriculum to offer more classes to students outside the English Department. It was decided that a needs assessment was the first essential step before proposing a curriculum expansion to higher levels within the university’s administration. Numbers and types of questions to be used, and issues that should be covered were suggested and discussed.
2. A preliminary draft questionnaire (in English) was developed by the leader of the survey project (the author of this paper).
3. The draft questionnaire was translated into Japanese by a bilingual associate professor from the English Department and then checked for accuracy by a bilingual professor from the same department (for detailed instructions and suggestions on translating questionnaires see Dornyei, 2010, pp. 48-51).
4. Feedback on the draft questionnaire was obtained from three teachers and four assistants in the English Department.
5. The comments and suggestions received in the feedback were incorporated into a final draft of the questionnaire, which was written in both English and Japanese.
6. The final draft was then piloted with three third year students to check for things such as clarity of instructions, time to complete the questionnaire, and general comprehension of the questions. The author was in the room with each respondent in order to observe and answer any questions as they completed the draft version of the questionnaire online. The piloting was done one-by-one, during which, the author made any needed adjustments to the questionnaire. This was done to maximize questionnaire comprehensibility for each successive pilot participant (for comprehensive suggestions on piloting see, for example, Brown, 2001; Dornyei, 2010; Gillham, 2008; Nation & Webb, 2010). Four assistants from the English Department were also asked to complete the online questionnaire and provide feedback.
7. The comments and suggestions received in the feedback from the piloting were incorporated into a final version of the questionnaire.
The resulting questionnaire contained ten questions: three regarding background information (year, department, major), five concerning the continuance of English study, and two about English Department events. The questions were a mix of closed-ended questions (items that provide the respondent with ready-made options to choose from) and checklist questions (items that present a list in which respondents can check all of the items that apply to them). All questions, other than those asking about students’ background information, had a space where respondents could add an open-ended written comment.

**Procedure**

This questionnaire was administered online and developed using a free online survey software and questionnaire tool called SurveyMonkey (http://www.surveymonkey.com). The assistants in the English Department sent out individual notices to all of the first and second year non-English major students through the university’s portal site that contained a URL link to the survey (http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/688TLQ7). The survey was open from Monday November 8th, 2010 to Friday December 3rd, 2010. After the initial announcement of the survey on November 8th the staff sent out weekly reminder announcements through the portal site that asked students to complete the survey if they hadn’t already done so.

**Results**

The URL link to the survey was sent to 1184 students. A total of 796 students went online to do the survey (67% response rate) with 740 students completing the entire survey (93% completion rate). Table 1 shows the year of study and the departments of the respondents. First year students accounted for 60% of responses and second year students accounted for the remaining 40%. The breakdown of respondents and departments was aligned with the student population distribution at the university with the largest department, Psychology and Social Studies, having the most respondents (228), and the smallest department, Costume and Art, having the fewest respondents (92).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Characteristics of respondents (N=796)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year of Study</strong></td>
<td>Number of Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First year</td>
<td>481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Year</td>
<td>315</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Departments</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Japanese Literature and Culture</td>
<td>159</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychology and Social Studies</td>
<td>228</td>
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<tr>
<td>Costume and Art</td>
<td>92</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health and Nutrition</td>
<td>191</td>
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<td>Life and Ecology</td>
<td>126</td>
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</table>
Figure 1 illustrates students’ attitudes toward continuing their studies of English after their first year. The y-axis indicates the number of students and the x-axis shows students’ responses. Of the 778 students who responded to this question 17% indicated they would like to study English after their first year, 28% of students were undecided, and 55% of students revealed they are not interested in continuing their English studies. This question used a feature of the survey software called *skip logic*, which can direct respondents through different paths in the survey based on their response to a question. Respondents who answered *No* to this question were directed past the questions concerning the continuance of English study to the final two questions on the survey about English Department events.

![Bar chart showing student responses](image)

**Figure 1. Number of students (N=778) who would like to continue to take English classes after first year**

Figure 2 displays the results for when students would most like to continue their study of English. Once again, the y-axis represents the number of students and the x-axis indicates students’ responses. There were 330 students who responded to this question and although the majority of students (51%) remain undecided about when they would like to continue their studies, 30% of respondents showed they would like to continue studying English straightaway in their second year. Very few students were interested in studying English in their final year at the university.
Figure 2. The year(s) in which students (N=330) would most like to continue studying English

Figure 3 presents the results for which English skills students would most like to improve. The y-axis denotes the categories of skills and the x-axis shows the number of students. For this question respondents could select from one to eight of the given options. Of the 330 students who responded to this question the majority of them would like to focus on a combination of speaking and listening skills (35%). The second most popular response was for a combination of all four skills (31%). Reading and writing were the skills students were least interested in focusing on.

