

Amani K. Hamdan Alghamdi, Fatma Kayan Fadlelmula, Abdulghanni Hattami (2017). Evaluating Teaching Strategies in Higher Education from Students' Perspectives. *Journal of Education and Learning*. Vol. 11 (2) pp. 120-129. DOI: 10.11591/edulearn.v11i2.5981

Evaluating Teaching Strategies in Higher Education from Students' Perspectives

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Abstract

This study was conducted to investigate students' perception of learning experiences at one of the largest government universities in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia. The sample consisted of male and female students and their instructors enrolled in four main colleges (Arts, Education, Preparatory year, and Science). Data were collected through a survey and focus group interviews during the fall semester of 2014-2015 academic year. The results provide feedback to faculty members about the quality of content, format, and structure of their courses, and can contribute to teaching and learning processes by facilitating faculty growth, development, and self-improvement.

Keywords: *teaching strategies; students learning styles; academic achievement; academic satisfaction*

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Introduction

According to the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), learning is “an active, constructive process whereby learners set goals for their learning and then attempt to monitor, regulate, and control their cognition, motivation, and behavior, guided and constrained by their learning goals and the contextual features in the environment” (Pintrich, 2005, p.453). Certainly, what a teacher presents in the classroom has a significant impact on students’ learning, yet learning happens best when students are actively engaged in the process and given responsibility for their own learning (McKeachie 2007; Torrano and Gonzales, 2004; Zimmerman, 2001). In this sense, learning can be described as ‘effective’ to the degree that students know and use of a variety of learning strategies (Marcou and Philippou, 2005), and decide on when, why and how to use them in appropriate learning contexts (Zimmerman, 2008). Certainly, this requires not only possessing knowledge of appropriate study skills but also having a positive attitude towards the study together with substantial motivation and use of learning strategies (Pintrich, 2004).

A substantial body of research reveals that students’ beliefs about teaching and learning highly influence their approaches to learning (Zerihun, Beishuizen, and Os, 2011a). In particular, when students perceive teaching as a matter of transmitting knowledge and learning as an increase in knowledge, they tend to adopt a surface approach to learning (Entwistle, McCune, and Hounsell, 2003) and concentrate more on how much they can recall facts and procedures (Lalla, Frederic, and Ferrari, 2011). In this case, teachers are seen as the source of information (Akerlind, 2004) and the focus of teaching becomes how well teachers can deliver the contents to students (Zerihun, Beishuizen, and Os, 2011b). Therefore, the effectiveness of teacher’s performance becomes the key measure of the quality of teaching and learning process (Ning and Downing, 2010). On the other hand, when students perceive teaching as a matter of guidance and support, and learning as an abstraction of meaning and understanding of concepts, they tend to apply a deep approach to learning (Entwistle, McCune, and Hounsell, 2003). In this case, the emphasis “shifts from what the teacher does to what students have to do to understand the materials presented” (Zerihun, Beishuizen, and Os, 2011b, p.101). Particularly, teachers become responsible about facilitating learning and providing feedback, whereas students become masters of their own learning and actively engage in the learning process (Lalla, Frederic, and Ferrari, 2011). Review of previous research studies

Nowadays, research on student learning have shown an increasing interest in exploring possible relationships between students’ learning experiences and their demographic background, perceptions of learning environment, and academic outcomes. For instance, in a recent study, Sun and Richardson (2016) examined the link between students’ age, gender, and perceptions of academic environment, study behaviour, and also general satisfaction of the program attended. Data were collected from 469 postgraduate students in England, through the Course Experience Questionnaire measuring students’ perception of learning experience regarding appropriate assessment, appropriate workload, clear goals and standards, good teaching, and emphasis on independence. The results of path analysis revealed that students’ age and gender had no relation with their perceptions of the academic environment, as well as with their general satisfaction. However, a positive relationship existed among students’ perceptions of academic environment, study behaviours, and their general satisfaction with the programs they attended. Specially, the link between students’ perceptions of academic environment and study behaviour (relating ideas, use of evidence, organized studying, alertness to assessment demands) was found to be bidirectional in nature.

