



## Using Student Satisfaction Surveys for Program Improvement

Research on teaching and learning in TESOL has incorporated student opinions and student voices in a variety of ways. However, it is relatively rare to see studies that query students after they have exited a language program and can reflect more objectively on their experiences. The survey described in this article was sent to university second language (L2) students who had completed a required English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program for 1st-year multilingual students 1 to 3 years earlier. Students were asked to evaluate their experiences with the EAP program in general, to comment on specific elements of the program that they had enjoyed or that they felt needed improvement, and to assess whether, in their opinion, the EAP classes had helped them succeed in subsequent writing classes (or classes that involved substantial writing). In this article, I describe the program, curricular features that were being evaluated, the survey responses ( $N = 355$ ), and changes to the EAP program that are already under way as a result of the findings. I also discuss how the evaluation process we undertook can be valuable to other language and writing programs wishing to assess their own effectiveness.

Research on teaching and learning in TESOL has incorporated student opinions and student voices in a variety of ways. However, it is relatively rare to see studies that survey students after they have exited a language program and can reflect on what they have gained from completing it. Some years ago, Christison and Krahnke (1986) argued that “[c]urriculum design in ESL programs for academic preparation has, in general, failed to use the experience of students themselves as a basis for planning and decision making” (p. 61). Such feedback from students is important for two reasons. First, student satisfaction can be a valuable data point, along with statistical data (such as GPAs) and performance data (such as portfolio-

os of student writing), to inform program assessment for outside evaluators. Second, if student feedback is finely tuned to elicit opinions about specific elements of the program or curriculum, administrators and teachers can potentially use it to improve their practices.

The survey described in this article was sent to university second language (L2) students who had completed a required English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program for first-year multilingual students one to three years earlier. Its director (the author) was interested in students' feedback on the program to pinpoint ways in which the program could continue to improve. In this article, I describe the program, the survey responses ( $N = 355$ ), and changes and discussions that are under way as a result of the findings. Though the details of the curriculum, the survey, and the consequent changes are specific to this particular program, the process of review and evaluation that we pursued (and continue to pursue) can be applicable to many different language, writing, or EAP programs that wish to strategically incorporate student perspectives in their own self-evaluations.

### **Background**

Student reactions and opinions about language instruction have been studied in a variety of ways, dating from the late 1970s. Sometimes students are surveyed and/or interviewed about their preferences regarding specific pedagogical approaches, such as peer feedback, error correction, or computer-based instruction (e.g., Rabe-Hemp, Woollen, & Humiston, 2009). Other researchers have examined students' beliefs about language learning and their expectations about what they will encounter in a language or writing class. In some studies, students have been queried about the skills required in academic course work beyond their introductory language program and to what degree they felt well prepared for the demands of their subsequent courses. For example, Leki and Carson (1997), who interviewed students several years after they had completed their EAP courses, reported that the students described their courses across the curriculum as "completely different worlds" compared to their experiences in the EAP program. In their 1997 study and an earlier one (Leki & Carson, 1994), students reported feeling ill prepared especially for complex and demanding writing assignments that involved writing from multiple sources.

Studies of student reactions to the instruction they received in language programs has most typically been conducted as students begin the programs (studies of beliefs or expectations, e.g., Horwitz, 1988; Lobo & Gurney, 2014), while they are still in their language courses (e.g., Christison & Krahnke, 1986), or as they are exiting the program (e.g., Baik & Greig, 2009). Only scattered studies through the years have examined students' opinions, after some time had passed, as to how well they believed their language program served them and prepared them for future course work. The

present study combined several elements of the previous research: It both asked students to give opinions as to how well the program had prepared them for later courses and asked them to share their reactions to specific elements of the program itself. As Leki and Carson (1994) put it:

[W]e need to be making greater efforts to consult more with ESL students and former students about their needs. ... Giving our students voice in this way helps to balance a top-down approach to curriculum design with information from those who are the focus of our efforts. (p. 99)

This study was guided by two primary research questions:

1. Do students believe that the EAP program they had completed one to three years earlier helped them to succeed in subsequent courses?
2. What are students' reactions, after exiting the program, to the program in general and to various specific elements of the program and curriculum?

