

Evaluation of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (FHSS) Doctoral Program in Foreign Language Education: Questionnaire Design

Jasenka Čengić

*Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Zagreb, Croatia
jasenka.cengic@gmail.com*

Silvija Hanžić Deda

*Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Zagreb, Croatia
silvija.hanzic@gmail.com*

Ana Gabriјela Blažević

*Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Zagreb, Croatia
anablazevic@gmail.com*

1. Introduction

Evaluating academic programs has become an integral part of developing and improving various programs at undergraduate as well as graduate and postgraduate university levels. One of the problems in assessing the quality of university level programs is the fact that most assessment programs rely on student satisfaction surveys only (Hurt, 2004). However, academic programs involve some other dimensions which should be considered in the evaluation process with student satisfaction being only one of them. Other dimensions include meeting the students' desired outcomes, their relationship with the advisors (Szymanska, 2011) and the variable of the course instructors' as well as the thesis advisors' experience (Cuseo, 2003).

Furthermore, a comprehensive assessment of academic programs should include a variety of qualitative and quantitative assessment tools. The use of open-ended questions and focus groups are the recommended procedures for general questionnaire design proposed by Brown (2001), Dörnyei (2003) and Demetriou (2005).

Ready-made instruments cannot always serve the purpose of evaluating specific academic programs. The necessary steps in academic program evaluation, therefore, involve designing instruments that provide enough information for program improvement.

From 2006 to 2014 the Doctoral program in foreign language education (FLE) at the FHSS (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences), University of Zagreb (henceforth the Program) was evaluated with the instruments designed by the Program directors. Although the previously used questionnaires managed to reflect the complex picture of the multitude of dimensions encompassed by the Program, they were not validated instruments.

Therefore, in 2014 the evaluation underwent considerable changes. The idea was to recruit the students themselves in the process of collecting the necessary information about what needs to be included in the new assessment protocol and instrument design. After a period of brainstorming sessions and collaborative meetings

between students and the faculty members involved in the Program, a decision was made to design a new questionnaire for evaluating the Program. The aim of this paper is to describe the process of designing the above-mentioned questionnaire.

2. The FHSS Doctoral Program in Foreign Language Education

In this section, the Program will be described along with the evaluation procedures in use prior to the Program change in 2014.

2.1. The description of the Program

The Program consists of two parts pertaining to the activities designed for doctoral students: a) coursework based on compulsory and elective courses, and b) students' independent research work.

The coursework part consists of four modules and students' independent research work covers three modules (see Table 1).

Table 1. The structure of the Program

The FHSS Doctoral Program in FLE						
Coursework				Independent Research		
Applied linguistics courses	Courses about research methods	FLE themed courses	Various elective courses	Students' current research work presentation	Selecting the area of doctoral research	Dissertation work

2.1.1. Coursework

Module 1 comprises six courses (see Table 2). In all the tables that follow below, the first column shows the course titles, the second column shows their status (compulsory or elective), and the third column shows the number of ECTS credits per course.

Table 2. Courses in Module 1

Course	Status	Credits
Second Language Acquisition	compulsory	4
First Language Acquisition	elective	2
Bilingualism and Multilingualism	elective	2
The Age Factor	elective	2
Cognitive Grammar in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching	elective	5
Language for Specific Purposes	elective	2

Module 2 includes courses pertaining to research methodology (see Table 3).

Table 3. Courses in Module 2

Course	Status	Credits
Research Design and Introduction to Statistics	compulsory	3
Methods in Researching Foreign Language Education	compulsory	3
Academic Writing and Oral Presentation Skills	compulsory	3
Language for Specific Purposes and Language Corpora	elective	2
Modern Technology and Foreign Language Teaching	elective	5
Computational Linguistics and Language Technologies	elective	2
Research Areas in Foreign Language Acquisition	elective	2

Module 3 consists of topics in foreign language education, and it offers fourteen courses shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Courses in Module 3

Course	Status	Credits
Theories and Methods in Foreign Language Teaching	elective	3
Discourse Analysis and Classroom Discourse	elective	3
Reading in a Second Language	elective	3
Communicative and Other Competences in Foreign Language Teaching	elective	3
Written Discourse in Foreign Language Education	elective	3
Literature in Foreign Language Education	elective	3
Cultural Elements in Modern Foreign Language Teaching	elective	3
Individual Learner Differences and Foreign Language Teaching	elective	3
Language Learning Strategies	elective	3
Learner Autonomy	elective	3
Reception Approach in Foreign Language Learning	elective	3
Analysis and Evaluation of Teaching Materials	elective	3
Assessing Communicative Competence in a Foreign Language	elective	3
Designing Language Tests	elective	3

Module 4 contains eleven elective courses (see Table 5).