In another study, Ning and Downing (2012) used the Course Experience Questionnaire for collecting data from 384 undergraduate students in Hong Kong, and measuring the relation among students’ self-regulation (time management, self-testing, study aids, information processing, selecting main ideas, test strategies, concentration), motivation (attitude and motivation), learning experience, and academic success (final cumulative GPA). The results of structural equation modelling showed that both self-regulation and motivation mediated the link between learning experience and academic performance. Specifically, the results suggested that “if self-regulation and motivation can be enhanced in those students who rated their learning experiences negatively, their academic performance may also improve” (p.231).

In a previous study of Ning and Downing (2011), the researchers examined the relation among students’ learning experiences, study behaviour, and academic achievement, through the Course Experience Questionnaire and the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory. They collected data from 541 undergraduate students in Hong Kong, and the results demonstrated that students’ perception of learning experience affected their study behaviour, which in turn predicted their academic achievement. In particular, “students who were aware of what was expected of them from the undergraduate program were less likely to feel anxious and to rate themselves better at dealing with test and exams in terms of

using test strategies and selecting main ideas” (p.774). In addition, students who were not overwhelmed by the workload demands were found to be better on effort related strategies such as time management and concentration. Also, students who perceived their teachers as supportive and teachers’ assessment methods as intellectually stimulating tended to be better at monitoring comprehension and feeling more motivated towards their study.

In another recent research, Li, Marsh, and Rienties (2016) analyzed the relation between students’ perception of the quality of learning designs, learner characteristics, and satisfaction with learning experiences in blended and online courses. Data were collected from more than 62,000 undergraduate students in England, through the Student Experience on a Module Survey. The results of logistical regression indicated that students were more satisfied with their learning experiences especially when they were satisfied with the quality of teaching materials, assessment strategies, instructors’ guidance, assignments, and workload. In addition, their learner characteristics, such as prior education, age, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, did not have a strong role in predicting their overall satisfaction with the learning experiences.

In addition to these correlation studies, a meta-analysis conducted by Pounder (2007) highlighted a variety of factors that influenced students’ evaluation of their learning experiences. The factors were grouped under three main categories as 1) student related factors such as student’s gender (e.g. Bachen et al.,1999; Walumbwa and Ojode, 2000), academic level and maturity (e.g. Holtfreter, 1991; Langbein, 1994), 2) course related factors such as grading (e.g. Goldman, 1993; Greenwald, 1997), class size (e.g. Koh and Tan, 1997; Liaw and Goh, 2003) and course content (e.g. Clark, 1993; DeBerg and Wilson,1990), and 3) teacher related factors such as gender (e.g. Langbein, 1994; Sears and Hennessey, 1996), age and experience (e.g. Clayson, 1999; Langbein, 1994). The researcher concluded that as there are a variety of factors effecting students’ evaluations of their classroom experience, in order to obtain an accurate picture it would be more appropriate to use different methods that could give richer assessment of what happens in the classroom. At this point, Marsh (2007) suggested using self-evaluations, peer evaluations, and external observer ratings, other than merely depending on students’ evaluations.

In another past study, Feldman (1988) conducted interviews with students and faculty members to examine possible teacher characteristics that could be related with good teaching. Upon the opinions of both students and instructors, a number of factors were identified to be resulting in good teaching, including knowledge of the subject, course preparation, clarity, enthusiasm, sensitivity to students’ learning progress, helpfulness, fairness, and assessment strategy. On the other hand, the results highlighted the fact that every so often students’ evaluation of teachers’ performance were biased regarding how they perceived the course difficulty, grading, workload, and class size, which were actually not related to effective teaching. Previous studies also underline some other factors that influence students’ perceptions of good teaching, such as cultural background, gender, grade level (Davies, Hirschberg, Lye, Johnston, and McDonald, 2007), as well as academic background (Thomas and Galambos, 2004). Feldman (1988) suggests using other methods such as collecting instructors’ self-evaluation and doing classroom observation, for providing quality feedback regarding effective teaching.