## **Method**

### ***Context***

The study was conducted at a large public research university in the US. There are nearly 30,000 undergraduate students, with a rapidly growing percentage of international students (around 18% of undergraduates as of Fall 2018) as well as many resident multilingual students who had grown up in homes where the language(s) used were other than English. The EAP program, designed for first-year students, consists of three sequenced courses that focus on integrated reading-writing skills with additional emphases on grammar and vocabulary development. Depending upon their initial placement, students take one, two, or all three courses before exiting the program into a basic writing course run by a local community college and then finally into their required first-year composition (FYC) course. The three EAP courses were, at the time the survey was administered, graded pass/no pass, and they carried graduation credit.

### ***EAP Student Characteristics***

The demographic information gathered from the students in the first part of the survey is displayed in Table 1. This table shows that the majority of the respondents were still in their first two years of college (66%) and had completed the EAP program fairly recently—within the previous two years (69%). The majority (76%) grew up in homes in which the primary language was not English, but 23% said they had grown up speaking English plus

**Table 1**  
**General Student Respondent Information (N = 355)**

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Response choices</i>	<i>Percentage*</i>
Year in school (when completing the survey)	Freshman	15%
	Sophomore	51%
	Junior	23%
	Senior	10%
Year they completed the EAP program	2013-14	10%
	2014-15	19%
	2015-16	52%
	Fall 2016	17%
	Don't remember	7%
Which EAP course levels they completed	Level 1	31%
	Level 2	64%
	Level 3	99%
Primary home language in childhood	English only	1%
	English and another language	23%
	A language other than English	76%
Born in the US	Yes	13%
	No	87%
Graduated from US high school	Yes	47%
	No	53%
International (visa) student	Yes	62%
	No	38%
Use of English outside of school now	Only English	3%
	75-99% English	21%
	50-74% English	27%
	25-49% English	23%
	0-24% English	22%
	Not sure/it varies	4%

\**Note.* Some numbers may not add up to 100% because of rounding.

another language.<sup>1</sup> As to their English language proficiency, 31% of the respondents said they had begun the program at the lowest level of instruction (Level 1), 64% had taken Level 2, and, of course, nearly all had taken the most advanced course (a few students per year are allowed to skip levels). These respondents' placement numbers are consistent with overall course placement patterns for this program, measured and reported elsewhere (Ferris, Evans, & Kurzer, 2017). To summarize, these student respondents were largely newcomers to the US (not born in the US and not residents)

who had been judged as needing substantial amounts (two to three terms) of EAP instruction before proceeding to basic and first-year required writing instruction. Though students' countries of origin and first languages were not explored in this survey, from other program research we know that the majority of our international students are from China and that most domestic multilingual students needing EAP are L1 speakers of Spanish.

### ***Curricular Features***

For this study, I, the director, was especially interested in eliciting student reactions to specific curricular changes that had been recently implemented to better align the instruction with best practices in the field. In interest of space, I will touch on just several of the most substantive changes.

1. **Thematic Content.** One of the first decisions made was that the course syllabi would revolve around specific themes. Our academic calendar is structured around 10-week quarters, and it can be difficult to spend time teaching new content as well as reading, writing, and language skills. The use of thematically linked reading and writing assignments derives from the principles of content-based instruction for academic language development (Kasper, 1997) and has been specifically recommended for writing contexts by L2 writing experts (e.g., Leki, 1991/1992; Silva, 1997).
2. **Portfolio Assessment.** The culminating requirement for the courses was changed from the previous heavily weighted final exam to evaluation of electronic portfolios of student work. This change was in line with expert recommendations (CCCC, 2014) and brought the EAP courses into alignment with the practices of the first-year composition program within the same department, which also uses e-portfolios for final assessments. Portfolios are graded by teams of instructors following an intensive norming session at the end of each quarter; if readers disagree on the scores, a program supervisor makes the final decision.
3. **Approaches to Feedback.** Under the new portfolio system, students receive peer feedback on their first drafts of portfolio papers and teacher feedback (in writing or in conferences) on the second draft before the paper is finalized and submitted to the e-portfolio. This choice was made both for practical reasons (in a 10-week quarter, it is difficult timewise for an instructor to turn around feedback on two drafts) and for philosophical/theoretical ones (sociocultural and second language acquisition theory supporting collaborative group work [Villamil & de Guerrero, 2006]).
4. **Approaches to Error Correction and to Formal Grammar Instruction.** The previous versions of the courses had featured ex-

tensive amounts of traditional grammar instruction (teacher presentation, exercises, quizzes and tests). However, every experienced teacher can cite instances of students who can perform well on grammar tests but show inability to apply their knowledge to their own writing (see, e.g., Frodesen & Holten, 2003). We opted instead for a combination of contextualized error feedback on second drafts of portfolio papers paired with regular individualized feedback on patterns of error via a technique known as Dynamic Written Corrective Feedback (DWCF; see Hartshorn et al., 2010; Kurzer, 2018a, 2018b).<sup>2</sup>

