

報告

## Toward a Situation-based College English Education: A Case Study of a Learner-centered Class

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Abstract : This paper provides a case study of a learner-centered class, a pedagogical approach that is becoming increasingly prevalent in college education. In the study, strategies for explanation, exercises and motivation were chosen according to the learners' characteristics, and examined afterwards through an analysis of follow-up questionnaires. They were generally taken positively, which illustrates the significance of the situation-based approach.

(Key words: situation-based education, learner-centered teaching, motivation)

### 1. The aim of the paper

In today's world where far more students go on to college than before and the diversification of college students is apparent, learning situations vary. Learner characteristics, especially, cannot be taken lightly in considering college education. This paper provides a case study of learner-centered English education in university. Various strategies focusing on learner characteristics were used in class, and examined afterwards through the analysis of follow-up questionnaires. The study aims to consider the feasibility of situation-based English education.

### 2. The outline of the study

The study should be regarded as a case study of learner-centered English education, as it shares the same sense of value with the learner-centered principles outlined by McCombs & Miller (2007, hereafter M&M). This section outlines the study along those lines.

#### 2.1. Learner-centeredness

According to M&M (pp.15-16), there are two fundamental focuses of learner-centeredness. One is a focus on a unique combination of factors to individual learners, such as beliefs, talents, interests, capacities and needs. The other is a focus on learning and those teaching practices that are most effective in promoting

the highest levels of motivation and achievement.

Although the present study was begun independently of M&M, much focus on learner characteristics and teaching practices to promote motivation and achievement are common in the two studies. Correspondence between the two studies is presented in Section 2.3, through the comparison of their strategies in practice. Before the comparison, we take a look at the requests and comments by students in the first class, which make up the basis of the strategies used in the present study, in the next section.

#### 2.2. Requests and comments by students

The present study was conducted over approximately two years of English classes tracking the first year students in the College of Nutrition of Koshien University.<sup>(1)</sup> In the first year, the study was conducted over two classes, one with 58 students and the other with 59. In the second year, the study was conducted over three classes, each with 28 or 29 students. Owing to the class size, reading-based lessons were given.

In the first class of the first semester, students were asked to write requests about the class on a questionnaire. The major requests and comments, which reflect their attitude toward learning English, are indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Major requests and comments about the class

basic data	year	2007	2007	2008	2008	2008	average
	class	X	Z	X	Y	Z	-
	students	55	54	29	27	28	(sum) 193
requests	clear explanation(%)	15	9	14	11	43	17
	slow explanation(%)	13	15	17	11	11	13
	basic explanation(%)	11	11	14	19	11	12
	detailed explanation(%)	2	11	3	11	11	7
other comments	weak in English(%)	16	20	28	52	46	28
	will try hard/try to like English(%)	2	6	10	15	11	7

\*Multiple requests are permitted.

As can be seen in Table 1, all the major requests are about explanation that helps them understand English.<sup>(2)</sup> Moreover, it is worth noting that 28 percent of the students on average comment, in making requests, that they are weak in English. Actually, listening to their self-reports, few students say they like English, and even those who pay attention well in class feel that they have trouble in learning.

Therefore, it was confirmed that the clear explanation of the basics at a followable pace is desired by students. Meeting this need is essential in order to carry out the learner-centered teaching. It is also assumed that when the explanation helps the students' understanding and gives them confidence, their so-called "English complex" will be reduced. This will ultimately motivate their study, which accommodates to the second focus of learner-centeredness. Strategies for carrying out this method are indicated in the next section, and compared with the learner-centered principles proposed by M&M.

### 2.3. Strategies

To carry out the learner-centered teaching mentioned above, the strategies in Table 2 were used. They are explained later in comparison with the learner-centered principles (hereafter LCP) in M&M,

indicated in Table 3.

