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A Case Study of Student Expectations in an IEP

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The study examines students' expectations and satisfactions in both curricular and extra-curricular terms at an Intensive English Program (IEP) in a large state university in the western United States. For the purpose of this study we defined curricular as anything related to in-class concerns and extra-curricular as anything related to out of class concerns such as health services, housing, orientations, and so forth. We administered preliminary questionnaires and interviews to a small number of students to identify themes, problems, etc... and then gave an extensive questionnaire to the entire student

population and interviewed approximately 25%.

We found a strong connection between the curricular and extra-curricular aspects of the students' lives. We recommend for IEPs to systematically address the out-of-class needs as vigorously as the in-class needs in order to increase student satisfaction, create a more supportive environment, and improve enrollment and retention.

本稿では、アメリカ西部の州立大学付属の集中英語教育プログラム (IEP) において実施された、学内と学外での生活における学生の期待と満足度についての調査結果を報告、考察を行う。この研究においては、Curricularは学生のクラス内における事柄、Extra-curricularは住居探し、海外生活に関するオリエンテーション等の学外での生活全般に関する事柄として定義した。はじめに学生の一部に対し予備的な調査を行い、その後その結果をもとに学生全体に対するアンケート調査と約4分の1の学生に対するインタビュー調査を行った。この研究によって学内と学外における学生のニーズが大きく関わりあっていることが示された。IEPは学外における学生のニーズを学内でのニーズと同様に系統的に分析し、学生の満足度を高め、より協力的な環境を整えることが求められる。

Introduction

Within the realm of Intensive English Programs (IEPs), institutional research is often engaged in to gain systematic insight into student expectations and needs. By learning and understanding what the students expect and need from a program, both inside and outside of the classroom, a program can develop methods and systems to meet those expectations and needs. Many studies (e.g., Hess & Morton,

1996; Hafernik, Messerschmitt, & Vandrick, 1996; & Wilhelm, 1996) deal with curriculum to address what happens, should happen, or may be beneficial, inside the IEP classroom. Middlebrook (1991) addresses student services (e.g., health care, housing, orientation) in ESL programs, but he does not connect this to the students' in-school lives. Unfortunately, to our knowledge there is no research that tries to address IEP students' total lives in both curricular terms, which we define as any aspect of their school life, and extracurricular terms, which we define as any aspect of their life outside of school. This study attempts to take a holistic view of curriculum and proposes that an IEP that sensitively addresses and meets student expectations and needs in and out of the classroom can enrich its students' lives and assist in linguistic, cultural, and social adaptation (Reiff and Kidd, 1986).

In this study we report the students' perceived expectations and needs, both curricular and extra-curricular, as well as general satisfaction levels, at an IEP that serves students 18 and older and is associated with a large state university located in the Western US. We first gave out initial questionnaires to two classes and did four student interviews to identify themes and problems that might be common to the student body as a whole. After reviewing the data from these questionnaires and interviews, we created an extensive questionnaire and interviewed, with revised questions, approximately 25% of the student body. This article is the presentation of this study and our findings.

Site and Site Entry

The IEP where this study was conducted is connected with a large state university located in the Western US. The IEP, which we will call the Program of English Language Learning (PELL),

offers four ten-week terms a year. The program has full time and part time faculty as well as graduate assistants who are working toward their Master's or Ph.D. in TESOL or Second Language Acquisition (SLA), respectively.

The academic curriculum of PELL has four main concentrations: reading, writing, structure, and conversation skills, as well as TOEFL preparation courses. As will be seen in the findings section, the program also has a reputation as being more academically oriented than other programs in the local area.

The students are mainly from Asia, mostly Japan and Korea, with some coming from South America and Europe. Many students are planning to enter an American university either directly after they leave the program or through an institution such as a community college. The program also has non-university oriented students to study in courses that are less academically oriented. PELL thus has a broad base of student expectations and needs that must be addressed and met.

Data Collection and Analysis

Three researchers took part in the data gathering aspect of this study. One researcher is Japanese, one is Korean, and one is American.

Before we carried out the major part of the study, we administered four interviews and distributed a preliminary questionnaire in English to approximately 20 students, with 11 students responding. We then used the information gained from the preliminary research to formulate our final questionnaire and "in-depth" interview questions.

After revisions of interview questions and the questionnaire, we conducted in-depth interviews with 15 students: 9 Korean, 5 Japanese, and 1 Taiwanese. We conducted the interviews in three languages with the participants being able to choose the

interview language according to their preferences. After piloting the final questionnaire, we gave the questionnaire in English to all students, totaling 64, at PELL. Response was on a voluntary basis, and 42 students responded giving us a response rate of 66%.

After the background section, the questionnaire consisted of eleven major closed-ended questions with sub-questions in each question, and five open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions were answered using a five point Likert scale ranging with values being assigned the following rating scale: 1—agree; 2—somewhat agree; 3—don't know; 4—somewhat disagree; and 5—disagree. Japanese and Korean students were allowed to answer the open-ended questions in their mother tongue.

Data Analysis

After collecting the final questionnaires, the two bilingual researchers translated the open-ended questions. We then entered the data from the background information and the closed-ended questions into a spreadsheet program to look for trends and calculate basic statistics. Each interview was audio recorded and subsequently transcribed by the researcher who conducted the interview. If the interview was conducted in either Japanese or Korean, the researcher also translated the transcription into English.

