

English Learning Maximisation System

English Learning Maximisation System:

A Learning-Centred Approach

By

João Canoquena

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This book is dedicated to my three bundles of joy – Filipe Nunes-Canoquena, Emma Joseph Nunes-Canoquena and Rochelle Tomé Canoquena.

It is equally dedicated to my mother, Maria da Conceição Francisco Canoquena, for her unwavering and unconditional support. She has always been a reliable source of encouragement and inspiration.

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ABBREVIATIONS & ACRONYMS

ACTA	Australian Council of TESOL Associations
AMES	Adult Multicultural Education Services
ASQA	Australian Skills Quality Authority
CAE	Certificate in Advanced English
CELTA	Certificate in English Language Teaching
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
CRICOS	Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students
DoS	Director of Studies
EA	English Australia
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELICOS	English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students
ELMS	English Learning Maximisation System
ELT	English Language Teaching
ERIC	Education Resources Information Centre
ESL	English as a Second Language
FCE	First Certificate in English
GE	General English
HR	Human Resources
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
IT	Information Technology
KET	Key English Test
NEAS	National ELICOS Accreditation Scheme
OUP	Oxford University Press
PET	Preliminary English Test
PPP	Present – Practise – Produce
ROI	Return on Investment

RTO	Registered Training Organisation
TAFE	Technical and Further Education (College)
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

INTRODUCTION

The English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) industry in Australia is largely privately owned. Its owners operate small to medium-sized colleges/English Language Teaching (ELT) centres in major cities such as Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide. These proprietors invest millions into this increasingly regulated industry, which suffers enormously from the Federal Government's tightening of the Australian visa system. The challenge faced by the Federal Government in the management of the visa system arises predominately from a lack of consultation mechanisms with the teaching industry, its main bodies, education agents and clients (the students and/or their parents). However, its consequences are drastic. For instance, one report by a prominent Australian into the visa system has recommended that Australia export its educational courses and stop importing overseas students. In other words, the report has recommended the removal of the economic benefit of international education from the Australian economy, which is in the billions. This perplexing recommendation comes at a time when Australia is spending millions advertising itself as a preferred destination for tourism. Puzzling too is the fact that international students' relatives and friends are the biggest cohort of tourists to Australia. It is not surprising, therefore, to hear cries for help from ELICOS' Academic Managers. "Government officials know nothing about ELICOS." Or the more mundane concern over the rise in the cost of compliance. "That's another burden imposed on us [ELICOS] by the government."

As a direct result of these suggestions for reform in the educational sector which only serve to heighten tensions and the tightening of the visa system, private education providers are confused, wary, and, in most instances, defensive. These sceptical proprietors are merging job titles (e.g. Marketing Manager/Campus Manager) and diluting existing job roles (e.g. the duties of a manager are spread across a range of other job descriptions). The last thing they need to hear is that a teacher has been perceived by students as not "teaching them anything". Worst of all would be the prospect of students asking to withdraw and moving to another provider after their first six months at the college, because they are "not learning anything".

In this book, the phenomenon of “not learning anything” is explored. In addition, its causes are outlined. These are said to be, *inter alia*: the textbook, teachers’ lesson delivery style, students’ own challenges, teachers’ profile, the dearth of information about ELICOS and the absence of an alternative method. Additionally, this book offers a new ELT paradigm. This new system is herein denoted as ELMS (English Learning Maximisation System). ELMS is a principle of English language learning maximisation, which should offer teachers a wide range of benefits. It should help TESOL practitioners to structure their lessons. Moreover, this new paradigm should make lesson planning an effortless task. Most importantly, through the adoption of the ELMS sequence ELT teachers should be able to engage their students in meaningful learning.

Divided into five parts and nineteen chapters, this book examines a problem (or phenomenon), outlines case studies to understand the factors contributing to the phenomenon and describes a research project designed to resolve the problem.

PART I

THE PHENOMENON: WHAT HAS HAPPENED?

CHAPTER ONE

THE STUDENT COMPLAINT

Introduction

This chapter narrates a sequence of events related to a student complaint, which was raised at an ELICOS college.

This complaint referred to the perception, on the part of some ELICOS students, of “not learning anything” in a series of English lessons.