Table 2: Learner-centered strategies

1. Strategies for explanation
1.1. To limit to basic matters
1.2. To refer to important points many times
2. Strategies for exercises
2.1. To give quizzes
2.2. To require out of class preparations
2.3. To give hints when students are in trouble
3. Strategies for motivation
3.1. To feature familiar situations

Table 3: Learner-centered principles (McCombs & Miller 2007: 46)

Domain 1: Cognitive and metacognitive factors
1. Nature of the learning process
2. Goals of the learning process
3. Construction of knowledge
4. Strategic thinking
5. Thinking about thinking
6. Context of learning
Domain 2: Motivational and affective factors
7. Motivational and emotional influences on learning
8. Intrinsic motivation to learn
9. Effects of motivation on effort
Domain 3: Developmental and social factors
10. Developmental influences on learning
11. Social influences on learning
Domain 4: Individual differences factors
12. Individual differences in learning
13. Learning and diversity
14. Standards and assessment

#### 2.3.1. Strategies for explanation

Strategies for explanation were aimed at clear explanation of the basics. Explanations were limited to

basic matters. Complicated matters were referred to if related matters appeared in the textbook, but were not elaborated on, in order to avoid confusion. (Strategy 1.1.) Basic important points were referred to many times (in fact, almost every time they appeared in the textbook) so that they would be imprinted on the students' memory.<sup>(3)</sup> (Strategy 1.2.) In addition, they were given to students in catchphrase-like forms, such as, "When you see *that*, look for the subject and verb after that."<sup>(4)</sup> These work as models in learning and help strategic thinking (M&M pp.49-50, LCP 4).

### 2.3.2. Strategies for exercises

Strategies for exercises were aimed at building up understanding through language practice exercises, and expected to work as extrinsic motivation. This idea holds the same viewpoint as M&M, which says "[m]ild anxiety can also enhance learning and performance by focusing the learner's attention on a particular task" (p.52, LCP 7).

Quizzes were used as an opportunity to practice the English skills they had learnt.<sup>(5)</sup> (Strategy 2.1.) They were given twice a semester, which means once every five lectures, and were followed by comments on important points and common mistakes. Every effort was made to set the quizzes at an optimal level: that is, neither too difficult nor too easy. (Suzuki 2008:136, M&M p.62, LCP 14) Some sentences to be translated in the quizzes were altered from the original ones in the textbook, so that students had to understand the structures in order to translate them — not just memorize the translation. Another aspect about quizzes is that they conveyed the individual situation of students' understanding and contributed to individual-based teaching, which corresponds with LCP 12 in M&M.

For Strategy 2.2., Students were asked to translate the sentences in the textbook into Japanese in advance.<sup>(6)</sup> They had to be prepared for all the sentences, because sentences were not individually pre-assigned and they could not tell which sentence they would be asked to translate in class. Strategy 2.3.

was used when students could not translate sentences in class. By giving hints, the task of translating a sentence was divided into smaller steps, such as translating a clause or identifying the subject and verb of the sentence. This aim was to avoid "I don't know" responses and have the students achieve something related to understanding sentences. This would help students to "experience success and feelings of competence" (M&M p.54), which would contribute to intrinsic motivation to learn (LCP 8).

### 2.3.3. Strategies for motivation

In teaching grammar, example sentences that feature familiar situations (and are sometimes amusing) were used, the chief aim being to interest students in learning English. Along these lines, M&M point out that "[i]ntrinsic motivation is facilitated on tasks that learners perceive as interesting and personally relevant and meaningful" and that "[i]ntrinsic motivation is also facilitated on tasks that are comparable to real-world situations." (p.53, LCP 8) In addition, these sentences would show students that grammar is not just something to study, but something that is related to and can be made use of in their daily lives.<sup>(7)</sup>

In this way, strategies used in the present study have much in common with LCPs in M&M., especially with the focus on motivation. Developmental and social factors (Domain 3 in M&M) were not considered in the present study. Consideration of them will be carried over to future studies.

## 3. Feedback

To evaluate the effect of lesson and strategies, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire about the course. This section illustrates its results.

### 3.1. Follow-up questionnaire

Students were asked to fill out an anonymous questionnaire about the course in the last class of each semester during the first year. In the second year, students filled out a questionnaire in the middle of December, about nine months after the course began.

That is, feedback was given three times over three and a half semesters of classes.

Each semester is referred to correspondingly as semester 07-1, 07-2 and 08 in the paper. As there are two to three classes in each semester, “lesson given to class X in the semester 07-1” is referred to as “07-1X.” Other classes are named in the same manner as well.