Figure 3. English skills students (N=330) are most interested in improving

Figure 4 shows the results for why students want to continue to study English. The pie graph shows the percentage of students who want to study English for the five reasons that were given in the survey: (1) to be able to communicate with foreigners, (2) for my future job or career, (3) because I like English, (4) to communicate more easily when I travel to foreign countries, and (5) because I want to study abroad.
in the future. Respondents could select any or all choices that applied to them. The top three reasons for continuing their English studies were for their future job or career (55% in orange), to be able to communicate with foreigners (48% in blue), and to communicate more easily when they travel to foreign countries (43% in purple).

Figure 4. The percentage of students’ (N=330) reasons for wanting to continue to study English

Figure 5 displays the ten most desirable elective English courses as selected by respondents, if they could study English after their first year. The y-axis is the types of classes and the x-axis shows the number of students. There were 28 classes on the list and students could choose as many classes as they liked. English through Film and English through Music were clearly the most popular choices with 55% and 42% of students respectively, selecting this class. The least popular classes on the list were academic reading, writing, and listening (included in the ‘all other responses’ category on the graph).

Figure 5. Types of English classes students (N=320) would most like to take
In addition to investigating students’ attitudes towards continuing their study of English after their first year the questionnaire was also utilized to examine the idea of cross-departmental participation in events held by the English Department. Figure 6 displays students’ responses to whether or not they are interested in joining events held by the English Department. The y-axis represents the number of students and the x-axis is the students’ responses. Of the 774 respondents, 478 or 64% of students, were not interested in participating in events held by the English Department. This question also applied the skip logic feature of the survey software and directed respondents who answered No to the Thank you page at the end of the survey.

Figure 6. Number of students (N= 774) who would like to participate in events held by the English Department

Figure 7 illustrates the results for the last question on the survey which asked students which events held by the English Department they would be most interested in joining. The pie graph shows the percentage of students who would like to join in each event. Of the four events the English Department holds, the English Musical (30% in blue) was the most popular. Most students, however, were not interested in joining any of the events (52% in orange).

Figure 7. The percentage of students (N=266) who would like to join in events held by the English Department
Discussion

As outlined previously, there were seven research questions the needs assessment aimed to answer. Each of them will be discussed in this section.

1. What percentage of students (non-English majors) would like to continue to take English classes after their first year? From a negative viewpoint, the results indicate that the majority of students (55%) clearly showed they are not interested in continuing their English studies. However, if we view the results in a more positive light, 45% of students indicated they are or may be interested in continuing their English studies. Put another way, although 429 students are not interested in studying English after they finish their required credits, 131 students certainly are and another 215 students may be, but are still undecided. The results verify that there are hundreds of non-English majors at Wayo interested in continuing their English studies. It now becomes imperative for the curriculum committee of the foreign language section to address the “hole” in the curriculum by expanding the English curriculum in some way so that English language learning opportunities are provided to those students after their first year.

Furthermore, the results also suggest that a needs assessment of the current English curriculum at Wayo could be helpful in informing teachers and administrators how, if at all, existing English classes influence students’ motivation to continue studying English at Wayo. The questionnaire for this needs assessment was administered in the fall semester of 2010 and at that time the respondents had either finished their four required English credits or were in the process of completing their last two required credits. Some of the open-ended comments that students wrote in this section imply that they may not have been happy with the current curriculum and consequently, may have lost their motivation to continue their English studies at Wayo. For example, when responding to the question Would you like to continue to take English classes after first year? one student wrote, “It depends on the content of the class”. Another student said, “I want to take more classes, but it depends on the teacher”. Finally, a third student took the time to write, “I like English so I am taking English lessons, but honestly speaking I don’t think Wayo’s foreign language learning environment is good. I don’t want to take English class as an elective course in this environment next year”. The comments are a sign of potential dissatisfaction with the content of existing English classes, the teaching approach used by some of the current teachers, and the current language learning environment at Wayo, respectively. Another needs assessment focusing on students’ attitudes towards the content and teaching of the current curriculum may provide information that could help teachers and administrators at Wayo improve the current curriculum. This may in turn motivate non-English majors to further pursue their studies of English at Wayo Women’s University if they get that opportunity.