A cycle of the management of this complaint is briefly outlined in this chapter.

A Student Complaint Life Cycle

Notification

On a Thursday morning, just after the morning break, a staff member notified me, the Director of Studies, of some student complaints about a young, male teacher via e-mail. Other staff members had been copied into the e-mail to help unveil additional, similar cases. It was common practice to treat students’ complaints in a manner that initially generated feedback from other staff members. This often had either one of two outcomes. Other staff members offered additional comments to corroborate the students’ complaints. Or there might be staff members who have heard positive comments about the teacher, in which case, the complaints might be treated as isolated cases.

The complaints at hand related to the male teacher’s teaching style. These related mostly to pace and language knowledge.

A second e-mail was subsequently sent by the same staff member to me, a day after the initial one. This time, additional information was provided in relation to the nature of the students’ complaints. Their main concern was the perception of “not learning anything” in three out of the five days of

timetabled tuition. The teacher in question taught this class of intermediate, heterogeneous, Conversational English students, Monday to Wednesday.

Investigation

I sampled four students out of this class. I selected the more capable ones from their test results. I sat with them separately and made no mention of the complaints received, indicating that it was my routine to talk to students from time to time about their learning experiences. I asked direct questions in some cases. In other cases, I outlined the gains in their learning first. So, for example, I started with “I’ve noticed that your second reading test shows some improvement in your reading skills”. The more capable ones saw this as a cue to talk about their reading skills. The less proficient student required a more direct question. “Has your English improved?” I noted down the answers, summarising some and quoting others verbatim. The chief concerns raised by the students I spoke to and the ones who had approached the aforementioned staff member fell into six categories, namely: the pace of delivery (too fast), a lack of visual aids, the relevance of learning experience to their needs and interests, a lack of hands-on and challenging activities, knowledge acquisition through daily theme changes/ number of conversation activities and a lack of written production. These items have been conceptualised from the actual complaints voiced by the students to allow me to draw generalisations from this experience in Table 1.1. These generalisations are not intended to indicate that all teachers consider student complaints in the same way. Different teachers will approach student complaints in a range of different ways. Nonetheless, the inclusion of this example in this first chapter serves two purposes. On the one hand, it allows the reader to visualise the process involved in handling a complaint. On the other hand, it contextualises the phenomenon of “not learning anything”.

Right of Response

I, the Director of Studies, forwarded a summary of the issues raised by the students to the respective teacher. Because it was a Thursday, the teacher was not at the college to discuss the concerns raised face-to-face. In my e-mail, I focused on the key issues in order to provide a manageable framework to work with. I outlined the six aspects of the learning experience, about which the students were concerned. In the e-mail, I made every effort not to identify the complainants as per the college’s

complaint handling policy. In his reply e-mail, the teacher expressed concern at the complaints. He then indicated that he would have liked to have been approached by the students, in the first instance. In the teacher's interpretation of the complaints, there were some truths and some inconsistencies in the students' assertions.

Table 1. 1 Structure of a teacher's response to students' complaints

COMPLAINT CATEGORIES	TEACHER'S RESPONSE TO COMPLAINTS
Pace	agreement & pledge to address it
Visual aid	agreement, admission & indication of recent rectification
Relevance of learning experience	disagreement/different perception & anecdotal evidence of addressing it in recent past
Hands-on & challenge	disagreement/different perception & speculation of a reason for the complaints as the students had not been in the class long
Daily conversational topics	justification for the decision not to have had daily topics
Written production in class	partial agreement with indication of it being an isolated case & refutation

Reconciling Accounts

The teacher's response was then compared to the students' complaints. I concluded that a) the students were able to examine or interpret their learning experience, b) these students had a fairly good understanding of what they wanted and needed, c) the teacher was willing to address some of the issues raised and d) although the teacher would have preferred the issues to have been referred directly to him, he admitted that he was aware of some areas for improvement such as speaking too fast in class. Most importantly, the two sets of comments (i.e. the students' and the teacher's) revealed a clear mismatch in perceptions about the learning process. For instance, in relation to the lack of relevance of the students' learning

experience and the lack of hands-on activities, there were discrepancies between the complaints and the teacher's response.