The questionnaire consisted of 17 question items with multiple choice responses and free comment section, as shown in Table 4.<sup>(8)</sup>

Table 4: Questionnaire items

Question items	
Q1	How was your attendance?
Q2	Were you actively engaged in class?
Q3	Was your attitude toward class appropriate?
Q4	Were the lecturer's assessment criteria clear?
Q5	Were the way class went and its pace proper?
Q6	Was the learning content difficult?
Q7	Was the amount of learning much?
Q8	Were assignments, homework and papers useful for understanding?
Q9	Did other students' attitudes disturb class?
Q10	Was the class useful?
Q11	Were the textbook and handouts useful for understanding?
Q12	Were illustrations on the blackboard and slide materials useful for understanding?
Q13	Were audio-visual materials (cassette, CD, DVD and videotape) useful for understanding?
Q14	Could you hear the lecturer well?
Q15	Did the lecturer deal with questions and requests appropriately?
Q16	Were facilities and equipment suitable?
Q17	Were you satisfied with the class as a whole?
Response choices <sup>(9)</sup>	
1	Yes
2	Somewhat yes
3	Can't say either yes or no
4	Not really

5	No
6	Don't know/Not applicable
Free comment section	
1	What was good about the class
2	What needs improvement about the class
3	Other comments, requests etc.

### 3.2. Response to Question Items

The feedback data are in Table 6.1 and Table 6.2 in Appendix 2. General tendency remains almost the same throughout the period, although the responses in semester 07-2 were a little more negative.

The most positively evaluated item was “illustrations on the blackboard (Q12).”<sup>(10)</sup> The percentage of those who answered “yes” or “somewhat yes” exceeded 70 percent in all the classes.

The second most positively evaluated items were “could hear the lecturer well (Q14),” “deal with questions and requests appropriately (Q15)” and “satisfied with class as a whole (Q17).” The percentage of affirmative responses (either response 1 or 2) exceeded 70 percent in five or six of the seven classes. These were followed by “the assessment criteria (Q4)” and “the pace and progress of the class (Q5).” The percentage of affirmative responses exceeded 70 percent in four classes, including all three classes in semester 08. For Q5, the percentages in these three classes were quite high, ranging from 79 to 89 percent.

On the other hand, the most negatively evaluated item was “assignments, homework and papers (Q8).” The percentage of “yes” responses was relatively low, and the percentage of students who responded with either “yes” or “somewhat yes” was less than 60 percent in six out of the seven classes. The second most negatively evaluated item was “audio-visual materials (Q13).” The percentage of affirmative responses was less than 60 percent in all four classes in semester 07-1 and 07-2. Actually, the only audio-visual material used in class was a CD. Undoubtedly this would have led to the negative evaluation. However that percentage exceeded 60 percent in all three classes

in semester 08, ranging from 61 to 67 percent, although the use of audio-visual materials was the same.

### 3.3. Free Comments

A breakdown of the major responses in the free comment section is indicated in Table 5. As there were not so many free comments in semester 07-1, 07-2 and class 08-X, students were reminded in classes 08-Y and 08-Z that free comments were welcomed. This may have caused more free comments in these classes.

Table 5: Major free comments about the class

basic data	semester	07-1		07-2		08		
	class	X	Z	X	Z	X	Y	Z
	students	56	54	51	54	28	26	24
what was good about the class	could understand well (%)	13	15	2	9	25	42	50
	basic/close/thorough explanation (%)	4	7	6	11	14	27	42
	could enjoy/was interested (%)	2	7	0	4	18	8	13
	appropriate speed (%)	2	7	2	0	4	4	13
	could develop study habits (%)	4	4	0	0	0	12	0
	cared about students (%)	0	0	0	2	0	8	4
what needs improvement about the class	mistakes in reading out translation (%)	4	0	2	0	0	0	0
	random calling on (%)	2	0	0	0	0	4	0
	difficult quizzes (%)	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
	too easy (%)	0	0	0	0	7	8	4
	too fast/couldn't hear well (%)	0	0	0	0	4	15	4
	noisy/neglecting students (%)	2	2	2	2	0	8	0
other comments, requests etc.	quizzes are difficult (%)	2	0	0	0	11	0	0
	needs variety in the lesson content (%)	0	2	2	0	11	0	4
	could enjoy/was interested (%)	2	0	0	0	4	8	8

\*Multiple comments are permitted.

