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## Unwrapping the layers: exploring the hidden depths in feedback forms<sup>1</sup>

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The Bologna process, a series of agreements among European countries, was launched in 1999 (Joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education), with the aim of offering comparability among institutions of higher education. It triggered reforms within European countries and provided for credit-rated courses based on the number of hours and the course content, among other factors.

Higher educational institutions across the world today vie to gain a position in the Academic Ranking of World Universities, also known as the Shanghai Ranking – introduced in 2003 by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University but compiled, since 2009, by the Shanghai Ranking Consultancy. Quality ratings are attributed, for example, according to the number of Nobel prizes won by academics belonging to a given institution. Institutional rivalry for the most sought-after students (those with the desired scores, funding and potential) reveals itself in selection procedures that some researchers criticise as “merchandising” education.

In the scramble to attract fee-paying students, higher education institutions even emphasise the employment rate of newly qualified graduates. In other words, the stress is on the “usefulness” or “skill-providing” capacity of courses on offer. In the context of employment-driven-degree education, evaluation seems to have gained disproportionate importance. *How* a given task will be evaluated is one of the most common questions raised in classrooms. This seems to be a pre-condition to all the mysterious consequential calculations vitally necessary for students to decide the level of interest and effort they intend to invest in accomplishing any given task in formal classroom settings.

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Within higher education institutions, the collection of syllabi, homogenisation of institutional credits and evaluation of course content are among the various steps taken in the name of transparency of knowledge transfer. Whether this transparency also results in the improvement of standards and quality of teaching could be the subject of another study, but it is certainly true that individual assessment no longer just concerns students but increasingly teachers as well (Lawrence, 2018). In the age of swiping and liking, students regularly evaluate their classes and their teachers. Much has already been said and written about this “inverse” evaluation (Mémet, 1999; Ching, 2018). As language teachers, we are most interested in how best we could interpret student feedback in order to improve our effectiveness as language teachers.

Our original trigger for conducting this study arose from the dilemma that we presume all teachers confront: feedback forms often offer confusing ideas about their students’ classroom experiences and expectations. The presenting dissonance and disparity in the responses frequently provided by students from the same group induced us to wonder if the respondents were all in the same classroom, or whether, in fact, there was an issue of “skewed perception” (Gledhill, 2011). With the increasing importance placed on language results in higher education within the current French reforms, we wonder whether the seemingly bipolar nature of student observations may become even more acute.

For the purpose of this text, we studied the feedback forms (Annex 1) received over a three-year period for the English lessons given in a Master’s level course in Sports Management at the institution where we teach. These completed forms constitute the corpus for this article. We (the authors of the text) have been teaching this English course since 2016. Far from finding answers to our initial thoughts, this study has led us to gradually delve deeper into the students’ responses as they appear on their course feedback forms and attempt to unwrap the possible hidden causes and explanations behind their comments.

### **Objectives of this study and student profile**

The principal aim of this study was to benefit from the data gathered as part of an existing university language teaching evaluation programme. Research has shown that evaluation involves collecting, analysing and interpreting information in order to make informed decisions to improve students’ learning outcomes (Rea-Dickins & Germaine, 1992). For some years, the department where we work has been collecting answers to questionnaires used internally to check quality of teaching and content. Whilst we had hopes and expectations, we adopted a data-driven approach, preferring to wait and see what, if anything, emerged from the data.

The student sample (see Student profile below) was chosen for a variety of reasons. It was a distinct group, of manageable size, with whom we had a higher than usual number of teaching hours per year (42 hours per year as opposed to some other common programmes where we have 24 to 30 hours of English lessons per academic year). It was anticipated that any strengths and/or problems would

thus be easier to highlight as they would have developed more over the extended teacher contact time period.

The anonymity of teacher and language teaching evaluation questionnaires is acknowledged to bring risks of “student impulsivity” and even “personal vengeance” (Mémet, 1999) which is, at the least, unhelpful. We hoped that this element would be minimised by considering feedback from post-graduate students who are used to the expectation of university level courses.

As compared with our other groups of first year Master’s students, however, these students seemed to exhibit higher than average participation levels, with good teamworking abilities. When the activities gain students’ interest, they pull together and throw themselves headlong into the games necessary to play in order to improve their English. When things are going less well, the group feels as if it is on a losing streak. Any possible initial reluctance of some students to participate in speaking activities, for instance, dissipates when the exercises incite them to become “independent” users in “work-based” scenarios and not just students bound in a classroom situation.

If the group has bonded well, the teacher may take on the role of a coach to help them pull themselves through, seemingly more so than in other lessons, perhaps simply because language teaching is about communication in a wider sense than other subjects. Either way, there is a level of analysis, a desire to improve, often an understanding that it takes work to succeed, an energy and a real team spirit in the classroom, which is always an interesting start for all concerned.

### **Teacher evaluation methods and feedback**

In many countries, “evaluation procedures have multiple purposes: to appoint, to inform salary and promotion decisions, to terminate and to help teachers improve” (Angelo & Cross, 1993: 319). In this purpose statement, it is only the latter, which draws our interest and attention, as “Evaluation enables teachers to put themselves, the content and their teaching skills into question again” (Allwright, 1996).