Investigating Further

Due to these inconsistencies, I asked the Head Teacher to conduct a focused observation of the teacher. The report of the observation confirmed the existence of areas for improvement such as pace. However, it indicated that most of the improvement areas were minor and could easily be addressed. The report also indicated that the teacher had been debriefed in relation to the nature and extent of the improvement required.

Exploring Solutions

Subsequently, I saw the teacher and discussed his professional development needs. I asked the teacher to describe some of the class activities to me to see if I could help in any way. "I know how to teach," he retorted. "I hired you. I know you can teach, but there might just be a mismatch between your teaching style and their learning style," I offered, backing off a bit. "Well, you know, I get them to do tasks and reflect on their learning." As these words were uttered, a realisation dawned upon me. The teacher was using task-based teaching with an accuracy-minded class. In other words, his class was best suited to a method which bridged the gap between accuracy and fluency, with greater emphasis on the former rather than the latter. In other words, the pendulum had swung too far towards fluency, at the expense of accuracy.

Resolution

I suggested that the teacher observe a very experienced teacher who had an accuracy-oriented delivery style. The teacher organised the observation with the experienced colleague I had suggested and forwarded a post-observation summary to me within a week of our debriefing session. In it, the teacher summarised the lesson and outlined the professional development drawn from the observation.

I then proceeded to sit down with the complainants to explain to them how their complaints had been investigated. I elicited their reaction to the processes adopted to address their complaints. They all indicated that there had been some progress in the lesson delivery style of their teacher from Monday to Wednesday. I then asked them if they were happy to declare

the case closed, to which the three initial complainants sitting in my office agreed unanimously.

Conclusion

This initial chapter outlines the life cycle of a student complaint. This cycle, in the case presented in this chapter, encompasses seven steps, from notification of the complaint to its resolution. In addition, this chapter provides a depiction of the duties fulfilled by various members of staff within an ELICOS college.

The conceptualisation shown in Table 1.1 affords the reader a bird's-eye view of the teacher's reaction to the complaints. This summary of the teacher's views enables readers, on the one hand, to access the mental orientation of a teacher under enormous pressure. On the other hand, it shows perceptual differences between teachers and students. Whilst the students in this case study believed that there was not sufficient writing in class, the teacher was of the opinion that there was "enough writing in class".

Curriculum Implications

For Academic Managers

The starting point of a student complaint cycle holds considerable significance for Academic Managers. Firstly, early *notification* is important to the work of Directors of Studies (or Academic Managers) because it allows counter measures to be put in place in good time to thwart any derailment of a teacher's career. By receiving early signs of areas for improvement, Academic Managers are placed in a good position to offer support to teachers in need. Secondly, the comprehensiveness of the *notification* may assist the Academic Manager to manage the complaint effectively. The more initial information there is, the more focused the subsequent investigation is likely to become. The receipt of sufficient information to establish lines of inquiry may not always be forthcoming from all staff members. It is, therefore, imperative that staff members be trained to gather sufficient detailed information from complainants to aid further investigation. Often the people in these initial ports of call share the language of the students and they are well-positioned to unearth their concerns and challenges. These staff members

(the first ports of call) are, invariably, Marketing Officers and Student Service Officers.

In addition, profiling teachers may assist Academic Managers in the management of teachers' performance. In this sense, Academic Managers should have information about: a) teachers' orientation (fluency or accuracy), b) professional development records, c) graduating students' feedback, d) philosophies of teaching, e) awareness of students' study goals, learning preferences, proficiency needs etc. and f) lesson delivery styles.

For Classroom Teachers

It is important that both agendas – the teacher's and the students' – be aligned in order for a great deal of agreement between the two to exist. This alignment is often overtly obtained. For instance, the teacher may conduct surveys with the class to identify their needs, study goals, past learning experiences and philosophies of learning. This information can then be factored into lesson planning and delivery. Covertly, teachers can observe students' behaviour in a variety of exercises and classroom settings (i.e. individual, pair or group). Observing students' reactions and engagement can prove significantly instructive. These two methods of learning about students' learning preferences do not need to be employed in a mutually exclusive way. These can be adopted and combined at the teacher's discretion.