Table 5. Courses in Module 4

Course	Status	Credits
Cognitive Linguistics	elective	2
Neurolinguistics	elective	2
Developmental Psychology	elective	2
Mental Lexicon – Theories and Models	elective	2

Language Learning Impairments in Monolinguals and Bilinguals	elective	2
Psychology of Children with Special Needs	elective	2
Blindness and Foreign Language Learning	elective	3
The Modern School in the Educational System	elective	2
Curriculum Theory and Models	elective	2
Education Strategies and Innovation	elective	2
Interculturalism and Education	elective	2

2.1.2. Independent Research Work

The students' independent research work covers three modules (Modules 5, 6 and 7). The doctoral students set their own goals and schedule their research activities, that is, they work independently towards reaching the required number of credits.

Module 5 involves collecting credits for independent research work through publishing, attending conferences and presenting research findings, etc. The students organize their work autonomously, or with the assistance of their advisors, faculty members involved in the Program and other experts in the field.

Module 6 includes the necessary stages in the process of determining and selecting the thesis topic and preparatory work for drafting research proposal and the official research proposal public defense.

Module 7 is dedicated to planning the research, reporting on the relevant stages of the accomplished tasks, public presentation of preliminary results and key findings, and the actual dissertation writing. Finally, the module is completed with the official evaluation of the thesis and its public defense.

Each doctoral student receives the so called Gloma file that contains personal information, list of courses, and the program schedule. Students' responsibility is to make timely entries, indicating progress (credits earned, exams passed, conferences attended, papers published, etc.).

2.2. Previously used questionnaires for evaluation of the Program

From 2006 to 2014 three questionnaires were designed for evaluation of the Program. The evaluation was conducted after each semester and at the end of the Program. In the questionnaires, the following categories were evaluated: the structure of the courses, the relevance of the courses, course instructors' performance and course requirements. Semester evaluation was conducted using a questionnaire containing the list of both compulsory and elective courses which were evaluated through the above-mentioned categories. The students were asked to evaluate each course along the four listed categories using a 5-point scale. In addition to that, there was a text box intended for comments and suggestions regarding individual courses as well as the overall program.

The evaluation of the overall program consisted of three parts: first, some general information about the students was required, such as previous education, work experience and the hours spent in completing the Program requirements. Next, the students were asked to provide an overall evaluation of the program on a 5-point

scale, and the subsequent 30 statements addressed the Program administration, the Program director's availability and the time provided for students' needs, tuition fees, assignment deadlines and reading materials, exam dates and requirements, teachers' expectations, the balance between theory and research, collaboration with thesis advisors, and overall study program organization. The final part of this questionnaire comprised three open-ended questions related to: a) three strongest aspects of the Program, b) three possible improvements, and c) ideas pertaining to improving the skills and competences acquired in the Program.

In the section that follows we are going to describe the concepts and instruments that served as the basis for the new questionnaire design.

3. New Questionnaire Design

The idea was to construct a questionnaire that would encompass the multidimensionality of the Program structure and the complexity of the motives and goals of the students enrolling in the Program. More specifically, we examined the existing instruments used prior to 2014, in terms of their applicability to the aims of evaluation of the Program. In addition to the previously used questionnaires, we explored instruments used in other universities. The instrument that we found most useful for constructing a new questionnaire was The Students' Evaluation of Educational Quality (SEEQ) instrument (Marsh, 1983, 1984, 1987; Marsh & Dunkin, 1992).

3.1. SEEQ

The SEEQ instrument (Marsh, 1983, 1984, 1987; Marsh & Dunkin, 1992) is frequently used by researchers at the university level (Richardson, 2005). It comprises a number of the so-called teaching dimensions (Marsh, 2007).

The SEEQ is a type of the students' evaluation of teaching effectiveness (SETs). According to Marsh (2007), SETs is the most commonly used instrument for the students' assessment of their study programs. The SETs has an established construct validity (e.g., Cashin, 1988; Howard, Conway, & Maxwell, 1985) and that was the main motive for inserting it in the new questionnaire we were trying to design. SETs aims to identify various teacher profiles.

The standardized SEEQ is designed to evaluate one course at a time, and it is most commonly administered upon completing the course. It consists of 34 items distributed in ten unequal parts: nine parts use six-point Likert scales, and the last part is an open-ended question eliciting additional comments or feedback. The SEEQ questionnaire sections address the following teaching dimensions: the learning process, enthusiasm, organization, group interaction, individual rapport, breadth of coverage, examinations, assignments, overall program evaluation and feedback.