### 4. Analysis

In this section, the feedback is analyzed in connection with the strategies used. Strategy 1 worked well, as the evaluations on explanation and illustration were generally positive. As the answer to Q6 (Was the learning content difficult?) and comments that said “too easy” in semester 08 indicate, the basics are not the only things students want. However, making the content more difficult does not seem to be quite the right thing to do, since basic explanation is evaluated positively during these two years, and some students still consider English difficult. So, adding more complicated content to challenge such student will be a good solution. It will also work as a solution to comments such as those that asked for more “variety in the lesson content.”

Strategy 2.1. does not seem to have been very successful. “Assignments, homework and papers (Q8)” was the most negatively evaluated question item. In addition, negative comments on quizzes, saying they were difficult, were seen.<sup>(11)</sup> Although two students in class 07-1Z explicitly commented that quizzes worked as an incentive for them to study, it seems that the quizzes need some reform. One of the possible solutions is increasing the amount of easier questions in each quiz, so that students would not feel their English skills are weak or discouraged to study. Assigning smaller tasks to encourage their study at home would be another means of promoting confidence.<sup>(12)</sup>

However, in examining the success of the quizzes, their effect on learning should also be taken into consideration. Score changes over the year are illustrated in Figures 1 through 5 in Appendix 1. In the figures, the classes are divided into six groups according to their average scores on either three (08) or four (07) quizzes. It can be seen in all the figures that, in the latter half of the year, the score rise/decline of group 4 is more/less than that of the average, and the same thing can be said of group 5 in four out of five classes. This suggests that quizzes were helpful in learning for those students whose learning ability is a

little less than the average. However, the score of group 6 is generally declining. Easier tasks, as mentioned above, should solve this problem.

Strategy 2.2 worked as a form of extrinsic motivation. Most of the students who commented they “could develop study habits” also wrote that they studied to prepare for classes in which they might be called on. This is exactly what strategy 2.2 aimed at. However, two students commented that they got nervous when they were called on without notice. For strategy 2.3., two students in class 08-Y explicitly referred to the benefits of the learner-centered stance for finding what the problem in understanding is for each student and adapting teaching accordingly. This reinforces the effectiveness of the strategy.

Strategy 3.1. was also a success. Some students commented that the example sentences that featured celebrities were amusing. Others commented they grew interested in learning English because they came to understand it better. Other things got their interest, too. Two students in semester 08 referred positively to the use of quotes from movies and the words of well-known American presidents, which also appeared as example sentences. Two other students in class 07-1Z were interested in the textbook since its focus was on food, which is related to their major (nutrition). This shows that authentic materials and materials going along with students’ interests are also effective in motivating students.

In addition, it can be said that the learner-centered attitude emotionally encouraged learning. Some of the comments saying the lecturer “cared about students” contained emotional remarks, rather than a mere evaluation. Examples of these included, “I was thankful for the handouts with detailed comments on quizzes” and “I could feel your kindness from the way you think together with students.” This kind of emotional effect represents another motivation to learn, which is regarded as an example of the “positive relationship” (M&M p.58, Domain 4) between the lecturer and students.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has provided a case study of a learner-centered class. Strategies that were used in implementing the learner-centered approach were introduced and examined with reference to teacher practice and student feedback. Explanation and illustration were positively evaluated. Strategies that required out of class preparation served as a worthwhile extrinsic motivation. On the other hand, although they were useful for certain groups of students, it was determined that the regular in-class quizzes require some reform, such as combining them with easier tasks. Strategies for motivation worked well with respect to comprehension and emotion. These results illustrate the significance of the learner-centered approach, or from a broader perspective, the situation-based approach.

## Notes

\* The author is grateful to Tim Greer and Yuko Masuda for their help, and to the editorial board for the meaningful remarks on an earlier version of this paper.