2. In what year of their studies would students most like to take more English classes? Even though most students (51%) indicated they were undecided as to when they would like to study English after their first year, the results reveal that offering more English classes to non-English majors during their second year could be the most practical way of expanding the English curriculum. The lack of responses for studying English during their third and fourth years is not surprising as students at universities in Japan typically start to focus on writing their thesis and/or job-hunting during those years.

3. Which English skills would students most like to improve? The results for this question reveal that
most students want to improve their listening and speaking skills and/or a combination of all four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking). Thus, providing language courses that have an appropriate balance of opportunities for learning all four skills should be a priority of the curriculum committee in any classes they propose to offer students at Wayo. Using Nation's (2007) framework for language courses that divides opportunities for learning language into four strands: meaning-focused input (listening and reading), meaning-focused output (speaking and writing), language-focused learning (direct study) and fluency development (in all four skills) would help curriculum planners develop and offer well-balanced courses that students would certainly find helpful and meaningful.

4. Why do students want to continue their English studies? The results for the fourth research question are encouraging in that they show Wayo students in a positive light, with many of them connecting the importance of English to their future in the work force and with the importance of communication. Understanding their reasons for wanting to study English can help curriculum planners provide appropriate classes (the next research question) and improve students' motivation and satisfaction.

5. What kinds of English classes would students be interested in taking? It seems that the classes students are most interested in taking are connected with the reasons they want to continue studying English. For example, we can consider that the top two classes, English through Film and English through Music, are related to students' desire to learn English in order to communicate with foreigners more easily. Both film and music are a popular way to learn about culture and knowing about someone's culture can help foster better communication. Furthermore, we can speculate that the third highest ranked class, TOEIC test preparation, relates directly to students wanting to study English for their future job or career. Most students know that a good TOEIC score can help them get a better job or a promotion once they have a job. There are many companies around the world and in Japan that require high TOEIC scores and the extrinsic motivation of getting a certain job that requires a certain TOEIC score (e.g. cabin attendant for an airline) can be a powerful stimulus for students to continue their studies of English. Making sure there are courses that students are interested in and that will help meet their needs for studying English should be a significant goal for curriculum planners.

6. Would students be interested in participating in events held by the English Department? Although the last two research questions are not directly linked to students' attitudes towards continuing their study of English this part of the needs assessment was used to explore the idea of cross-departmental participation in events held by the English Department. The results obviously indicate that students from other departments are, for the most part, not interested in joining events held by the English Department. This result is not very surprising as many extracurricular activities at Wayo (and Japanese universities in general) are done within departments where students with the same major participate in the same events within their department. At times, it may even be expected of them to be supportive of and participate in their own department's events. Moreover, the structure of classes for non-English majors studying English in their first year promotes this kind of behaviour and thinking. Many first year English classes are made up of students from the same department, which makes it difficult for students to meet people from other departments and do things outside of their group (department). More discussion on
How to better promote cross-departmental contribution is needed, if this is indeed a goal of the English Department.

7. **What English Department events are students most interested in?** Lastly, for some of the reasons surmised above, few students outside the English Department are concerned with being a part of the four events the department holds each year. The English Department can either be content with this and focus on recruiting participants for its events from within the department or promote discussion amongst staff and faculty to garner suggestions on methods and events that will attract students from other departments.

As Brown (1995) notes, curriculum development is "a series of activities that contribute to the growth of consensus among the staff, faculty, administration, and students" (p. 19). The members of the curriculum committee of the foreign language section at Wayo performed this needs assessment to gather information that would help build a consensus towards the feasibility of expanding the current curriculum to meet the needs of those students (non-English majors at Wayo) being disadvantaged by a lack of opportunity to continue their English studies. The survey project was successful in eliciting feedback from almost 70% of the first and second year student population and provided students with an opportunity to express their attitudes towards continuing their study of English at Wayo. Now that we have heard students' voices it is up to the staff, faculty, and administration to put the pieces together and make informed decisions that will lead to an expanded English curriculum that provides all students at Wayo Women's University with the opportunity to continue studying English beyond their freshman year.

**References**