There were and are other innovations that our revamped curriculum includes, such as a switch from “essays” to broader genre knowledge instruction (see Tardy, 2009, 2016), additional instruction on reading strategies (see Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Hedgcock & Ferris, 2018; Hirvela, 2016), and greater emphasis on vocabulary development in the context of course reading-writing assignments.

### ***Placement Process***

As discussed in Ferris et al. (2017), we formerly had a placement process that was a poor fit for our needs, both as to the content of the placement instrument and the process. Specifically, the content of the placement instrument (source text and prompt) was overly abstract and culturally inaccessible to our incoming international first-year students. The rubric was a pass/fail scale, not one to pinpoint students’ placement into one of our four course levels (the three EAP courses and the basic writing course). Finally, students had been taking the placement exam on campus just a few days before the fall term began, making it difficult for students to plan their class schedules and for the program to schedule classes and instructors. In response, we had created and piloted a new placement instrument (a reading-writing exam that followed suggestions from Weigle, 2006) and received permission to have students take it remotely from their homes during the summer before their arrival on campus as first-year students. Overall, this transition has been smooth and successful, but since students’ feelings about their course placement can influence their overall attitude toward an EAP, language, or writing program (Crusan, 2002), a separate item about placement was included in the student satisfaction survey (Question 12).

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

To evaluate the overall success of the program from the perspective of its primary stakeholders—the students—we undertook a careful examination of the curricular changes we had made. Because the goal of this study was to gather a broad range of opinions from students who had completed

the program over the previous several years, a survey seemed the most reasonable method for collecting data quickly and with minimal intrusion into the respondents' ongoing undergraduate studies. With input from program instructors, I designed a 17-item online survey to address the research questions outlined above. All but the final three items were multiple choice to facilitate easy, efficient completion. Questions 1-6 gathered demographic/background information about the respondents; Questions 7-11 asked them about their history with courses in the EAP program and subsequent required writing courses; Questions 12-15 asked for specific reactions about various aspects of the program itself and its value for their later course work; and Questions 16-17 were open-ended questions that allowed them to add further comments if they wanted to. The complete text of the survey is in the Appendix.

For survey administration, program staff compiled a list with names and emails of the 1,900 students who had completed the highest course in the program between Fall 2013 and Fall 2016. I sent an email with the request to fill out the survey and a link to the online collector beginning in November 2016 and sent additional reminders at regular intervals until June 2017. In all, I received 355 responses. Considering some attrition (from students who had withdrawn, transferred, or been dismissed from the university), the response rate was a bit over 20%. I had hoped for a higher response rate but still thought that 355 responses provided a robust enough sample to provide some valuable feedback.

Data analysis followed typical survey research procedures. For multiple-choice items, I examined frequencies and percentages and performed cross-tabulations to examine various responses more closely. For the optional comments provided in response to several of the questions, I categorized them according to themes and examined them for patterns. I also conducted initial inferential statistics tests to see whether there were significant differences in responses depending upon which year the respondents had completed the program, but as there were not, I then treated the entire sample of 355 as one group.

## **Findings**

In this section, I will address three main findings: (a) students' reactions to the EAP program in general; (b) students' assessment of whether the EAP courses helped them succeed in later courses; and (c) students' evaluations of specific elements of the program, especially those outlined in the sections above subheaded "Curricular Features" and "Placement Process."

### ***Students' Reactions to the EAP Program***

Table 2 summarizes the respondents' answers to survey Question 13: "Overall, how did you like your ESL class(es)?"

**Table 2**  
**Students' Overall Satisfaction With the EAP Program (N = 353)**

<i>Response option</i>	<i>Number/percentage of responses</i>
I enjoyed all of my UWP ESL classes and found them valuable.	143/41%
I enjoyed/found valuable some of my ESL classes but not all of them.	71/20%
My UWP ESL classes were OK. I didn't love them or hate them.	102/29%
I didn't enjoy my UWP ESL class(es) at all and didn't find them valuable.	30/9%
Not sure/no opinion	7/2%

\**Note.* Percentages may add up to more than 100% because of rounding.