Significance of the Study

Students’ evaluation of their learning experiences has been the topic of considerable interest for many higher education institutes all over the world, especially in Australia, North America, Canada, United Kingdom, and Hong Kong (Marsh, 2007). Primarily, students’ evaluations are collected both for formative and summative purposes. In particular, the evaluations are formative in the sense that they provide feedback to faculty members about the quality of content, format, and structure of the courses, and contribute to teaching and learning processes by facilitating faculty growth, development, and self-improvement (Carr and Hagel, 2008). Next, the evaluations are summative as they provide information to administrators about students’ level of satisfaction and perception of the quality of instruction, which in turn used for improving education policy and practice, as well as for making promotion, tenure, and salary decisions (Lalla, Frederic, and Ferrari, 2011).

Although asking students to evaluate the quality of instruction and their overall satisfaction of the program and course organization has attracted a great deal of research worldwide (Li, Marsh, and Rienties, 2016), it is still not a widespread practice at the higher education institutions in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Up till now, no rigorous or systematic research has been disseminated in this area within the Saudi Arabian higher education context. The findings of this study can provide a vital source of information to faculty members and administrators for identifying how students perceive different aspects of teaching and learning practices in their undergraduate programs. In addition, it can give new

insights to policy makers for determining how to reinforce the quality of undergraduate curricula and pedagogy in Saudi Arabia, and monitor the quality of instruction from national and international aspects.

In this aspect, the following research questions were examined in detail:

- (1) What are the learning strategies of Saudi college students?
- (2) What are the teaching strategies factors that help achieving learning outcomes?
- (3) What are the teaching strategies factors that help students to be satisfied with their academic performance?

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive research design and uses student surveys and focus group interviews with students and teachers for examining how college students' perceive their educational aims and learning experiences in a public university located in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia.

Participants

The participants consisted of 266 undergraduate students, studying in a public university located in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia. Data were collected during the second semester of 2014-2015 academic years, from four colleges; Arts (N =35, 13.2%), Education (N=37, 13.9%), Preparatory (N=154, 57.9%), and Science (N=40, 15%).

Survey Instrument

Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) was used to collect data for this study. Negatively stated items were recoded before doing the analysis. The instrument consisted of four parts; Classroom evaluation, Students perception about teaching and learning, Curriculum, and Overall satisfaction. The college students were asked to indicate their agreements or disagreements about 61 items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5; 5 indicating 'strongly agree' and 1 indicating 'strongly disagree.' The questionnaire has been validated in a number of research studies (e.g. Byrne & Flood, 2003; Ginn, Prosser, & Barrie, 2007; Webster, Chan, Prosser, & Watkins, 2009; Wilson, Lizzo, & Ramsden, 1997), and many universities adapted it for their own use. In this study the questionnaire was used as it is, without any modification or adaptation.

Webster et. al. (2009) validated the SCEQ (a modified version of the CEQ and an initial version of the SLEQ) in the context of Hong Kong. Specifically, they reported that when administered to the Hong Kong undergraduate students, the SCEQ was of good reliability on most scales: Good teaching ($r_c = .837$), clear goals and standards ($r_c = .575$), appropriate assessment ($r_c = .794$), and appropriate workload ($r_c = 0.620$) (Note: r_c denotes the composite reliability). With regard to the construct validity, the scale structure of the SCEQ was confirmed by both exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses (Webster et. al. 2009; Ginns et al. 2007).