The difference between feedback and evaluation was clarified by Ende (1983: 6), in that “feedback presents information, not judgment”. Whereas feedback is formative, evaluation is summative, that is it comes usually after a fact and presents a judgment. However, Ende states that feedback does have some connotation of judgment attached to it and, in order for it to be effective, close collaboration between teacher and trainee is required. This advice, applicable for medical training, could be applied to other formal teaching practices. Ideally, feedback should be an ongoing, integral part of the learning process, allowing the recipient to improve: it is feedback for learning rather than of learning. In our study, this ideal equated to enabling teachers to become more effective.

Evaluation, on the other hand, presents a judgment, usually about performance. However, Ende confirms that even as early as 1983 the terms were used interchangeably, which has led to confusion between the two. Having clarified the difference, for the purpose of this text, we have adopted the term *feedback* as being closer to our aims, unless the term *evaluation* has been used in citations with

the same meaning. University students' feedback for teachers can take many forms including learning logs, chain notes, electronic mail feedback, specifically designed feedback forms (Mémet, 1999: 110-111). Today, student feedback is collected within French universities as part of overall course assessment. Elsewhere, students can even score their professors on a scale of five points (for example, on the website [ratemyprofessors.com](http://ratemyprofessors.com)). This could have consequences for teachers' careers. It would be interesting to examine the (in)consistency of student feedback for the same teacher, the same course and within the same group, the only difference being the submission method.

Coming back to the feedback questionnaires which constitute the corpus of this study, these can be handed out as a questionnaire to collect information about students' motivation and to evaluate teachers and the classes (*ibid.*: 112), with an approximate time period of ten minutes to fill in the questionnaire, as is the case in our study. However, the form we use is not an "objective", close-ended questionnaire. Rather, it aims to elicit students' general perception of the course (strong points, weak points, suggestions for improving).

### **Effective feedback**

In a text about student-oriented feedback (Masantiah *et al*, 2018), the authors highlight the fact that, in order to be effective, feedback needs to be immediate. This is particularly true for adults who risk experiencing false memories and consequent reduced learning effectiveness if feedback is delayed. When teachers are institutionally evaluated, based on students' test scores, there is a tendency to narrow curricula in order for students to obtain better grades (Mathis & Welner 2015: 2-3). In some cases, there is similarly potential for conflict when teachers are paid by merit but also control the feedback mechanism. Neither of these conditions applies to this study. Nevertheless, it is important to note that feedback does indeed have some influence on teaching and assessment of students.

In their textbook on classroom assessment techniques, Angelo & Cross (1993) highlight the importance of allocating sufficient time for each of the three components of feedback: preparation of feedback material, student response and, finally, teacher analysis of results. We note that, at least in our experience, it is the final stage which is the most time-consuming but potentially fruitful. We initially read the responses holistically and strived to identify common themes and areas of interest. In order to gain the maximum yield from the seeds of data, it was necessary to analyse our data several times, refining and redefining our focus.

"It's not what you do but the way that you do it", goes the adage, popular among language teachers. How we do things can be perceived in radically opposing ways. We could use the term "skewed perception" (Gledhill, 2011) to express the idea that the very same act can be perceived differently, based solely on the way it is accomplished. This "skewed perception" on the part of the students could explain why teachers can sometimes find themselves at a loss to account for the different, often conflicting, student responses to the same course.

Our initial view of the evidence in our data was that it appeared wholly inconsistent: students complained simultaneously of too much grammar content and of insufficient grammar; of too much speaking and of not enough speaking. Both these comments were purely quantitative, rather than involving any qualitative element. It appeared reasonable to view them as simply contradictory.

As we explored more deeply, we realised there were various reasons that might explain the apparent dissimilitude between responses. The student responses contained within completed feedback forms (given that the questions remain constant) provide not only responses to a specific course, but also, over the years, they could reflect changes in the attitudes of students and/or teachers towards the subject itself and/or towards the methodology adopted.

## **Unwrapping the layers**

### *Description of the course*

Not all French universities offer a Sports management course at Master's level, but an increasing number of universities do and, additionally, there are a handful of business schools and even specialised sports management schools offering equivalent courses.

The feedback analysed here is from a course offered for over ten years in Toulouse. This course aims to give students the fundamentals of running sporting events and creating and working with/within sports management organisations. Students have obligatory credit courses in sports organisations, law, finance, statistics, information technology (IT)/graphic design, marketing, management, communications and English.

Language level is one of the criteria currently used in the selection process: students are expected to already have a B2-level (advisory and self-evaluated only) in English (the only language offered), which reflects an "independent user" status according to the Common European framework of reference for languages (Conseil de l'Europe, 2001). Students are well aware of the fact that they need to achieve a minimum of 40% in English each semester to obtain their Master's degree.

The principal aim of the course is to prepare students for the second year Master's programme in Sports management after which they may choose to work in academia and/or within a more commercial environment, having already undertaken a three-month work experience placement at the end of the first year. Alumni work in either the private sector (sports event organisations, retail organisations and sports management agencies/consultancies) or the public sector (usually government sport ministries at district, regional or departmental levels). Some become independent consultants or set up their own agencies, whilst others specialise, for example, in managing the image of sports personalities.