Generally speaking, students' reactions to the EAP program, even one to three years after they had completed it, were far more positive than negative, with 61% saying they had enjoyed and found valuable all (41%) or some (20%) of their classes, and only 9% saying that they had not enjoyed or found their EAP classes valuable at all. The other 29% said the classes were "OK—I didn't love them or hate them," a not-unexpected reaction when considering developmental reading/writing classes that they had been required to take whether or not they wanted to or felt they needed to. Students' verbal comments ( $N = 20$ ) in response to this question ranged from the extremely negative ("they were useless, complete waste of time") to the philosophical ("Writing is one of my weaknesses. More practice may be beneficial to me, even though the process may be painful.") to mixed reactions depending on the course level (e.g., the lower-level courses were too easy, but the most advanced course was valuable).

Question 17, the final item on the survey, asked students to provide any further comments about their experiences in the EAP program, and there were 51 verbal comments in response to this open-ended question. The themes or categories noted are shown in Table 3.

Similar to the patterns in Table 2, the comments made by students in response to this item were largely positive, including both general testimony about how much they had enjoyed the program and/or found it helpful, and satisfied comments about the instructors (in general and several by name). However, there definitely were a few very unhappy respondents, who spoke generally about the program being a waste of time or specific teachers having treated them harshly or unfairly.

**Table 3**  
**Verbal Comments in Survey Response to Question 17 (N = 51\*)**

<i>Category or theme</i>	<i>Representative quote(s)</i>	<i>Number/percentage in this category</i>
Generally positive comment about the program	“I cannot be more thankful for my [EAP] experience in my first year of college.” “It was a good program that help[ed]me a lot.”	22/43%
Specific complaint	“Upper [EAP] classes have too much work.” “I didn’t think the peer review sessions were any help at all.”	10/20%
Generally negative comment about the program	“Generally a waste of time.”	9/18%
Specific suggestion	“More group discussions should be introduced. it’s really fun.” “it might be better if I could choose my own topic to write when i took the class.”	7/14%
Praise for a specific teacher or the teachers in general	“[Name] is the best writing professor i have ever met.” “I think the instructors are great and my writing skills improved a lot.”	7/14%
Mixed comment (both negative and positive reactions)	“Really liked the discussions on topics, which helps with writing our essays. However, there are too many sources to discuss about that took a long time.”	3/6%

\**Note.* Some comments were coded into more than one category; thus the totals exceed 51.

### ***Students’ Assessment of Whether the Courses Helped Them Succeed in Later Courses***

Students were asked, in survey Question 14, if they believed that the EAP program had helped them succeed in subsequent classes that required writing. They were asked about four specific course types: (a) the required basic writing class (which follows Level 3 and is administered by a local community college class); (b) the required first-year composition (FYC) course; (c) the required upper-division writing course; and (d) other general education or major courses that included a writing component. Since the

respondent group varied with regard to how advanced they were in their undergraduate studies and how much time had passed since they had been in the EAP program (anywhere from a few months to three years; see the first two rows in Table 1), some had not taken the more advanced courses yet. Table 4 summarizes the students' responses to Question 14.

**Table 4**  
**Student Perceptions About Helpfulness of EAP Program**  
**for Subsequent Writing Courses**

Question 14: *My ESL classes helped me to succeed in ...*

<i>Course level</i>	<i>Number of students responding</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>
Basic writing	311	23%	53%	15%	9%
First-year composition	222	28%	51%	13%	8%
Upper-division composition	103	25%	47%	17%	12%
GE or major courses that included writing	256	25%	59%	11%	8%

According to the responses to Question 9 of the survey, the vast majority of the respondents had taken and successfully completed the basic writing course, with a few others saying they were still taking the class at the time they took the survey. Of these students, 76% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that the EAP program had helped them to succeed in this basic writing course, but 24% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. A number of comments added to various survey questions might help to explain the negative responses. There is substantial misalignment between the curriculum and teaching practices in the EAP program and the basic writing program, which is outsourced to a local community college district. Some students, knowing this, suggested that the EAP program change its approach to better prepare students for the “harsh grading” they would experience in the outsourced course. However, since the vast majority of survey takers had nonetheless successfully completed the basic writing course, the overall response to the question of whether the EAP pro-

gram had helped them to succeed in that course was largely positive.