Focus group interviews with students and teachers

Focus group interviews were conducted with 26 volunteered college students to get further information about their learning experiences. Then, focus group interviews were conducted with their instructors. Each focus group interview lasted 4 hours. The questions were related with what is their preferred learning style and why, what are their preferred teaching strategies, what helps them to learn best. Focus group interviews were believed to provide deeper understanding and honest answers from the students. The participants were believed to have some common interest as they were from the same colleges or characteristics based on their academic record. The interviews took place at the university cafeteria during the hours that were less busy. A male lecturer who is familiar with the research questions volunteered to do the students male focus group interviews.

Instructors were interviewed so that the researchers could check if students and instructors perceive the matter of teaching and learning in the same way or they regard things different than each other. 12 instructors were interviewed (6 males and 6 females) and each group was interviewed separately because of gender segregation policy applied in Saudi Arabia. During the instructors focus groups, a slide of students' responses were shown to intrigue the discussion on how students perceive their leaning style and how instructors perceive that these meetings took place at the university social area and lasted for two hours. Focus group data of students and instructors were analysed in detail to find main themes that answer the research questions.

Results

In order to answer the first research question, which is about the learning strategies of Saudi

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Journal of Education and Learning. Vol. 11 (2) pp. 120-129.

college students, a descriptive analysis was performed using the mean and standard deviation. Table 1 summarizes the most important indicators, based on the value of the mean that help Saudi students learn better. Those indicators are nested into three factors; namely, good teaching, clear goals and standards, and appropriate workload. The indicators are arranged according to their importance in each factor based on the means. For the good teaching, the teachers normally give me helpful feedback on my progress, (M = 3.37, SD = 1.302), and the teachers of the degree curriculum motivate me to do my best work, (M = 3.22, SD = 1.229), were ranked the most important indicators. For the clear goals and standards, I have usually had a clear idea of where I am going and what is expected of me in this degree curriculum, (M = 3.65, SD = 1.298) and It is always easy to know the standard of work expected, (M = 3.49, SD = 1.224), and for the appropriate workload, There is a lot of pressure on me as a student in this degree curriculum, (M = 3.81, SD = 1.248) and The workload is too heavy, (M = 3.77, SD = 1.266).

Table 1. Most selected indicators that help students learn better

Items and Factors	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Good teaching			
The teachers normally give me helpful feedback on my progress	265	3.37	1.302
The teachers of the degree curriculum motivate me to do my best work	265	3.22	1.229
The staff make a real effort to understand difficulties I may be having with my work	265	3.20	1.363
My lecturers are extremely good at explaining things	265	3.17	1.203
The teachers work hard to make their subjects interesting	265	3.17	1.204
The staff put a lot of time into commenting on my work	264	3.13	1.243
Clear goals and standards			
I have usually had a clear idea of where I am going and what is expected of me in this degree curriculum	266	3.65	1.298
It is always easy to know the standard of work expected	264	3.49	1.224
The staff made it clear right from the start what they expected from students	264	3.43	1.149
It has often been hard to discover what is expected of me in this degree curriculum	262	3.26	1.295
Appropriate workload			
There is a lot of pressure on me as a student in this degree curriculum	265	3.81	1.248
The workload is too heavy	266	3.77	1.266
I am generally given enough time to understand the things I have to learn	265	3.66	1.199
The volume of work necessary to complete this degree curriculum means it cannot all be thoroughly comprehended	266	3.41	1.256

The original questionnaire has many items related to the teaching strategies. In our study, we focused on parts that examining the best teaching strategies that help students achieve the learning outcomes to answer the second research question. All the indicators were found to be significant in helping student achieve the expected learning outcomes (see Table 2), except two indicators, *I am generally given enough time to understand the things I have to learn* ($B = 0.010$, $P = 0.074$), and *my teachers are extremely good at explaining things* ($B = -0.024$, $P = 0.066$). The regression model was significant, $F_{(18, 232)} = 191.364$, $p < 0.05$).

The last research question was related with examining if the teaching strategies factors help students to be satisfied with their academic performance, or not. In order to answer this question, we used multiple regression analysis. The regression model was significant, $F_{(18, 232)} = 124.618$, $p < 0.05$). Most of the items appeared to have positive relationship with students' satisfaction of their academic performance as indicated at Table 3.

