

SURPRISE AND DELIGHT: APPLICATION OF A SERVICE QUALITY MODEL TO LANGUAGE TEACHING

J. Blake

University of Aizu (JAPAN)

Abstract

This article shows how a service quality model can be applied by language teachers to improve student satisfaction. Improvements in student satisfaction, however, do not necessarily correlate with improvements in teaching ability. Exceeding the low expectations of students results in high degrees of satisfaction, but meeting the high expectations of students may not result in satisfaction. This article introduces the theoretical background, presents a model of service quality for language teaching, and shows how this model can be applied through three case studies. The article concludes with practical suggestions on how teachers of language can increase student satisfaction levels by meeting and exceeding the expectations of students.

Keywords: Student evaluations of teaching, teacher development, student satisfaction.

1 INTRODUCTION

The origins of student evaluations of teaching (SETs) were formative [1], yet these evaluations are now frequently used by decision-makers for summative purposes, such as when deciding which teachers to promote or rehire [2] [3] [4].

Teachers who elicit satisfaction from students are concluded to be good teachers [5]. However, popular but ineffective teachers frequently receive high scores. Effective teachers who lack popularity tend to receive low scores. Student ratings of teachers appear to suffer from popularity bias.

SETs do not therefore measure teacher effectiveness [6]. Zabaleta [7] found a moderate correlation between low grades and low evaluations, but found no correlation between high grades and high evaluations. This may imply that students punished their teachers when they received low scores, but did not reward their teachers when they received high scores. Esarey and Valdes [8] showed that even when SETs are assumed to be unbiased and reliable, the evaluations may still be unfair due to the lack of correlation between instructor quality and SET scores.

Although the validity of the effectiveness of SETs is still unresolved [9], SET scores provide insight into whether students are satisfied with the character, behaviours, skills and knowledge of their teacher. Through the triangulation of student, peer and self evaluation, a more reliable measure of teaching effectiveness may be produced. The focus of this study, however, is on how teachers can impact student satisfaction and increase SET scores through the application of a service quality model.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces the theoretical background to eliciting student satisfaction namely expectation confirmation theory, and a value analysis of the key drivers of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The language teaching service quality framework is described and explained in Section 3. Sections 4 and 5 describe the method and results of the case studies. The article concludes with practical recommendations on how to implement the service quality framework for language teachers.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Student expectations and values greatly affect perceived satisfaction. Any model or framework needs to be based on firm foundations and so the fundamental concepts of expectation confirmation theory and value analysis are described in this section

2.1 Expectation confirmation theory

Various researchers have described the effect of expectations on consumer satisfaction [10] [11]. In educational contexts, the consumers are students. Student satisfaction occurs under two conditions: when service delivery (i.e. teaching) exceeds the expectations of students, or when service delivery

meets the high expectations of students. This means that it is easier to satisfy students with low expectations and more difficult to satisfy those with high expectations. Students with unrealistically high expectations are unlikely to be satisfied by the quality of teaching, but if such expectations are identified from the outset of the course, and the student expectations are brought down to a reasonably realistic level, then satisfaction may occur. Service delivery in language teaching is the conveying of language knowledge and developing the ability to understand and use the target language. Yet, student perceptions of service do not relate only to pedagogic activities.

2.2 Value analysis of key drivers of satisfaction and dissatisfaction

Conducting a value analysis [12] helps teachers understand which aspects of their teaching are valued by their students. Improving the aspects that are valued may result in increases in satisfaction, but improving aspects that are not valued is unlikely to impact satisfaction levels.

The key drivers that cause satisfaction and dissatisfiers blocking satisfaction need to be identified. Potential drivers and dissatisfiers are multifarious and include grade awarded, difficulty of class, burden of homework, fun, feedback on performance and class content. Each of these can be further sub-divided to discover the particular aspect that is valued.

For example, in a writing class students may value feedback given on written work highly; however, the mode, manner, quality, quantity and timing of feedback could be valued differently. At one university in Hong Kong, students valued the turnaround speed of feedback more than quantity and quality of feedback, and so implementing speed-marking [13] would help drive satisfaction.

The initial priority is to ameliorate dissatisfiers as this is likely to result in larger increase in SET values. Once dissatisfiers have been addressed, teachers should then concentrate on improving the drivers of satisfaction [14] [15]. Motwani & Kumar [16] note that what students want, however, may not be what they need, and so satisfying the needs of students may paradoxically be a disservice to them.