In contrast, only 59% of the survey respondents had taken their first-year composition (FYC) requirement, which is not surprising given that most respondents had finished the EAP program within the year previous to the survey administration (Table 1), and there is no specific time requirement as to when they must take the FYC course. Of these, 79% strongly agreed or agreed that the EAP courses had helped them succeed. Few students (103, or 32%) responded to the item about upper-division composition courses. In the Question 14 responses, 72% agreed that the EAP courses had helped them in upper-division writing. Finally, 80% of the respondents thought that their EAP courses had helped them in general education (GE) or major courses that included a writing component. In summary, for all subsequent levels of writing-related instruction respondents had completed, 72-80% of the students believed that what they had learned in the EAP courses helped them to be successful in those later courses.

### ***Students' Evaluations of Specific Aspects of the Program***

In survey Question 15, students were asked to give feedback about 11 specific aspects of the program (see Appendix). Table 5 shows their responses regarding the four specific curricular changes described in the previous section: the use of themed courses, portfolio assessment, approaches to grammar instruction (especially the incorporation of DWCF), and the extensive use of peer-response workshops. The item about the instructors (last row of Table 5) is included because it provides additional information about feedback processes (to complement DWCF and peer response).

Generally speaking, the responses to the items in Table 5 suggest that students were mostly satisfied with the various curricular and instructional choices made, even several months or years after the fact. They were the most positive about DWCF and about the instructors (over 30% "Very satisfied" for both items) and least positive about the peer-review workshops (14% "Unsatisfied," the highest number for any of the 11 items within that survey question). On the other hand, 65% of respondents said they were "Very satisfied" or "Satisfied" with the peer-response activities. Similarly, there were mixed comments about peer-response workshops, with some students saying they had been an enjoyable highlight of the classes while others thought they were not time well spent. In verbal comments added to this survey item and to Question 16 ("suggestions for improvements"), some students said they would have liked more formal grammar instruction in addition to DWCF, while others wished for less, saying that classroom grammar instruction was too repetitive of what they had already experienced in secondary school.

**Table 5**  
**Students' Reactions to Specific Program Elements**

<i>Program element</i>	<i>Very satisfied</i>	<i>Satisfied</i>	<i>Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied</i>	<i>Unsatisfied</i>	<i>Not sure/no opinion</i>
Use of course themes to connect reading/writing assignments	20%	53%	15%	8%	4%
Timed writing paragraphs for grammar feedback <sup>3</sup>	31%	50%	11%	6%	2%
Final portfolio requirement	23%	52%	15%	7%	2%
In-class peer-review workshops	22%	43%	19%	14%	2%
Instructors' classroom teaching, feedback on papers, and other help	30%	56%	11%	2%	2%

***Student Reactions to Their Initial Placement***

As noted above, students' perceptions about their initial placement within the program, after the fact, were examined through their responses to Question 12 on the survey. Table 6 shows their responses.

Speaking from hindsight (after completing the program), 47% of respondents thought that they had been initially placed in the right level. Another 28% expressed frustration that they thought they had been placed too low, while the other respondents thought that, while they might have disagreed with their initial placement, they did not ultimately regret taking the class they had been placed in. Fifteen students made verbal comments in response to this question, and the comments varied from annoyance ("I took a lot of English classes in my home country," or "I grew up in the U.S., and I don't see why I had to take this test") to specific concerns ("My Internet crashed during the test, affecting my performance"). In another examination of our placement process (Ferris et al., 2017), we found that only 34% of 1,067 students surveyed in 2014-2015 "self-placed"<sup>4</sup> themselves into the same level that the local placement-exam score indicated.

**Table 6**  
**Respondents' Views About Their Initial Placement**

Question 12: *Thinking back to your time in [the EAP program], do you think you were placed in the right course level? Choose the response that BEST expresses your opinion NOW.*

<i>Response</i>	<i>Number and percentage</i>
I thought I was placed in the right level.	164/47%
I thought I was placed too low, and I was frustrated about that.	98/28%
I thought I was placed too high, and I was anxious about that.	1/0%
I thought I was placed too low, but I'm glad I took the class anyway.	74/21%
I thought I was placed too high, but I did all right in the class anyway.	4/1%
Not sure/no opinion	11/3%

### Discussion

The survey responses in this study suggest that our recently redesigned EAP program has generally been well received by its primary stakeholders—the students. Even several years after taking the courses, the majority of the respondents (more than 60%) had positive memories of the program (Tables 2-3) and a large majority (72-80%) agreed that the EAP courses had helped them succeed in subsequent courses that involved writing (Table 4). Respondents also largely expressed satisfaction with various specific elements of the program that had been transformed (Table 5). Overall, these findings are encouraging news. It is particularly gratifying to see positive student responses to the program when one remembers that they were required to take the courses, like it or not. The default assumption might have been that students would give negative reviews because of the mandatory nature of the experience.