Table 2. Regression estimates that best help students achieve the learning outcomes

Items	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	4.704	.084		55.9	.000
My studies at the university are intellectually stimulating.	.067	.011	.129	6.2	.000
The workload in my degree curriculum is too heavy.	.049	.008	.099	5.7	.000
I usually have a clear idea of where I am going and what is expected of me in this degree curriculum.	.088	.011	.168	8.0	.000
The teachers of the degree curriculum motivate me to do my best work.	.041	.013	.074	3.2	.001
The teachers are more interested in testing what I memorize than what I understand.	.036	.009	.072	3.9	.000
I am generally given enough time to understand the things I have to learn.	.010	.005	.035	1.7	.074
I am assessed on my analytical skills.	.042	.012	.071	3.4	.001
The teachers put a lot of time into commenting on my work.	.054	.012	.096	4.6	.000
I feel that I am a part of a group of students and teachers who are committed to learning.	.043	.011	.076	3.9	.000
It is often hard to discover what is expected of me in this degree curriculum.	.028	.005	.098	5.6	.000
I am assessed on how well I can apply what I have learned to new situations.	.051	.013	.089	4.0	.000
The teachers make a real effort to understand difficulties I may be having with my work.	.064	.012	.125	5.4	.000
My teachers are extremely good at explaining things.	.024	.013	.046	1.8	.066
Too many teachers ask me questions just about facts.	.060	.013	.095	4.7	.000
The teachers work hard to make their subjects interesting.	.078	.012	.156	6.6	.000
The teachers have made it clear right from the start what they are expected from students.	.068	.011	.127	6.0	.000
My teachers ask questions on how well I can integrate knowledge and skills acquired in a course.	.050	.013	.088	3.8	.000
My degree curriculum develops my ability to use information technology effectively.	.073	.012	.134	6.3	.000

Focus group results

When analyzing male focus group results major themes emerged which indicated that students find teacher support a paramount to their learning and their success. The easiness of the tests and quizzes made students more relaxed and that when they learned better in their views. When analyzing female focus group results major themes emerged indicated that students find it useful to their learning if teachers decrease the course workload, do not give quizzes, and give bonus grades. Both male and female focus groups were in agreement that the more support they perceive from their instructors the more they were encouraged to learn. It is worth mentioning that participants' (males and females) responses were similar in almost all the questions. However, instructors' focus groups highlighted that the type of support students requires is putting more demands on the already overloaded professor's workload. Maybe some tutoring centers at the university are a necessity to meet at crossroad and for students to achieve better results.

Table 3. Regression estimates that best help students be satisfied academic performance

Items	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	4.840	.675		7.1	.000
My studies at the university are intellectually stimulating.	.053	.086	.046	.6	.000
The workload in my degree curriculum is too heavy.	-.058	.068	-.053	-.8	.392
I usually have a clear idea of where I am going and what is expected of me in this degree curriculum.	.051	.088	.043	.5	.000
The teachers of the degree curriculum motivate me to do my best work.	.068	.103	.054	.6	.040
The teachers are more interested in testing what I memorize than what I understand.	-.057	.074	-.052	-.7	.658
I am generally given enough time to understand the things I have to learn	.095	.043	.155	2.2	.027
I am assessed on my analytical skills.	.081	.097	.061	.8	.048
The teachers put a lot of time into commenting on my work.	.115	.093	.091	1.2	.012
I feel that I am a part of a group of students and teachers who are committed to learning.	-.173	.088	-.137	-1.9	.051
It is often hard to discover what is expected of me in this degree curriculum.	-.075	.039	-.119	-1.8	.189
I am assessed on how well I can apply what I have learned to new situations.	.122	.101	.096	1.2	.000
The teachers make a real effort to understand difficulties I may be having with my work.	.009	.094	.008	.0.0	.583
My teachers are extremely good at explaining things.	.089	.105	.076	.8	.000
Too many teachers ask me questions just about facts.	-.074	.102	-.053	-.7	.000
The teachers work hard to make their subjects interesting.	.030	.095	.027	.3	.041
The teachers have made it clear right from the start what they are expected from students.	.025	.090	.021	.2	.016
My teachers ask questions on how well I can integrate knowledge and skills acquired in a course.	.027	.105	.021	.2	.329
My degree curriculum develops my ability to use information technology effectively.	.206	.092	.170	2.2	.077