3 SERVICE QUALITY FRAMEWORK FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

According to Berry and Parasuman [17] proposed a model of service quality that focused on meeting and exceeding consumer expectations to create a higher degree of satisfaction, termed delight. The framework shown in Fig. 1 is an adaption of their seminal model tailored to language teaching. A key caveat in any framework designed to improve student evaluations of teachers, is that the target outcome is an increase in SET score, which may not correlate to any actual improvement in learning but may correlate to “illusions of learning” (p.137) [18]. The individual components of the framework are described and exemplified in the following subsections.

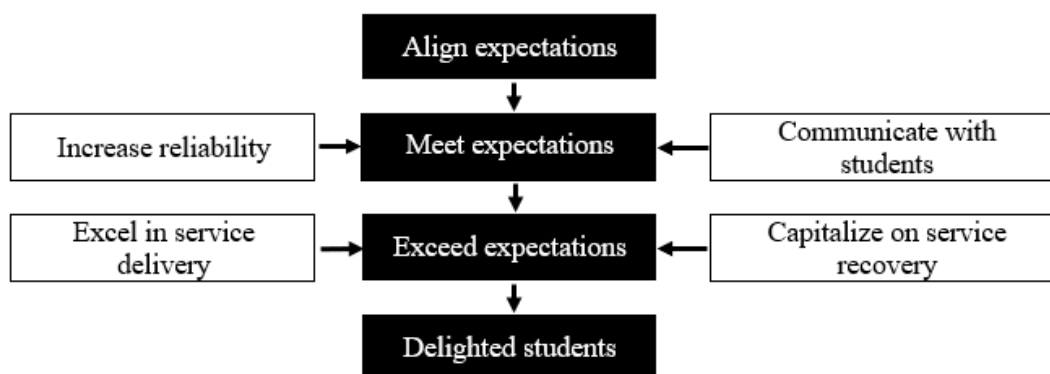


Fig.1. Service Quality Framework for Language Teaching (based on [17])

3.1 Aligning expectations

The first step is to identify student expectations from the outset though either written or spoken activities. Should any expectations differ greatly, it is necessary to point that discrepancy out to students at the earliest opportunity. Students may have unrealistic expectations about the amount of contribution needed, knowledge or skills to be acquired and the likelihood of achieving a high grade. To help align expectations, some teachers use learner contracts in which the teacher expectations of students are clarified. In the

same vein, a teacher contract in which the teacher sets out their promises to students may be distributed or explained.

3.2 Increasing reliability

In quality assurance reliability is paramount. Reliability of service delivery can be improved by using standard operating procedures. Checklists can be created to help teachers systematize processes. Since value analysis shows that students may place greater value on particular aspects, teachers who can identify and focus on the higher valued aspects are more likely to be able to elicit student satisfaction.

Reliability of teacher performance can be increased through systematic monitoring and reflection. Some ways in which this can be undertaken include reviewing an audio or video recording of teaching. Identifying potential bottlenecks can help teachers work out a plan to ameliorate them. For example, a teacher who receives 175 essays to grade in the same week may need to devise a suitable feedback strategy to be able to return the graded essays in a timely manner. Providing feedback on formative assignments may help to improve the quality of the related summative assignments. Systematization of assessment processes helps improve both the perception of and actual reliability. Systems that may be utilized include using criterion-referenced checklists. Learners can use them to check their submissions and teachers can use to grade their submissions.

3.3 Communicating with students

Teachers who take the time to get to know their students benefit two-fold. First, they gain more insight into the needs and wants of their students; and, second, by showing a personal interest in them, students are more likely to develop an affinity for the teacher and for the course delivered by that teacher.

Communicating the lesson aims clearly at the start of each lesson [19] ensure that students and teachers have a shared understanding of the purpose of the lesson. Putting the objective and instructions on any distributed materials helps ensure that students having difficulty understanding have the opportunity to read (and where necessary look up) the instructions.

Providing students with an opportunity to share their feedback on teaching and teaching materials mid-course can help teachers identify areas which deserve more attention prior to the summative SET [20].