Though generally we seem to be doing well, this study highlighted a number of ways we could improve. First of all, students' dissatisfaction with their course placement, even in hindsight, seems important to consider further. As we saw in Table 6, a substantial minority of respondents (28%) said that they thought they had been placed at a course level too low and had felt frustrated about it. While they may or may not all be correct about having been misplaced, that is a fairly sizable proportion of unhappy students,

especially when combined with another 21% who initially thought they had been placed too low but only in retrospect were glad they had taken the course that they did.

Second, the responses suggest that we should not give up on peer-response workshops—many students did enjoy them—but we should work on making them more satisfying for students, especially considering how much class time is devoted to them and how dependent the portfolio system is upon the peer workshops operating effectively. Third, while students clearly responded well to the DWCF technique, many (but not all) expressed a desire for more explicit classroom grammar instruction, in addition to the individualized regular feedback they received from the DWCF activities and on their portfolio papers.

It is also worth noting an issue that our findings raised but that we are unlikely to change. Though generally students were satisfied with the thematic approach to the syllabus and assignments (see Table 5), there were a number of complaints about it in verbal comments attached to various survey items. Some students complained about specific themes used during their time in the program that they found boring or irrelevant to their needs. We are committed to the thematic approach for the reasons outlined above, and again, a majority of students seemed satisfied enough with it.

### ***Changes We Have Made/Are Making***

In response to the findings discussed above, we have already begun making several changes. As to the placement process, we are piloting an option that would give students some (limited) input into which course level they are placed—the choice to move up or down one level if their placement test scores are on the borderline between levels. In conjunction with this pilot, beginning in 2016, the self-evaluation questionnaire discussed in Ferris et al. (2017) is now part of the placement exam, rather than administered separately, and exam scorers are instructed to consult that information during scoring to obtain a more holistic sense (beyond simply the exam) of where each student should be most optimally placed. Early returns on these changes are encouraging: Both students and teachers have expressed greater satisfaction with where students are placed, and results of our pilot indicate that there have been no negative effects on students who were allowed to self-place higher (or lower). We will continue to examine ways we can incorporate more student agency into the initial placement process, as we believe it is important for student attitudes while in the courses.

As to students' expressed desire/need for additional grammar instruction, in addition to our DWCF activities, this year we have created a series of grammar minilessons with explanations and activities on topics that are tied to our curriculum goals for each level and that are addressed through the DWCF coding process. These materials allow the instructors to more easily

integrate whole-class grammar instruction on a regular or as-needed basis (e.g., after reading a set of student papers and identifying common problems) and/or to assign or recommend individualized work to a student(s) who has a specific need or desire for instruction that perhaps most of the class does not. Further, we are incorporating activities for the beginning and end of each term that help students diagnose, set goals, and reflect upon their own areas of need with regard to grammar (and vocabulary) instruction. We hope that a set of classroom modules and reflective activities that is carefully integrated with the error categories covered through the DWCF program will provide more thorough coverage of common language issues while still addressing our goal of having such instruction be authentically integrated with the reading and writing assignments that the students are doing.

We have also begun, in a series of instructor meetings and workshops, discussing ways to make peer-response activities more effective in the EAP courses. Finally, as a bigger-picture issue, we are in the process of revising the EAP/basic writing sequence to reduce the number of courses students have to take before their first-year composition course (from as many as four down to as few as one and no more than three). This curricular change will, among other things, address student concerns seen in survey comments about the lack of alignment between the EAP and basic writing programs and about having to take too many writing/language courses at the beginning of their college careers.