CHAPTER TWO

HANDLING A STUDENT COMPLAINT

Introduction

This second chapter represents a sequel to the first chapter. In it, the stages of the escalation of the complaint outlined in Chapter 1 are presented.

The end result of the escalation is also discussed in this chapter.

Not learning anything

Notification

Some four months after the initial complaints about the young, male teacher's teaching style, two distraught students raised fresh, new concerns about the same teacher. I was sitting in my office when the college proprietor popped her head in and politely asked me to follow her. I wondered why she had chosen not to elaborate on her request. Nonetheless, I thought the request had been fairly reasonable and so I followed hot on her heels. In her office, there were two students. One of the students appeared distraught. She sounded somewhat agitated. The other, sitting on the couch, appeared settled. It took me about half a minute to figure out what was actually happening – these were not happy students. I suspected this the moment I stepped into the office. What eluded me was the reason why they had felt so distressed that they had not chosen to see me, in the first instance. I resolved to listen as I had not been instructed to do anything else. As I sat in silence, the revelations became more surprising by the second.

Seriousness and Sense of Urgency

Apparently, four students had stopped attending lessons in the class of the complainants. These two students in the college owner's office were threatening to stop attending as well. I waited patiently for a moment of clarity as to what motivated their threats. Nonetheless, I feared stifling the

flow of information from the students. I looked at the proprietor and was given some background to the threats.

The Complaint Proper

These two female students had said to the college owner that they were “not learning anything” with their Monday to Wednesday teacher. I pressed for additional information, making every effort to sound supportive. I wished to learn more about the term “not learning anything”. I had assumed that if they had a teacher in class, who had been trained to teach English, that the students would do nothing but learn the language or at very least some level-appropriate language. Surprisingly, I could not have been more wrong. These Intermediate Conversational English students explained that from Monday to Wednesday, they came out of the lessons without any recollection of the contents. They could hardly say what the lessons had been about. They were, however, able to say what activities they had done in class. One student described a two-hour activity, which entailed describing a bedroom. I asked, if there had been any specific exercises for the description of the bedroom, to which the two females shook their heads. “No grammar? No vocabulary or new words?” I insisted. The heads shook more vigorously this time. I thanked them for giving us some feedback about their learning experience and pledged to investigate their complaints further.

Investigation

I spent the next hour interviewing students about the particular class and their learning (or lack thereof) experience. The students’ comments I gathered fell into two clear categories. The first category indicated that “there was nothing to learn” and “I didn’t write anything”. The second category of students represented those who had been able to explain what they understood by the phrase “learn something”. This latter group said that they thought it meant, “you can remember” and “you know, oh, today I learnt *so do I*.”

Historical Reference

The revelations about “not learning anything” this time emerged as a result of direct questions about the learning experience in the classroom. Once again, individually, I spoke to five students from the relevant class. “So, you’re saying that with G [teacher’s name] you learn a lot, aren’t you?

What does G do in class?" I questioned, to which the students responded, "yes, with G, we do one activity, we learn one grammar, you know, struc ... structure and then we do something more like it, and then some writing, reading but still the same grammar." As I captured this description of a sequence of activities, I became intrigued. "But all the teachers do this, don't they?" The response to this question was similar from all the students. "No, Costa. With X, the teacher talks and talks. Then we open the book. We fill in the gaps. I guess, I don't know. Then sometimes, I'm right. Sometimes, I'm wrong. But I don't know why."

Right of Response

Afterwards, I spoke to the teacher in question about the complaints. I put it to the teacher that there might be a mismatch between the students' learning preferences and the teaching methodologies adopted in his classes. "They're just not used to my style. It's a great style. It helps them to talk," argued the teacher.

I reflected for a moment and accepted a couple of possibilities. Firstly, the students might be comparing teachers. Their comments might not be reflective of what was actually happening in class. These comments may have reflected what they had expected to happen in class. Secondly, I suspected that it could well have been a perceptual issue. Students were perceiving differences in the amount of language learnt at different stages in their educational experience.

Nonetheless, I continued to investigate this case. This time, I wished to educate myself about this phenomenon of being in a class with a trained teacher but "not learning anything". It somehow intrigued me.