Students' interest in the language lessons sometimes reflects their career targets, and sometimes their career targets reflect their language ability.

### *Student profiles*

Students enrolling in this Sports management course are expected to have at least some knowledge or interest in sport. Some are state or national level players but surprisingly few, bearing in mind the course profile which is aimed at developing engineering and managerial capacities in sports management. Over the research period, the number of students steadily declined in the course (as a whole) from 71 in 2016-2017 (Y1) to 54 in 2017-2018 (Y2) to 43 in 2018-2019 (Y3). However, of those, 27 in Y1 and 13 in Y2 studied English in separate Tourism management groups and therefore do not fall within the scope of this study. Student levels in our two groups remained relatively constant (44 for Y1, 41 for Y2 and 43 for Y3). All students had spent the previous year at a French university, although some had transferred from other French universities (Table 1).

<b>Previous university</b>	<b>Y1: 2016-2017</b>	<b>Y2: 2017-2018</b>	<b>Y3: 2018-2019</b>
<i>Toulouse</i>	44%	69%	61%
<i>Other cities</i>	56%	31%	39%

*Table 1 – Students’ university prior to this course*

The students came from various backgrounds (Table 2), the vast majority having successfully completed a three-year degree course the year before, but a few having also attained, or at least attempted, a different Master’s 1 degree before starting this course.

We examined the content of the previous years’ studies for each student and grouped these into three general fields:

- sport, sports management and management, business (with a sport specialisation);
- general management, administration, business, marketing (without sport specialisation);
- other (consisting mainly of IT, Communications, law, languages and accountancy).

<b>Years</b>	<b>Y1: 2016-17</b>		<b>Y2: 2017-18</b>		<b>Y3: 2018-19</b>	
Number of students	71	as %	54	as %	43	as %
<b>Total Sport (including STAPS)</b>	27	<b>38</b>	11	<b>20</b>	18	<b>42</b>
Management	22	31	29	54	20	47
Administration	8	11	6	11	0	0
Business/Marketing	6	8	0	0	0	0
<b>Total General management</b>	36	<b>51</b>	35	<b>65</b>	20	<b>47</b>
IT / Communication	4	6	0	0	0	0
Languages	1	1	3	6	0	0
Law	1	1	2	4	2	5
Accountancy	0	0	2	4	0	0
Other	2	3	1	2	3	7
<b>Total Other</b>	8	<b>11</b>	8	<b>15</b>	5	<b>12</b>

*Table 2 – Students’ academic background prior to this course*

Whilst it may be true that course headings may not always accurately reflect course content so that we do not necessarily know what each group of students has previously encountered in their studies, headings do give some indication of the previous aims and objectives of the students. In this way, we were able to gauge whether the sports factor was a recent or longer-term interest. When we examined the distribution of students over these three fields of study, we noticed there were some changes over the three-year period namely:

- the percentage of Sports students appears to have halved in Y2, then reverted to an even higher percentage in Y3;
- the percentage of General management students rose in Y2 by nearly a third and then fell back in Y3 to even lower than Y1.
- the percentage of students having previously studied “Other” fields rose from Y1 to Y2, by around 25% of the original figure, and again fell back to the Y1 level in Y3.

One possible reason for this is likely to be attributed to the fact that there had been some changes in the selection criteria (a minimum B2-level in English being required is one example) so that potential applicants may have self-censored themselves.

Additionally, with the inclusion of a new “Apprenticeship” Master’s option the schedule changed (for Y2 only but for all students) to two weeks at university, followed by two weeks studying from home or at the workplace (2W/2W).

Y2 also showed an interesting reversal of the balance between the sexes (Table 3). In Y1 and Y3, there were roughly twice as many male as female students. The number of female students rose by nearly 75% in Y2 (from 34% in Y1 to 59% in Y2) but fell back to 42% in Y3. Whereas, inevitably, the number of male students dipped from 66% in Y1 to 39% in Y2 before recovering to 58% in Y3.

	Y1: 2016-17		Y2: 2017-18		Y3: 2018-19	
<i>Number of students</i>	71	<b>as %</b>	54	<b>as %</b>	43	<b>as %</b>
<i>Female</i>	24	34	32	59	18	42
<i>Male</i>	47	66	21	39	25	58

*Table 3 – Proportion of male and female students by year*

As research shows inconsistent differences between feedback given by male and female students (Tatro, 1995; Koushki & Kuhn, 1982), we have not considered this as a relevant factor to explore since the responses are anonymous. For the sake of completeness, in each year, one or more students retook the year but none of them retook English so they are not taken into account in this study. We did not include any other data outside these student feedback questionnaires.

### **Teacher profiles**

Both of us had been teaching at university level in France since 2006 before starting this course in Y1 (2016), with significant experience of course design,



language teaching methodology and teaching English in the *Lansad (Langues pour spécialistes d'autres disciplines)* sector in France as well as preparation for different language certifications such as TOEIC and Cambridge examinations.