### **Conclusions**

Ongoing inquiry into the success (or lack thereof) of instructional programs is important for accountability and improvement. This is why most institutions have regular departmental or program reviews conducted by outside evaluators and why external accreditation bodies regularly study entire institutions. However, such major reviews require so much time and effort that they are conducted only at infrequent intervals. In my institution, for example, department or program reviews take place only every seven years, and accreditation reviews even less often than that. The type of evaluative inquiry represented by the survey described in this article is less labor intensive, so it can be used more consistently, and it is more targeted to the specific questions and details of the program about which we would like input from those most affected by them—the students themselves.

Nearly all institutions also conduct course/instructor evaluations every term, when students can provide feedback about a specific class or teacher. Even putting aside criticisms of inherent bias that have been raised by educators about anonymous student evaluations of instructors, the information provided from them is necessarily limited to one specific class and teacher at one point in time. In contrast, the survey described in this article allowed

students to reflect on their *general* experiences with the whole program after some time had passed and they could more objectively assess whether or not the courses had been helpful to them in subsequent classes after exiting the EAP program. This analysis gives us a bigger-picture sense of the degree to which our entire program, not just a specific class or teacher, is “working.” Because we also asked specific questions about elements of the program that are integral to how we do things across course sections and levels, the students’ reactions to these particular items have helped us to assess, in a fairly quick and easy way, which innovations have been immediately successful (e.g., the DWCF approach) and which still need work (e.g., our peer-response workshops and allowing more agency to students in the placement system).

Further, this broader retrospective view also helps us not to *overreact* to individual student negativity. Taking again thematic instruction as just one example, the fact that a few students here and there may have strongly disliked a particular theme in one of their classes—and were vocal about it in their course evaluations and/or on the survey—does not automatically mean that we should abandon using thematic content to design our courses and custom textbooks. It is human nature to listen to the complainers or “squeaky wheels,” perhaps not realizing that a more silent majority is satisfied with what has been done—and, of course, it is impossible to please everyone.

Our EAP program has its unique characteristics and history, and the exigency for the study discussed in this article was that we had made a number of curricular revisions and wanted to assess how such changes had been received by the students who had gone through the program. Other administrators wanting to examine the effects of their work will ask different questions depending upon the history, structure, and features of their programs, but the principles operating in this study are generalizable:

1. Ask the primary stakeholders (students) for their feedback, not only about a specific class or teacher but about how the whole program worked for them (including, if applicable, how they were placed into the program/courses);
2. Ask the questions after time has passed so that they can assess, looking back, if or how the program helped them be successful in their subsequent endeavors; and
3. Ask specific questions about elements of the program that may be new or even controversial so that these elements can be (re)considered and/or improved.

Evaluation is important because even a good teacher, class, or program can always get better. Student voices are essential because they are the rea-

sions that our programs exist at all. As Horwitz put it back in 1988, “[T]eachers can ill afford to ignore [student] beliefs if they expect their students to be open to particular teaching methods and to receive the maximum benefit from them” (p. 293). We are happy about the results of our initial survey of student satisfaction with our redesigned program, but we expect this type of evaluation to be ongoing and necessary because students change and new ideas emerge. While asking such questions can feel risky, and reading student complaints can be humbling, in the end, data-driven decision making and honest self-assessment are always better than a vague, unexamined belief that “things are going well.”

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### **Author**

*Dana R. Ferris is professor and director of the University Writing Program at UC Davis. Her research and writing have focused on second language writing and reading and on response to student writing. She is the co-editor of the Journal of Second Language Writing.*

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>The apparent discrepancy between students who said they were international students (62%) and those who said they had graduated from a US high school (47%) reflects that we have a small but noticeable population of international students who came to the US for high school (thus answering “yes” to the question about being US graduates) but whose visa status is still international.

<sup>2</sup>In DWCF, students regularly write short texts in class (paragraph-length, in 10-15 minutes), which are coded for errors by the teacher according to a standard list and returned at the next class for immediate revision and charting in an ongoing error log. This provides frequent, meaningful, targeted feedback to students about ongoing patterns of language error and helps them to measure and observe progress.

<sup>3</sup>That is, DWCF (we did not call it that with the students).

<sup>4</sup>Students completed a self-evaluation questionnaire in conjunction with taking the placement exam, and the final question described the four levels they could be placed into (the three EAP levels or the basic writing course) and asked them to indicate which level they felt was best for them. The data were gathered for information purposes in 2014-2015 but were not used to make placement decisions.

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## Appendix

### Student Satisfaction Survey

Welcome!