Students' Contribution to Learning

Before I get too far into my inductive extrapolations about "not learning anything," it is important to take stock of this phenomenon with a degree of care. This caution stems from a meeting I attended with other Academic Managers. When I mentioned the phenomenon of "not learning anything" to other colleagues, one relayed a similar experience at their own college. "Funny you should say that. We had one last week, who said just that." I asked if the Academic Manager had drilled further into the phenomenon. The Academic Manager grinned and added, "we're looking into it, but frankly I think that there might be an issue of perception. Their test results may be showing otherwise." Other Academic Managers joined us, and we

bounced ideas off each other. “I think they actually mean, not being engaged or not having hands-on experiences,” suggested an Academic Manager. “But we’ve got one student who refuses to engage. She’s in IELTS (International English Language Testing System) and has actually refused to engage in speaking activities in class. She thinks that speaking activities are a waste of time. She says that she can learn to speak on her own.” This last comment about a Chinese IELTS Preparation student, who was under enormous pressure to obtain 7.0, resulted in a few raised eyebrows. *Learning to speak on their own?* We all looked as though we had asked the same question in our heads.

Whilst I could not fathom it, I understood what the student’s reluctance to engage actually meant – students contribute to the learning process enormously. As if reading my mind, one of the Academic Managers suggested, “it’s all about learning as a process, isn’t it? They really need to be helped to learn to learn.” They certainly do. This realisation could be expanded on to include an examination of the role of the student in the learning process or the concept of student-centredness. However, this book focuses primarily on teachers as the main “locus of control” for change in the creation of learning environments in ELICOS classrooms.

Outcome of the Threats

Whilst my learning curve led me to insightful discoveries, the fate of the teacher against whom the “not learning anything” complaints were made was not as enjoyable. Once the widespread nature of the discontent had been confirmed and the evidence (as demonstrated by the excessive drop-out rate in his class) indicated a commercial threat, the young, male teacher realised the inevitability of the need to part company with the college. On the one hand, his departure represented a wasted opportunity for growth on his part. On the other hand, it threw months of professional development, feedback and support down the drain.

However, the loss of this young, male ESL teacher has galvanised me in more ways than one. It has given me the strength to step out of my doctoral thesis and investigate this phenomenon of “not learning anything”. In addition, it has made me even more committed to unveiling a better way to plan lessons and a more confident way to teach English to speakers of other languages.

Conclusion

This chapter outlines an escalation of students' complaints. This escalation involved the owner of the college and the decision by other students to stop attending classes. In addition, this chapter describes the process of complaint handling I adopted in managing the concerns of the students, including an unfortunate end result.

Despite the small group of students involved (four withdrawn and two threatening to withdraw), this case holds significance in the issue of customer satisfaction. This significance relates to the potentially detrimental impact of a few unhappy students on many happy ones. In this sense, analogies can be drawn between unhappy students and rotten apples. When apples and any other fruit (e.g. bananas) rot, these give off a gas called ethylene. Whilst this gas, ethylene, is often associated with the ripening process, it causes enzymes such as amylases and proteases to break down the tissue in fruit, thus causing rotting. Once the rotting process begins, other enzymes in other fruits can be equally affected by the gaseous substances given off by the rotten fruit. The word of mouth of unhappy students can act in the same way as ethylene, affecting the satisfaction levels of other students. In this sense, the number of complainants does not need to be large. They only need to be influential individuals in the eyes of their peers for havoc to be wreaked in a college population. Therefore, the complaints of any students, especially those brave enough to see the college proprietor must be considered with extreme seriousness.

Curriculum Implications

Academic Managers

This chapter is of exceptional importance to Academic Managers. Its relevance to the job of Academic Managers relates to the management of expectations. If students' expectations are managed satisfactorily every time these are made explicit, they will gain confidence in the Academic Manager's ability to effect change in their favour. In this case, I admit not having acted in the initial instance with the determination required of me. I gave the teacher, in the first instance, the benefit of the doubt without placing sufficient monitoring mechanisms in place to give the students the confidence of a satisfactory resolution. At the very least, the teacher could have been better matched to a different class.