- (1) For the second year, the data are for nine months (From April through December).
- (2) Interest in communicative lessons appears in another questionnaire asking students what aspect of English they are interested in, which is not included in the range of the analysis in this paper.
- (3) The importance of referring to knowledge repeatedly in fixing it is pointed out in Sasada (2004: 49).
- (4) This ‘catchphrase’ is aimed at recognition of the structure of subordinate clauses.
- (5) Quizzes took 20 minutes, and contained 4 to 6 English-into-Japanese translations. From the second semester of the first year, other types of questions were added. They required the students to provide the meaning of certain words, or identify the subject and verb of the sentences. In the second year, 3 to 6 Japanese-into-English translations were added. The sentences to be translated were taken from the textbook, and were sometimes altered a little. Most of the chosen sentences contained grammatical points, such as rather complicated modification structures, or important idioms or collocations.
- (6) Although dependence on translation is sometimes criticized (Koike et al. 2003: 13-14), it is an

effective method for students to understand grammatical structure of a sentence. In classes for the second year students by the author, the focus shifts from translation to understanding the content and paragraph structure.

- (7) This idea has much in common with communicative approach. See Yamaoka (2002) and Azar (2007) about the advantage of teaching grammar in this communicative way. Also, see Koga (1983: 75-77) on the necessity of familiar materials.
- (8) Question items on the questionnaire were decided by Koshien University for faculty development research. In future research, these should be adapted in order to provide more appropriate evaluation on learner-centered classes.
- (9) For Q1, These choices mean “0 to 20 %” “to 40%” “to 60%” “to 80%” “to 100%” and “Don’t know” for “1” to “6” respectively. “0” in Table 6.1 and Table 6.2 means that the question is not answered.
- (10) Slide materials were not used in class.
- (11) However, it is also true that some students have told the author personally, “Your quizzes are solvable if we study. They are not too difficult, or too easy.”
- (12) Actually, according to what the author heard from students, quizzes are not necessarily considered wrong thing to do, because they reduce the risk that they are assessed solely on the term-end examination. However some modifications will be needed anyway. Another point that needs consideration is the wording of Q8. It is not necessarily clear whether or not students thought of the quizzes by the words “assignments, homework and papers” when they answered this question item.

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> (accessed on December 09, 2008.)

Appendix 1:

A class-by-class breakdown of the students' English achievement as indicated by the results of regular in-class quizzes

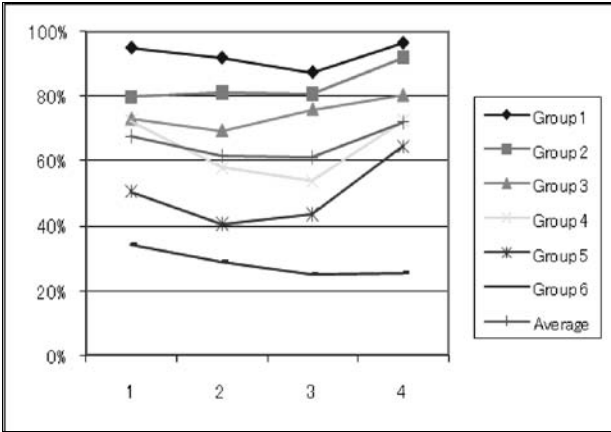


Figure 1: Changes in the score on quizzes (07x)

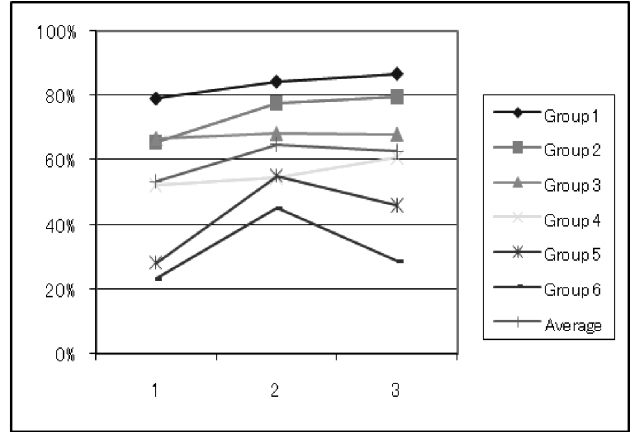


Figure 3: Changes in the score on quizzes (08x)