Rather than rigidly following any single teaching method, we would both classify ourselves as principled eclectics. We usually adopt communicative language teaching, in particular content-based and task-based learning with a bias towards speaking, listening and informal reactive tasks in class, with reading, writing and reinforcement activities reserved for homework. For all tasks, we believe that the content must be up-to-date, interesting and relevant to the target learners, presenting a variety of challenges and possibilities.

The continuous evaluation task in the first semester fell within the category of project-based learning, being the planning, budgeting, promoting and presenting of a sports event in Toulouse. In the second semester, we focussed on negotiation techniques and practice, building the complexity of the subject matter and negotiations gradually throughout the semester.

Neither of us, though, had any particular experience in or knowledge of sports management nor specialist knowledge of any aspect of sport. The joint approach was thus one of seeking interactivity and a variety of differentiated activities in order to involve students of heterogeneous levels in English to achieve real progress for each individual student.

### **Description of the course feedback form**

Other than the online institutional feedback questionnaire, the Department provides feedback forms at the end of each semester to be completed on a voluntary, anonymous basis during the last class (Annex 1). The questionnaire is divided into roughly three parts:

- the first part includes student information (*filière, année d'études, langue, numéro de groupe*, semester-based course or annual course, presence in class) as close-ended questions;
- the second part is the basis of the data analysed for this article, which are the students' responses: strong points, weak points and suggestions for improving the course, each of which are open-ended questions;
- the third part is devoted to their language learning activities outside the classroom, since much is made of learners' self-implication in the learning process, more so in the language learning process. Students are also invited to relate their use of the university's language learning centre (*Centre de Ressources en Langues – CRL* hereon) and whether they have been able/taken the initiative to participate in any of the extra-curricular activities offered.

### **Methodology**

The students come from different backgrounds, although most of them are interested in sports; their language levels (as previously discussed) are heterogeneous, which meant that we had to combine exercises designed to help

them to make real progress in the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) (Annex 2).

Rather than dedicating disproportionate contact time to accurately assessing the students' four linguistic competences, we conducted an initial level assessment test, limited to grammar and listening activities to divide the students into groups according to their level as reflected by this assessment. This gave us a basic student profile and helped us identify weaknesses to address during the year.

From the results of the level assessment test, we identified that the majority of students belonged to one of two groups:

- a group who still struggled with even relatively basic grammar and listening tasks;
- a group who largely coped reasonably well with the majority of these tasks.

There appeared to be few students who fell in between these two groups. Given the time constraints and the students' foreign language anxiety, we devoted more time in the classroom to speaking activities and, particularly for the lower levels, functional grammar consolidation (Annex 2).

## **Corpus**

Our corpus is composed of 70 responses over the three years (35 for Y1, 18 for Y2, and 17 for Y3) during which 128 students (44 for Y1, 41 for Y2 and 43 for Y3) were enrolled in our groups for the course (all responses have been summarised in a table which can be found in Annex 3). Feedback was given on a voluntary, optional basis. Students could choose between handing it in to the teacher immediately or returning it to the department office. Feedback rate varied probably due to a lack of interest or the optional, non-immediate nature of the feedback process itself.

In Y3, one class (19 students) did not actually fill in the questionnaire in Y3 as a colleague, who replaced one of us for the final test, had asked students to give the feedback form to the Department office. This accounted for the lower number of feedback sheets handed back; a lack of feedback, if not necessarily signifying a lack of interest, does stress the importance of immediate completion of all parts of the feedback process including delivery. Only 44% of Y2 students completed the questionnaire, compared with 80% of Y1 and 71% of the one Y3 group, which completed the form in class (the second Y3 group is not included because it fell outside the normal feedback process).

Our analysis is based thus not on huge numbers nor on econometric calculations but rather a qualitative analysis of what students actually said – which could be a subjective or objective perception – about their English language lessons.

## **Student attendance**

Part 1 of the evaluation questionnaire requires students to evaluate their own personal attendance and investment in the course, measured in tranches of 20%, going from 100% (most committed) to 20% (less committed), and finally to less than 10% (least committed). This was not accurately measured, either by the

teachers or by the students, but merely reflected their personal and individual assessment at the end of the course.

Interestingly, the self-reported figures (Table 4) show Y2 students reported that they felt differently compared to Y1 and Y3 students about their own investment in the course.

- They were nearly 60% more likely than Y1 students (and 45% more likely than Y3 students) to assess their investment at 100%.
- None of the Y2 students assessed their level at 60% or below (compared to 20% of Y1 students, and 12% of Y3 students).
- Y2 groups contained the only students who failed to complete this section (11%).

Year	100%	80%	60%	40%	20%	<10%	Not completed
Y1: 2016-2017 (35 responses)	15	13	6	0	0	1	0
Y1: 2016-17 as %	43%	37%	17%	0%	0%	3%	0%
Y2: 2017-2018 (18 responses)	12	4	0	0	0	0	2
Y2: 2017-18 as %	67%	22%	0%	0%	0%	0%	11%
Y3: 2018-2019 (17 responses)	8	7	2	0	0	0	0
Y3: 2018-19 as %	47%	41%	12%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Table 4 – Self-evaluated student attendance and involvement in the course

The teachers’ attendance lists did not show this to be the case (in terms of physical attendance) nor did the teachers’ personal assessments reflect this to be an accurate reflection of student investment. In contrast, the teachers both noted a significant and detrimental shift in the level of investment, and even group behaviour, in Y2, compared to Y1, both of which the teachers assessed as improved again in Y3.