3.4 Excelling in service delivery

To excel in service delivery in language teaching, it is necessary to go beyond what students expect from a typical language teacher. Service delivery in educational contexts is often assumed to be teaching; but, in fact, service delivery is not limited to only teaching.

Teaching-related service delivery factors include class management skills, explaining language, creating opportunities for students to practice language skills and providing feedback on their language use. In the case of explaining language, preparation and experience is key. Imagine trying to explain the difference between a *hare* and a *rabbit*, or *cosy* and *comfortable*, or a *prime minister* and a *president*. A *hare* is not just a big *rabbit*, *cosy* is not just another word for *comfortable* and different countries do not randomly select different terms for their political leaders. Teachers that excel in explaining need the requisite knowledge.

Other non-teaching factors impact student perceptions. Educational contexts vary by country and institution, and so what students consider to be beyond the expected service delivery will differ. Students in small classes in private language schools will most likely expect their teachers to remember their names while students in large classes at a university may not. Thus, should university teachers remember their student names, even though this is unrelated to teaching, this may positively impact SET scores. However, in fact, it may not be necessary to actually remember student names. Perception is paramount. For example, consider this scenario. A university teacher takes attendance and places an arrow on the class register to show the direction to look to see the student. Given that students tend to sit in the same place when taking attendance or nominating students in subsequent classes, the teacher can call out a name and look in the direction of the arrow. This technique gives the illusion of knowing the names of students without the burden of memorizing names.

3.5 Capitalizing on service recovery

When receiving poor service, customers may complain to the service provider or to other potential customers. In teaching, many issues that negatively impact students' views of the teacher and their

teaching. For example, students may get confused by a lengthy explanation and not understand what to do, the teacher may not be able to answer a valid student question about language, the teacher may have forgotten or even lost homework or assignments that were submitted. In each of these cases, teachers have the opportunity to capitalize on service recovery. This can be in the form of a short note, a quick conversation, etc.

4 METHODOLOGY

The ELT service quality framework was applied in three different contexts with a total of ten participants.

4.1 Participants

Participants included university educators in three different universities in Hong Kong, one university in Japan and teachers at a private language school in Thailand. All ten participants were referred by their line manager due to consistently low SET scores compared to the departmental, centre or school mean. In each case, contract renewal was at risk. All participants were between 35 and 55 years old. The key details related to participants are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant details

<i>Participant pseudonym</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Institution</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Native English speaker</i>	<i>Relevant qualification</i>	<i>Teaching experience</i>		
Addy	Hong Kong	University	female	no	MA	15		
Betty				yes	Certificate	2		
Cindy						3		
Davy					male	no	MA	25
Ernie				yes		PhD	10	
Freddie						Diploma	17	
Gary						BEd	10	
Harry	Japan				Certificate	1		
Illy	Thailand	Language school				1		
Joey						6		

4.2 Procedure

The three steps in the procedure are: (1) observe participant, (2) be observed by participant, and (3) discuss ways to improve student satisfaction with reference to the service quality framework. Participants followed this procedure between one and four times.

The main aim of the observation is to identify factors that may negatively affect student perceptions of the teacher. Discussion of classes and activities revolved around potential student perceptions of actions and behaviours, rather than pedagogy. Practical suggestions to improve student ratings were discussed with all the teachers. At the end of the discussion, teachers were encouraged to draw up an action plan of things to do differently to alter student perceptions.

5 RESULTS

Most teachers made multiple behavioural changes, which often were simple actions, such as to smile more, to greet late-comers and to use the names of their students. Some teachers were keen to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their teaching, while others only focused on increasing their SET scores.

As a result of the application of the service quality framework, all ten participants were able to improve their mean SET scores and had their contracts renewed. Three teachers substantially improved their scores to above the mean score of their centre or department.

5.1 Individual cases

Each teacher faced a different set of challenges. Here, I focus on three teachers operating in very different circumstances.

5.1.1 Addy

Addy was under tremendous pressure both at home and at work, and had become very emotional and had difficulty remembering even basic items, such as bringing whiteboard markers to the classroom. In addition, to the general practical suggestions detailed in the final section, she was advised to use checklists to create a standard operating procedure to ensure that key actions were not overlooked. Over one academic year, she showed improvement in both her teaching and her SET scores, which meant that she was able to retain her post.