Findings

The major area of general student satisfaction did turn out to be in the areas of curriculum. Specifically, within the interview and questionnaire data, class content and teachers were most often cited. For example, one student commented on the questionnaire that “PELL is more regulatory compared to the other program...those strict rules were helpful for me.” Another

student mentioned in his interview that “the content of the courses is similar to what I expected. I think my English ability has improved...” Also cited were the ability to take classes in different levels, based on student need, the ability to study TOEFL, the amount of homework, and interaction with other international students.

To clarify the extent of the satisfaction among the curricular aspects of the PELL program, we need to look at the first open-ended question on the questionnaire, “What are you most satisfied with at PELL?” Of the 40 students who responded to the question, only 6 were not directly related to areas of curriculum, again with course content and teacher ability/enthusiasm/assistance/etc... being cited most often. Satisfaction was also seen in a small number of comments related to extra-curricular areas. We have clearly identified that the academic nature and rigor of the PELL program is a great strength—for those students with academic goals. As we will see in the next section, the PELL program must develop a keener awareness of the needs of its non-academically oriented students, who do make up a significant portion of the student body.

It was found that the students studying at the program are generally satisfied with the overall program. When you look at students' comments on interviews and questionnaires carefully, however, you will find that comments expressing dissatisfaction about the program on extracurricular aspects start to appear, with one major exception. We can classify students' dissatisfaction into four major categories, which are as follows:

- 1) Lack of opportunities to use/speak English
- 2) Academic atmosphere of the program when compared with other programs
- 3) Orientation/Housing information.
- 4) Location and condition of facilities

Throughout the interviews and questionnaires, students consistently complained that they do not have enough opportunities to use English communicatively once they go outside of their classes. One interviewee, Hiro (a pseudonym) mentioned that he was hoping that the program could provide “more opportunities to speak with the students” enrolled in the university. His comments were reflective of the data collected as a whole. In the questionnaires, 25 students expressed doubt or disagreement about having enough opportunities to practice speaking English. Another student went so far as to say the only aspect of PELL she is not satisfied with is the fact that the program does not systematically provide opportunities for interaction with speakers of English outside of class.

The second source of dissatisfaction we identified is students’ concerns about the academic atmosphere of the program. As some interviewees mentioned, and also as the results of questionnaire showed, it was clear that there are students in two different tracks in the program: 1) students studying for academic purposes and 2) students studying for more non-academic, practical purposes, such as basic self-education. Several interviewees commented that the goals of the program seem to be academic oriented. Some interviewees, as well as some responses from open-ended questions in the questionnaire, referred to the emphasis on reading and writing skills in that program as one of the things that they are satisfied with, and also as a factor in choosing the program. Emphasis of reading and writing skills, however, was also referred to with dissatisfaction. It was clearly seen that the students’ preference of the academic atmosphere was divided.

Interestingly, this dichotomy of academic versus non-academic was a “make or break” point for some students in recommending the program to other family or friends. When asked whether they would recommend the program to their

friends or family members and the reasons for doing so, five students clearly stated that they would recommend the program only to those who want to go to the attached university or universities in the U.S. Also, three students clearly said that they would not recommend to those who do not intend to enter a college or a university in the U.S. While most students would recommend the program, they obviously displayed a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the program.

The third area of dissatisfaction concerned information about housing and orientation. When asked about orientation and housing information, 11 of the interviewees stated that they expected PELL to provide them with more information. Some students, who have relatives or friends in the state, did not have to worry about their accommodations when they arrived. Other students, however, who do not have any relatives or friends, have to find their places to live on their own, and some students acknowledge having a hard time finding places to live. Katsuyoshi said in his interview, “it was very tough for me to find the place [to live],” and “I wanted to have more information about housing” from PELL. Another interviewee, Chanho referred to the orientation that PELL provided as the “minimum amount of information” for the new-coming students.

The final area of dissatisfaction we discovered was the location and condition of the site/facilities. The program is located away from the main portion of the university campus. Among the students there is a definite feeling of isolation and marginalization. The program is located within “temporary portables,” which have been “temporary” for at least 12 years, and the facilities such as computers, air-conditioning, chairs, desks and so forth were in poor condition. Because the program is right next to the baseball stadium, one student, Sayuri, summarized the sentiment best, “what are we, minor league players?” As stated before, the students desire a stronger connection with the university as a whole.

Conclusion

In this study, we reported students' perceived expectations and needs, both from curricular and extra-curricular aspects, as well as general satisfaction levels at the Program of English Language Learning. We found that while students are in general satisfied with the overall curriculum of the program, they are not quite satisfied with the outside-classroom environment. We also found that students are seeking for opportunities to have more connection/interactions with the university system, which can be directly related to student's improvement in linguistic and social competence in English. As stated above, many students believe that PELL is a part of the university system, they expect and are hoping to have more interaction with students at the university, and even to have opportunities to experience the regular courses taught at the university. Because we studied the students lives in extra-curricular terms outside of the normal construct of curriculum, we were able to discover these needs and expectations. If we had only focused on the traditional perspective of students' needs in curricular aspects, we would not have found this information.

The extra-curricular aspect is, however, strongly related to curricular aspect of the program. Curricular and extra-curricular aspects of intensive English language programs are often viewed separately, and not much research has been done to connect them. Through this study, however, we found that extra-curricular and curricular aspects of students' needs are indeed closely tied together, and must be considered as such. As Perdreau (1994) states, what IEPs are supposed to provide students is not merely "English language training", but also a "nurturing cocoon" (p. 7) that students need as they try to get adjusted to a new life right after their arrival in a new and often strange place. This study revealed that much more research

needs to be done to connect the curricular and extra-curricular aspects of IEP programs. To simply ignore what happens to students once they leave the campus is to both do a disservice to the students as "customers" and to lose opportunities to better assist our students in their language and culture learning goals.

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