In view of the various differences noted above between the three groups, there seem to be several possible triggers for this skewed perception of involvement.

- It was related to the difference in the students’ backgrounds, there being significantly fewer students with a sport/sports management background in Y2 than the other years. It may be that those with a more general background felt less involvement and/or satisfaction with the more specialised sports management course, but took no personal responsibility for this.
- It was related to the change in the balance between female and male students (cf. Table 3 above), although it seems difficult to identify any realistic reason for this due to the anonymous nature of the feedback forms studied here.
- That it was in some way related to the change in the rhythm of the lessons, which seems possible (Y1: weekly Thursday evening lessons; Y2: Thursday

evening lessons for two consecutive weeks per month; Y3: Tuesday morning lessons once a week).

The teachers noted:

- a much higher level of frustration amongst the Y2 students with respect to the course as a whole, due to the two weeks on/two weeks off (2W/2W) timing for all their teacher contact time;
- a significantly weaker group bonding, and that which did emerge evolved more slowly. Again, this seems likely to be a consequence of the irregularity of teacher/student contact time.

Research has consistently shown a clear correlation between teacher qualities and student success but it is harder to clearly define what these teacher qualities are. Ur thoughtfully examined this issue in “Are teachers born or made?” (1998). In addition to more general qualities (including content knowledge, a sense of mission, charisma and inter-personal relationships), Ur identified five “t-factors” specific to teaching: awareness not only of learners’ current knowledge and problems but also of when learning actually takes place, making content accessible, ensuring tasks foster learning and getting a “personal buzz” from students’ progress. In Ur’s view, these abilities can be, and often are, acquired with experience and reflection, which some teachers have naturally to a greater degree than others. Whilst the majority of teachers would probably admit that their choice of content and use of tasks develop with experience, the awareness factors (which seem close to instincts) would be hard to train new teachers to acquire. It is these intangible factors that remain so elusive but so intriguing.

Greathouse *et al* (2019) undertook detailed analysis of the personal narratives and nomination letters of the 66 National (elementary, middle, and high school) Teachers of the Year in the USA since 1952. Their research concluded that each of the following four key elements were necessary qualities for teacher effectiveness: a) curriculum, b) relationships, c) collaboration and engagement and d) a commitment to further one’s learning.

Putting curriculum to one side, the remaining three key elements appear to us to be rather wider than Penny Ur’s five t-factors, although they are clearly closely linked to such teacher qualities. These three key elements reflect the consequences of a good teacher in a class of students (all else being equal), in other words, what actually happens in that class, instead of the skills a teacher brings to the class.

Whilst acknowledging that external issues could potentially have an impact on whether those consequential elements arise or not, we were interested in understanding to what degree the teacher will be in a position to maximise effectiveness, as highlighted by Ur (1998) and Greathouse *et al* (2019). In turn, this might lead to the possibility that all teachers, naturally weaker or inexperienced ones included, could become more effective by an increased awareness of the four key elements, even if they do not currently possess the five t-factors. Taking the time to create and maintain a conducive atmosphere in which to forge relationships and to collaborate and engage with students, may increase actual teacher effectiveness considerably. Such a step would enable and encourage the students to

respond in a similar fashion so that all those present can collectively contribute towards building the relationships within the class, the collaboration, the engagement and commitment to effective class progress. Teacher qualities remaining largely constant throughout our study, we were interested to see if we could identify any external factors that had affected teacher effectiveness, and/or student perception of such, in our study.

Following these key elements:

- in the current study, there was no fundamental change to the curriculum over the three years;
- there was also no real possibility of collaboration with wider stakeholders such as parents or employers or community members as was the case for the study conducted by Greathouse *et al.* We sought to create an atmosphere of collaboration both between teacher and students, and among students themselves, with respect to students' learning aims and personal growth;
- with the change in teacher contact timing in Y2 reported above, and the corresponding reduced group bond, it seems probable that the connection and relationships between each of the two groups and their respective teacher, and within the groups themselves, were significantly lower than in other years;
- this reduced connection, in turn, could very well have had a negative impact on the level of collaboration as described above;
- as Table 4 above shows, students' views of their own commitment to further their own learning was assessed as being higher in Y2, but this does not correspond to student attendance records and/or teachers' personal assessment of the Y2 groups. This apparent anomaly might have its roots in overall higher levels of student frustration (due to timetabling and/or lack of general interest in sport) leading to an exaggerated view of their own personal investment, perhaps compared to that of the university.

### **“Strong points” and “weak points” of the course and autonomous learning**

Part 2 of the questionnaire solicited students' subjective feedback on what they perceive as the “strong points” and the “weak points” of the course. “Strong points” (*points forts*) provoking positive comments can be categorised into two main headings: group dynamic and content. “Weak points” (*points faibles*) of the course could be categorised into two main headings: administration and content.