5.1.2 Ernie

Ernie's main problem appeared to be a lack of interest in students and teaching. He felt that his forte was research rather than teaching. He was rather disillusioned with the local culture and had erected a psychological barrier. To help overcome this, he was encouraged to get to know his students as people by finding out what they wanted to learn, what they were interested in and what they wanted to do. Rather than improve his overall teaching, Ernie decided to use psychological manipulation as the vehicle to improve ratings. He saw this as a personal vendetta to show how flawed the SET system was. However, through his Machiavellian approach, he was able to bring his SET scores above the departmental mean in 3 of his 7 classes over a single semester. This was sufficient for contract renewal.

5.1.3 Freddie

Freddie's main problem was his inability to concentrate on one task. He tended to go into class, set his students a task, and then work on his laptop, forgetting that he was supposed to be teaching his students. He frequently forgot to go to class, often failed to return homework and even lost completed assessments. When he taught, he was able to create a great rapport. Suggestions specific to him, were to systematize to ease his memory burden, and to excel at damage control. With his classes, he decided to be completely open and explain to his students that he had difficulty concentrating and remembering simple tasks, which is not unusual among gifted people. He implemented a number of systems, such as assigning students to come to his office to get him if he did not arrive on time for his class, and advising students to email work to him, because he had a tendency to lose paper copies. He was able to improve his SET scores, thanks to his designated student assistants.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

Some of the recommendations shared with participants are given here. These recommendations may provide food for thought for teachers who want to or need to improve their evaluation ratings. Recommendations are divided into two sections: pedagogic and non-pedagogic. The recommendations below are written with university educators in mind, but with some adjustments many can be adapted for other educational contexts.

6.1 Pedagogic recommendations

6.1.1 *Align expectations*

Four ways to ensure minimum deviation between the expectations of each student and the teacher are to:

- Identify student expectations (e.g. via questionnaires and class discussion)
- State teacher expectations of students (e.g. in a learner contract)
- State what students can expect of teacher (e.g. in a teacher contract)
- Check students understand the expectations (e.g. via a pop quiz)

6.1.2 *Increase reliability*

Six ways to increase reliability of service delivery are to:

- Identify and avoid drivers of dissatisfaction

- Identify and focus on drivers of satisfaction
- Reflect on teaching and incorporate incremental improvements (e.g. by observing peers, keeping a reflective journal, discussing lessons with peers, and reviewing audio and/or video recordings of one's own teaching)
- Identify and prepare for bottlenecks
- Give formative feedback on work in progress, especially extended written work
- Be seen to be fair (e.g. by using checklists)

6.1.3 *Communicate with students*

Seven ways to improve communication with students are to:

- Negotiate course content (e.g. tailor course to students' needs and wants)
- Provide a course outline showing the inclusion of the negotiated content
- Get to know the students, not just their names
- Put objectives and instructions on handouts
- Highlight achievement of objectives each lesson
- Seek formative feedback prior to official student evaluation of teaching
- Incorporate one-to-one consultations

6.1.4 *Excel in service delivery*

Three easy-to-implement actions are to:

- Show students that you know them by using their names and personalizing materials and examples
- Make classes more enjoyable by smiling and appearing approachable and incorporating fun activities
- Show concern for student learning by emphasizing your availability, willingness to help struggling students and giving future-orientated constructive feedback

6.1.5 *Capitalize on service recovery*

Three easy-to-implement actions are to:

- Deal with root-cause of problem
- Show the students the root-cause is addressed and thank them.
- Make amends for the hassle factor (e.g. offer extra consultations, send personalized notes)

6.2 **Non-pedagogic recommendations**

Here are four ways to improve SET scores without improving one's teaching

- Teach
 - a) Smaller classes [21],
 - b) Elective classes [22], and
 - c) Afternoon classes [23].
- Create a strong first impression [24] of being
 - a) enthusiastic and lively [25],
 - b) likeable and friendly [26] [27], and
 - c) attractive (e.g. well-dressed and well-groomed) [28].
- Grade leniently and hope for reciprocity [29] [30] [31] [32] [33].
- Strategically administer SET questionnaires

- a) before announcing bad news [34],
- b) after announcing good news [35],
- c) after conducting an enjoyable activity [35],
- d) when disgruntled students are absent [36], and
- e) when the teacher is present [37].

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