You are receiving this survey because you completed one or more EAP classes for multilingual (ESL) students—Level 1, 2, or 3—over the past several years. We in EAP would like to hear your opinions about the ESL writing program so that we can continue improving it and serving students well. Your honest responses will help us very much. We've designed the survey to be quick and easy to complete. You can keep your responses anonymous. However, we will do a drawing for four \$25 gift cards among students who complete the survey, so if you'd like a chance to win one, please provide your name and email address at the end of the survey. If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Dana Ferris.

1. What year in school (college) are you now?

- First-year (freshman)
- Second-year (sophomore)
- Third-year (junior)
- Fourth-year (senior)
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

2. When you were a young child, what language was spoken by the adults in your home?

- English only
- English and another language(s)
- Only my native (home) language(s)

3. Were you born in the U.S.?

- Yes
- No

4. Did you graduate from a U.S. high school?

- Yes
- No

5. Are you an international (visa) student?

- Yes
- No

6. Outside of school, what percentage of the time do you speak English?

- I speak only English
- 75-100% of the time
- 50-74% of the time
- 25-49% of the time
- 0-24% of the time
- Not sure/it varies

7. In which year did you complete EAP Level 3 (Advanced ESL Reading & Writing)?

- 2013-14 (including summer 2014)
- 2014-15 (including summer 2015)
- 2015-16 (including summer 2016)
- 2016-17
- Not sure/don't remember

8. Which EAP classes did you complete?

- Level 1 (Introduction to ESL Reading and Writing)
- Level 2 (Intermediate ESL Reading and Writing)
- Level 3 (Advanced ESL Reading and Writing)

9. Have you completed Basic Writing?

- Yes, I passed it.
- I took it but have not yet passed it.
- I am taking it right now.
- I have not tried it yet.
- I was not required to take Basic Writing (please explain: \_\_\_\_\_)

10. Have you completed first-year composition?

- Yes, I took it (or am taking it now).
- No, I have not taken it yet.
- I am not required to take first-year composition (please explain: \_\_\_\_\_)

11. Have you taken/completed your upper-division writing requirement yet?

- No, not yet.
- I took the Advanced Writing Exam, and I passed it.
- I took one of the advanced writing courses (or am taking it now).  
Which course did you take/are you taking? \_\_\_\_\_

12. Thinking back to your time in the EAP program, do you think you were placed in the right course level? Choose the statement that BEST expresses your opinion NOW.

- I thought I was placed in the right level.
- I thought I was placed in a level too low for me, and I was frustrated about that.
- I thought I was placed in a level too high for me, and I was anxious about that.
- I thought I was placed too low, but I'm glad I took the class anyway.
- I thought I was placed too high, but I did all right in the class anyway.
- Not sure/no opinion

OPTIONAL COMMENT:

13. Overall, how did you like your EAP classes?

- I enjoyed all of my EAP classes and found them valuable.
- I enjoyed/valued some of my EAP classes, but not all of them.
- My EAP classes were OK. I didn't love them or hate them.
- I didn't enjoy my EAP class(es) at all and didn't find them valuable.
- Not sure/no opinion

OPTIONAL COMMENT:

14. Do you feel that your EAP classes have helped you in other classes?

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>Not sure/ no opinion</i>
My EAP classes helped me succeed in Basic Writing.					
My EAP classes helped me succeed in first-year composition.					
My EAP classes helped me succeed in upper-division composition.					
My EAP classes helped me succeed in other GE/major classes that required writing.					

OPTIONAL COMMENT:

15. Now we'll ask you about different characteristics of the EAP classes. Please select the option that expresses how satisfied you were with each one. You can add comments in the box below the table.

	<i>Very satisfied</i>	<i>Satisfied</i>	<i>Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied</i>	<i>Unsatisfied</i>	<i>Not sure/ no opinion</i>
Use of course themes to connect reading and writing assignments					
Timed writing paragraphs for grammar feedback					
Final portfolio requirement					
Amount of work required					
The reading assignments (amount and type)					
The writing assignments (amount and type)					
Vocabulary and grammar instruction/ practice					
Reading strategies instruction/practice					
In-class peer review workshops					
Instructors' classroom teaching, feedback on papers, and other help					
The use of technology (like Canvas, Google Drive)					

OPTIONAL COMMENT:

16. Do you have any suggestions for improvements in the EAP program? Consider things we could add/spend more time on, things we could leave out, or any other changes we could make.

17. Do you have any other comments about your experience in the EAP program?