Turning first to the positive comments arising from the strong points of the course, and particularly those relating to group dynamic, this category could be divided into comments regarding the atmosphere and the teacher (Table 5).

<b>Positive comments</b>	<b>Y1: 2016-2017</b> (35 responses)	<b>Y1</b> <b>(as %)</b>	<b>Y2: 2017-2018</b> (18 responses)	<b>Y2</b> <b>(as %)</b>	<b>Y3: 2018-2019</b> (17 responses)	<b>Y3</b> <b>(as %)</b>
<i>Atmosphere</i>	16	46%	5	28%	5	29%
<i>Teacher</i>	9	26%	2	11%	8	47%
<i>Total positive comments</i>	25	72%	7	39%	13	76%

Table 5 – Summary of positive comments related to group dynamic

Under the “group dynamic” category, we would include “teacher involvement”, “lively”, “pedagogy”, “interactivity”. There were 45 total responses over three years – of which 19 comments were about the teachers, stressing their personal qualities. In Y1 and Y3 (where it was easier to build the teacher-student relationship due to the regular scheduling of classes), there were many more positive and personal comments on the teachers than in Y2, and with the quality of adjectives used in Y2 being far less personal (one student said the teacher was “great”, “involved”) than in Y1 and Y3, where several students commented on the teachers on a more personal note (“goodwill”, “nice”, “smiley”, “fun”, “lively”, “kind”, “attentive”).

“Weak” points consisted of “administration” and “content”, according to the students’ perception. Under “administration” we could include: “not enough hours”, “class too big”, “want more lessons”, “class timing” (Table 6). These factors were, for the most part, not under our control. Noting the reference to the lack of the number of hours of language lessons as reported by the students, it is worth mentioning that the CEFR suggests approximately 200 hours of guided learning to progress significantly (from one CEFR level to the next). So, apart from students who had already acquired a B2-level, students did not have sufficient hours of language lessons to help them make real progress (48 hours in Y1 as opposed to 42 teaching hours in Y2 and Y3), a point which was raised particularly by respondents in Y2. These comments also confirmed the overall negative perception of students, as well as teachers, of the 2W/2W schedule as it blocked the group from bonding and broke the continuity and feeling of progression.

<b>Administration</b>	<b>Y1: 2016 - 2017</b>	<b>Y2: 2017-2018</b>	<b>Y3: 2018-2019</b>
<i>Class timing</i>	3	7	0
<i>Lessons too long</i>	12	4	0
<i>Want more lessons</i>	0	2	5
<i>Class too big</i>	5	0	0
<i>Total Admin issues</i>	15	13	5

Table 6 – Summary of comments relating to administrative and timing issues

## Skewed perception

Under the heading “Content”, which is the common heading for “strengths” and “weaknesses” of the course, students mentioned grammar, vocabulary, activities (sport event, sport issues, presentations, group work, discussions and variety of activities). From Table 7 below, we can see that there was a slight dip in positive comments in Y2 with the level recovering in Y3, and a steady decrease in negative point from Y1 to Y2 and again from Y2 to Y3.

<b>Content</b>	<b>Y1: 2016-2017</b> (35 responses)		<b>Y2: 2017-2018</b> (18 responses)		<b>Y3: 2018-2019</b> (17 responses)	
<i>Positive comments</i>	25	71%	14	78%	17	65%
<i>Negative comments</i>	18	51%	12	67%	9	53%

*Table 7 – Summary of positive and negative comments about content*

As we can see from Table 7, positive comments remained relatively high overall whereas negative comments were consistent in Y1 and Y3 but peaked at 30% higher in Y2. Although the overall syllabus remained largely similar, the reduction in teaching hours from Y1 to Y2 forced us to make pedagogical choices, leading to the students experiencing the most interactive and stimulating course content from Y1. This use of what we considered the most challenging and appealing activities would have normally suggested a decrease in negative comments regarding content in Y2, rather than the recorded increase.

At first glance, it appeared that there were inconsistent comments, which seemed to reflect a difference between individual students’ perceptions of the same course: for example, some students considered there was insufficient grammar content whereas others felt there was excessive grammar.

Upon reflection and further data analysis, we realised that these inconsistencies were limited to general linguistic competence and not to sports or management related English. We also noticed, for example, that the weaker students wanted more grammar whilst the stronger students wanted less. We therefore realised that these students’ perception depended on their individual language levels and hence their personal needs.

This clearly reinforces the benefit of differentiation, ideally including personal guided learning using the university’s CRL. By including comments to this effect, some students reported a need for more grammar activities and practice, which corresponds to their belief about how languages are learnt. Despite regular encouragement, the responses to the question of whether students had used the CRL showed that only three students had visited it at all. They described having participated in a few activities; but only one student had done so in the English language.