The SEEQ identifies nine factors relevant for the teacher profiles: Learning/Value, Instructor Enthusiasm, Organization/Clarity, Group Interaction, Individual Rapport, Breadth of Coverage, Examinations/Grading, Assignments/Readings, and Workload/Difficulty, the combinations of which form various teacher profiles which have been proven constant in relation to time, courses and levels of teaching. The association between those profiles and teaching efficacy have not been widely explored (Marsh, 2007). This relationship between the teachers' profiles and their teaching efficacy was to be one of the crucial segments incorporated in our new questionnaire.

More specifically, we wished to examine the interrelation between teachers' profiles, their efficacy in teaching and the students' profiles (see section 3.3 for details about students' profiles).

3.2. Questionnaire design process

In this section, we discuss the steps taken during the process of questionnaire design. The questionnaire items were generated from 1) informal individual interviews with the directors of the Program 2) focus group interview and 3) questionnaires previously used for the evaluation of the Program.

Apart from the current Program director, one of the preceding directors of the FHSS doctoral program in FLE was interviewed as well. The aim of the interviews was learning about the Program structure and the changes after 2014 and, more importantly, to determine to what extent the feedback obtained from the previous questionnaires affected and/or initiated the Program change.

The first focus group consisted of 11 doctoral students who formed part of the 2014 cohort. The goal of the focus group was to articulate the issues concerning the structure and content of the Program. The focus group was held after the doctoral students had already attended most of the courses planned for that cohort. The students were asked to comment on the items included in a previously used questionnaire and to say if they thought the items covered the issues related to the students' satisfaction with the Program. Having compared the issues that arose during the focus group discussion to the items listed in the questionnaire previously used for the evaluation of the Program, it was clear that the old questionnaires used for the evaluation purposes of the Program failed to address most of the issues which emerged during the focus group discussion.

There were several important issues that surfaced from the data collected in the focus group. First, although the old questionnaires contained open-ended questions for additional comments, it was concluded that the doctoral students had to be provided with the opportunity to give much more detailed opinions about individual courses and teachers. This would ensure that the comments collected would be useful for gathering information about specific courses and their requirements. Second, the doctoral students' perception of course quality seemed to differ greatly from one another due to their previous education, teaching experience and motivation for enrolling in the Program. In other words, there were two basic ideas that emerged during this focus group: 1) the questionnaire for the evaluation of the program had to be more detailed in terms of addressing individual courses and teachers, and 2) the evaluation of the success of the courses and teachers' profiles should be matched with what we decided to call doctoral students' profiles. These profiles should include their educational background, place of work, and their primary motivation for starting the program.

3.3. The first draft of the questionnaire

The new questionnaire ³consisted of seven parts that had to be administered at different times during the course of the program. The first two parts aimed at collecting

³ Contact the authors for the full version of the new questionnaire in Croatian and the English.

information about the doctoral students' profiles. The rest of the questionnaire addressed the program itself – the courses available, exams and details about potential thesis advisors. Let us take a closer look at the structure of the questionnaire:

1. The first set of items gathered general information about the students, such as age, gender and previous education. In addition to that, it collected data on individual student's work experience irrespective of the type of employment. Finally, it addressed the question of motivation to enroll in this doctoral program. The items were either multiple choice or filling in the gaps.
2. The second set of items related to the profiles of doctoral students as language teachers. This set is divided into three subsets. The first subset presents nine types of learners that can be found in a language classroom and examines with which of these types of learners are the doctoral students likely to collaborate most effectively. The second subset examined potential "compatibility" between a certain learner profile and the doctoral students' teaching style. The last subset enquired about the doctoral students' perception of the "ideal" language learner.
3. The third set was intended for individual course evaluation and it consisted of five subsets. The first one related to the interest in the course before and after attending the course. The second subset related to the content and the schedule of the course. The third part related to the assigning a grade to the overall course and course teacher's performance. The final two subsets were open-ended questions enquiring about the strong points of the course, as well as the suggestions about what could be improved.
4. The fourth set examined the exam process. This part of the questionnaire was administered after each semester, and included all the exams passed during that period. The first subset examined the clarity of course requirements in relation to the final exam, the connection between learning outcomes and assessment, availability of reading materials and course instructor's feedback. The second subset related to the amount of time invested in completing the course requirements and the number of ECTS credits earned in relation to the effort invested in passing the exam.
5. The fifth set of the questionnaire dealt with the preferences of doctoral students, that is, they were asked to mark the level of agreement with the statements that described the types of teachers they preferred. For instance, the teachers who presented topics systematically and clearly, the ones who used real life situations to present research results, the teachers who were very objective and demonstrated no personal opinions, the teachers who respected the variety of theories and approaches even though they might not have agreed with them, the ones who expressed their opinions clearly, the teachers whose teaching was interactive, the ones who allowed interruptions, the teachers who encouraged independent student work, and the ones who accepted their teaching input to be guided by their students' needs and interests.
6. The sixth set consisted of six subsets. The first subset examined the administration efficiency, the second subset related to the courses schedule and organization and the third subsection was intended for the overall program evaluation. The last three subsets were open-ended questions examining the strong points of the doctoral program's organization, the suggestions for improvements, and the recommendations for expanding the knowledge and skills incorporated in this study program. This part of the questionnaire would be administered at the end of the doctoral studies.