Discussion and Conclusion

The main goal of education is that to make sure that our students achieve the specified learning outcomes of the course which in turn lead to achieving the program learning outcomes. This can happen by different ways and under different circumstances. There is no one size fits all in education. Most of the studies conducted focused on the teaching strategies, and little attention was given to students learning strategies. The Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) is a widely used instrument for examining students' perception about their learning experience in college. The results in this study supported the use of this survey continuously as indicated by (Zerihun, Beishuizen, and Os, 2011a). The results showed that the most important indicators that help Saudi students learn better are their need continuous feedback on their progress, a motivating curriculum, having a clear idea of where they are going and what is expected of them in the degree curriculum, putting pressure on them to learn. Such results are in line with what Lalla et al. (2011) found in their study. In terms of the best teaching strategies, many teaching strategies deemed important and this is true to my studies (Ning and Downing, 2010; Zerihun, Beishuizen, and Os, 2011a) that support the use of a variety of teaching strategies in the classroom. The study also focused on the teaching strategies that make students

academically satisfied. Students are academically satisfied when their studies at the university are intellectually stimulating, when they have a clear idea of where they are going and what is expected of them in the degree curriculum, when they are given enough time to understand the things they have to learn, when teachers put a lot of time into commenting on their work.

The interview discussion also yielded, generally, the same results. It was a means to make sure that students provided the most accurate responses. The results will help instructors adjust their teaching performance based on the students' needs, plan their own individual professional development and influence program improvement as a whole. The results also showed that students learn more when they are involved and guided through what is expected from them to learn. Such findings go in line with other studies (Entwistle, McCune, and Hounsell, 2003). These results are also in agreement with the context of Saudi education which is teacher centered for the most part and exam oriented. Hence the teachers' stringently conventional teaching methods and strictly follow the Ministry guidelines (Alghamdi, 2015).

Suggestions

Based on the results of this study and many studies in the literature, we suggest that that faculty members need to focus on their teaching skills and try to improve them answering the students' needs and study skills. Students' low achievements are not necessarily due to poor curriculum or ineffective study skills alone. Faculty members' role should not be denied. They ought to introduce students to better ways of studying effectively.

Students learn better if they are motivated and provide with constructive and consistent feedback. Their learning becomes effective if the learning outcomes were clearly written and presented to them, and when they are engaged in the learning process rather than being passive listeners. Research shows that active learning improves students' understanding and retention of information and can be very effective in developing higher order cognitive skills such as problem solving and critical thinking. Many teaching strategies are suggested in many books and research papers that are considered useful for students learning. One of the best books we read in this area and any teacher needs to read is *21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times* by Bernie Trilling and Charles Fadel. They listed skills needed to survive and thrive in a complex and connected world. 21st Century content includes the basic core subjects of reading, writing, and arithmetic-but also emphasizes global awareness, financial/economic literacy, and health issues. Teachers have to know what the skills that students need to master before going to the labour market are. The 21st century qualifications students should build are learning and innovations skills; digital literacy skills; and life and career skills.

Higher education institutions are required to review the materials thoroughly and annually to make sure that what is being taught is in line with the program goals. Nevertheless, faculty members should also be equipped with the necessary tools and facilities that encourage them show the best of them. Success cannot be achieved by teachers alone, but also by all stakeholders. Education is a complex mixture of students, teachers, and institutions. Each should exhibit his honest and interest towards achieving the learning outcomes.

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