## Autonomous learning outside classroom

Part 3 of the questionnaire elicited information about students’ activities to improve their language level in addition to their guided learning sessions in the

classroom. In response to the question “What do you do outside class to improve your English?”, 100% of students referred to watching television, sports, series, films and/or listening to music in English, all of which are clearly passive language reception, rather than language production activities. Only nine students undertook active language production outside class, for example, using a mobile phone application or attending language cafes and travelling. It appears that those students who have a lower level of English are aware of a need to focus on their basic language production yet fail to incorporate appropriate strategies into their habitus. On the one hand, it points to a feeling of insecurity where students are reluctant to plunge themselves into second language use in a monolingual setting. Foreign language anxiety can explain, to some extent, this reluctance to use English even though they are aware of the market potential of a language competence in English. On the other hand, they lack not only life experience in the world of work in general due to their age but also unsupported real-life interaction with English as the sole means of communication.

To sum up the findings of this case study, we note that they nearly all relate to Y2; when the students were at university for periods of two weeks, interspersed by periods of two weeks spent (studying) at home or at the workplace. These students were:

- less likely to complete the feedback questionnaire, possibly showing less interest overall;
- more likely to include a skewed and inflated figure for their attendance rate and personal investment due to a feeling of discontinuity, perhaps feeling they had insufficient teaching time and guidance in general, even though the number of teaching hours was the same as for Y3;
- more likely to criticise the content of the course (although this element remained largely constant) possibly as an expression of their personal frustration with the overall organisation of the course;
- less likely to give general positive feedback than the students in the other two years;
- less likely to give a positive comment about the teacher, and if they did so, it was a less personal comment.

### **Concluding remarks**

Teachers may play a part in student involvement, but many other factors enter into account when we consider language learning as a long-term process with many more parameters than the limits of the classroom setting.

Evaluation of teachers, even though a contested concept, has taken deep root in a profit-driven global economy, which thrives on the precarious status of an increasing proportion of the actors involved in educational institutions.

The purpose of this study was to understand students’ perception of *Lansad* English lessons by analysing data found within feedback forms completed by first-year Master’s students in Sports management. We hoped to identify and share threads to follow to help improve teacher effectiveness and as an inspiration for



our students to adopt guided yet independent learning practices. Writing this article has not been a comprehensive or exhaustive study. However, it reflects similar informal comments from teachers in other *Lansad* courses at the same university, whose students regularly give similar, apparently contradictory feedback.

Like most teachers, we were a little daunted by the prospect of delving too deeply into the content of the feedback forms. Their anonymous nature can encourage judgmental evaluation rather than constructive criticism. We would welcome progress towards confidentiality rather than anonymity, ideally linking feedback to attendance rates in the future.

This study was initially intended as an exploration of empirical data in which the course content itself showed a split representation: it was included both in the “strong points” and “weak points” of the course. Our original interpretation was that this was evidence of a “skewed perception”. *A contrario* it turned out to be merely a reflection of the disparity between individual student needs.

A secondary thread of interest which emerged was to explore elements which are, at least partially, within the zone of teacher influence but not directly dependent on natural teaching ability or experience. The change in student feedback triggered the realisation that it was necessary to unwrap the layers, and look beyond the presenting problem of “skewed perception”. The results from our corpus, albeit small, seem to support the importance of elements linked to connection and relationships, collaboration and commitment to learning (Greathouse *et al.*, 2019).

We began to wonder, if we were, perhaps, searching for the “holy grail”: teaching and/or pre-teaching methods that teachers seeking professional development could apply, at least experimentally, to their classes, regardless of their existing teacher qualities, skills, abilities or years of experience. Nevertheless, the creation of a unique collaborative bond within each class may prove to be one of the most effective ways to maximise student interest, investment, progression and success, especially in *Lansad* teaching. This vital team spirit is obviously much harder to achieve with the ever-reducing number of language teaching hours per student. Group members take time to build trust in each other, more so with larger groups, particularly with additional language teaching factors such as foreign language anxiety. Feedback forms, even with all their inherent drawbacks, can provide some indication of learners’ perceptions of teaching and learning practices, but it takes time and commitment for teachers to discover and benefit from the hidden depths within them.

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## *Annex 1 – Fiche d'évaluation des enseignements*

### **Fiche d'évaluation des enseignements**

*À restituer à l'enseignant ou à remettre au bureau AR 223*

- Filière d'études \_\_\_\_\_ Année d'études \_\_\_\_\_ Langue \_\_\_\_\_ N° du groupe \_\_\_\_\_
- Cours:    annuel     semestre 1     semestre 2
- Votre assiduité: 100%  80%  60%  40%  20%  <10%

Que faites-vous en dehors du cours pour améliorer cette langue?

Points forts de ce cours?

Points faibles de ce cours?

Améliorations et suggestions?

Centre de ressources en langues (CRL): fréquence d'utilisation

Activités auxquelles vous avez participé

**Merci à vous!**

## *Annex 2 – Classroom methodology adopted*

### ***Semester 1***

During the first semester, it seemed relevant to work on learning basic vocabulary in English related to sport and management. As with most language classes, we followed the “elicit-present-practice-produce” structure in our groups, with warming-up activities at the start and a recap at the end of each session.