7. The last, seventh set, of this questionnaire examined the quality of the doctoral students' collaboration with their thesis advisor(s). This section ended with an open-ended question calling for further comments. This part of the questionnaire would be administered after the doctoral thesis is defended.

3.4. Piloting the first draft of the new questionnaire

The first draft of the new questionnaire was sent to 9 doctoral students in several doctoral programs at the FHSS. Our aim was to obtain feedback about the structure and comprehensibility of the questionnaire. More specifically, they were asked to complete the questionnaire and comment on the following points: the wording of the items, the organization of the questionnaire, and the time frame necessary for completion. The comments obtained were used to improve the clarity and comprehensiveness of the questionnaire items. The result was the version of the questionnaire that was piloted further a few months later.

The participants were recruited from all the cohorts of the Program since its founding in 2006, including the 2014 cohort. Altogether there were 38 participants, out of which 12 were members of the 2014 cohort, and the remaining 26 were students belonging to all the other cohorts of the Program since its founding. The questionnaire was administered online. It is important to note that this final version of the questionnaire was used selectively in the sense that we had to find the elements that could be relevant for all the cohorts. Thus, the participants were asked to complete only those questions that relate to two out of four compulsory courses that were in common to all the cohorts. The items included in the sixth and seventh set of the questionnaire were not included in the piloting. As stated earlier those sets would be administered at the end of the doctoral study, which is a stage the majority of the doctoral students had not reached at the point the pilot study was conducted.

Our next step is to test the sixth and seventh module of the questionnaire on the doctoral students of the 2014 cohort so that the questionnaire could be used in its entirety with the 2016 cohort. One of the future steps will be designing an additional part of the questionnaire which would require feedback from the course teachers as well as thesis advisors to allow for even deeper insight into the needs of the Program.

4. Instead of a conclusion

After all the changes introduced at the university level in 2014, the FHSS Doctoral Program in Foreign Language Education, faced the need for changing the Program evaluation scheme. That resulted in constructing a set of questionnaires which, put together, make a new instrument for the integral evaluation of the Program. Such a questionnaire needed to encompass the enrolled students' profiles, both as teachers and as students, and had to cover the academic program in its entirety.

The novelties of the new questionnaire design are: 1) the opportunity for the students to give direct feedback on each individual course, including the course teacher performance, and their exam experiences immediately upon completion, 2) items designed to measure the students' motivation to join the Program and their goals, i.e., what they are aspiring to upon completing their doctoral education, 3) items designed to create a learner profile and a teacher profile of a particular doctoral student.

Collecting relevant data at regular intervals, from every cohort, enables the doctoral program director to adapt quickly and to meet the doctoral students' needs. In

other words, on the account of timely feedback, the study program becomes dynamic and remains up to date.

Apart from timely feedback and motivation for enrolling in the Program, the new questionnaire contains two distinctive subsets that collect information about each doctoral student from two different perspectives: those of doctoral students as teachers and as learners. Establishing potential connections between doctoral students' profiles as teachers and as students is seen as a way of grasping the complexity of the nature of the cohorts of students joining the Program. Both subsets of the questionnaire contain the items examining various cognitive styles and personality traits, so they provide valuable information that can clarify the reasons why individual students evaluated a certain course, course teacher, and other components of the doctoral program the way they did.

Having considered all the aspects of the Program requirements and the enrolled students' profiles, two new aspects were merged into a salient new variable that could influence the students' evaluation of the courses: the students' motivation to join the Program and their goals, i.e., what they are aspiring to upon completing their doctoral education. This new variable has the potential of explaining the variability in individual student's evaluation.

In sum, the data collected by means of the new questionnaire may carry great potential in providing accurate feedback to the directors of the Program. The ultimate value of such information can be twofold: it can be used for improvements in future planning and curriculum design, and in understanding the needs of potential future candidates, based on their backgrounds and interests.

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