The first classes were dedicated to eliciting their existing knowledge in specialised sports and management-related semantic fields (*e.g.* tennis court, football pitch, athletics track). This helped us identify the difficulties that students face in using relevant vocabulary in context (*e.g.* students would get confused between the appropriate verb collocations used in sport: play/do/go). The students then worked in pairs to create imaginary new sports using various props and the newly elicited vocabulary.

We realised early on that these students were much more interested in discussing sports rather than management, so our task was to find ways to maintain class participation through sports-related speaking and listening activities whilst encouraging them to incorporate management terminology and issues.

As students came from many different universities (only 44% in Y1 had been at this university the previous year), we decided to strive to create a collaborative bond within the groups from the outset. We therefore chose to apply project-based learning in each semester with smaller groups working autonomously on a guided task. In this way, we would encourage students to use “work” language in activities and therefore develop language strategic competence, centred on areas linked to their future careers.

In preparation for the first semester project, the whole class explored the key factors that led to the success of Sir Alex Ferguson, the world-famous manager of the Manchester United football team, thus reviewing leadership and management language. As a springboard exercise, small groups were next asked to research and introduce a manager of a sports team, defining and demonstrating their essential leadership qualities.

The semester 1 project itself involved the same small groups in the research, analysis and presentation of a chosen social or community not-for-profit sports project on different continents (five groups, five continents) – *e.g.* in prisons, with under-privileged groups of children, etc. We had previously looked at one interesting social project together and discussed the likelihood of students gaining useful work experience in similar situations. We worked on language related to problems and problem-solving, discussion and presentations.

For the advanced level students, the project continued into the planning and preparation of their own local commercial sporting event, which they presented in groups. This was as in-depth as individual groups wished it to be; some were painstakingly detailed, all addressed budgets, organisation, critical path planning, marketing and sponsorship, staff, health and safety plans.

In this way, we could apply differentiation between the groups, gradually building the complexity of the tasks and the students' confidence at the same time, each of the small groups working as a tight team, and at their own pace.

### ***Semester 2***

“Negotiation techniques” was imposed as the second semester module, so we designed activities in order to practise what the 2018 CEFR terms as interaction and mediation skills in English.

We started with a simple telephoning test – with the focus on using formal, polite and softened language – requiring an exchange of information and attempts to solve a minor problem, whilst dealing with unexpected interruptions, all without the benefit of any visual communication clues and signals. The students acknowledged they had not anticipated that it would be so difficult and this set the semester challenge off on a positive note.

We studied various documents (video and text) to identify successful negotiation techniques and exchanged our existing experiences. As in the first semester, the students started with smaller, pair work role-play activities (peasant negotiations for crops, work perks exchange), exploring and expanding the various techniques and language nuances and gradually building up to more complicated negotiation scenarios. We reviewed conditionals, and the advanced group learned how to soften or consolidate their positions linguistically.

As a final task, they had to work in larger groups and enact a meeting scenario to resolve a more significant business problem or decision by negotiation. We saw how much harder it is to use the techniques when the atmosphere is competitive than in a traditional classroom setting.

*Annex 3 – Feedback form response summary table*

Feedback sheet summary	2016-17 (35 Ss)	2017-18 (18 Ss)	2018-19 (17 Ss)	TOTAL (70 Ss)	% Ss
	3 hrs /wk	3 hrs /2 wks	1h30 /wk		
Timing of class	Friday 8h-11h	Thurs. 17h-20h	Wed. 11-12h30		
Extra-curriculum activities	100% Passive	100% passive	100% passive	70	

<b>POSITIVE POINTS</b>					
Teacher involvement	3	2	3	8	11
Teacher dynamic	14	5	4	23	33
Pedagogy	1	1	0	2	3
Atmosphere	6	1	3	10	14
Interactivity	8	2	5	15	21
Leveled groups		1		1	1
Speak only English	2	2	1	5	7

<b>CONTENT</b>					
Texts / Materials	2			2	3
Content: relevance		1		1	1
Content: CV workshop	NA	NA	1	1	1
Content: sport issues		4	1	5	7
Content: Sport Event		3		3	4
Content: presentations	1	1		2	3
Content: grammar			2	2	3
Content: management vocabulary			3	3	4
Content: professional English	5			5	7
Oral activities	8	3	2	13	19
Group work / Discussions	4	1	1	6	9
Variety of activities	5	1	2	8	11

<b>NEGATIVE POINTS</b>					
Not dynamic enough	1	2		3	4
Course objectives / structure	3	3	2	8	11

<b>CONTENT</b>					
Content generally		1		1	1
Insufficient grammar		3	1	4	6
Excessive grammar	4	1		5	7
Insufficient vocabulary		3	1	4	6
Excessive vocabulary	1		1	2	3
Insufficient oral	4	1	4	9	13
Insufficient debates	1			1	1
Insufficient pronunciation			1	1	1
Insufficient films / Audios	4	2		6	9
Insufficient written work	2	1		3	4
Insufficient sport	2			2	3

<b>ADMINISTRATION / TIMING</b>					
Class timing	3	7		10	14
Lessons too long	12	4		16	23
Want more lessons		2	5	7	10
Class too big	5			5	7