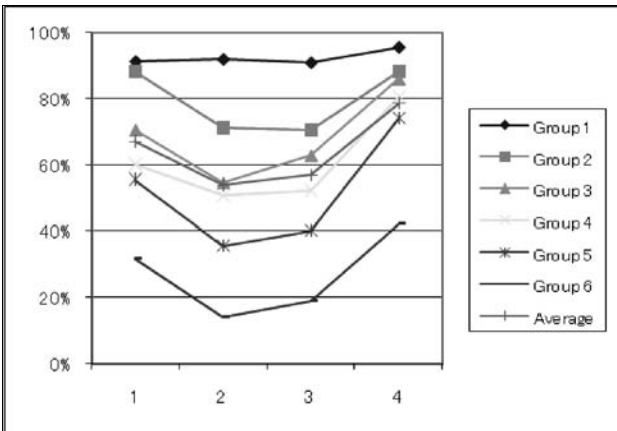


Figure 2: Changes in the score on quizzes (07Z)

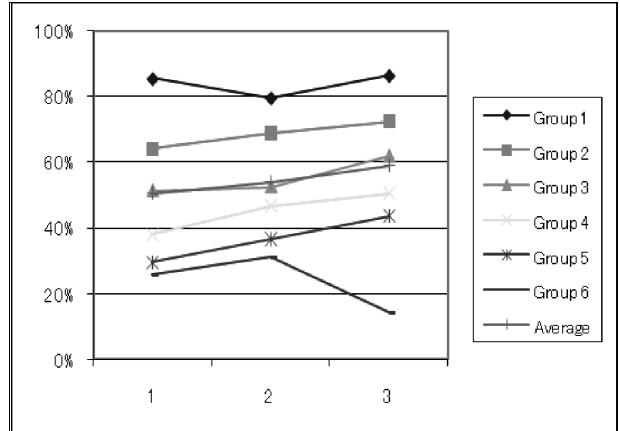


Figure 4: Changes in the score on quizzes (08y)

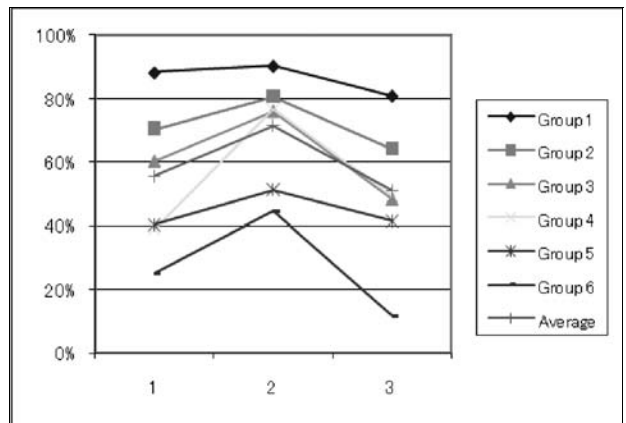


Figure 5: Changes in the score on quizzes (08z)



Appendix 2: Feedback Data

(The data are limited to related ones for lack of space.)

Table 6.1: Feedback in semester 07-1 and 07-2 (%)

	07-1X							07-1Z							07-2X							07-2Z						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0
Q4	20	36	32	5	0	7	0	25	30	27	7	4	4	0	33	37	24	4	2	0	0	46	33	19	2	0	0	0
Q5	25	43	23	7	2	0	0	29	36	21	5	4	0	2	31	33	27	4	4	0	0	39	31	24	2	4	0	0
Q6	11	20	38	27	5	0	0	9	25	36	25	2	0	0	16	16	41	24	4	0	0	11	26	37	26	0	0	0
Q7	5	13	43	36	4	0	0	7	20	39	27	4	0	0	8	14	45	25	8	0	0	7	26	33	30	4	0	0
Q8	5	27	32	9	0	27	0	20	39	23	4	5	5	0	12	37	31	8	10	2	0	15	37	39	6	4	0	0
Q9	5	13	45	20	16	2	0	5	7	20	34	30	0	0	18	24	33	16	10	0	0	9	17	35	19	20	0	0
Q10	20	46	25	9	0	0	0	16	43	25	7	4	0	2	22	43	24	4	6	2	0	17	41	37	6	0	0	0
Q11	32	27	38	2	0	2	0	21	50	23	2	0	0	0	29	31	24	6	8	2	0	19	48	30	0	4	0	0
Q12	38	34	13	9	0	7	0	30	48	7	4	4	4	0	31	43	10	6	8	2	0	28	44	22	2	2	2	0
Q13	16	32	27	9	2	14	0	13	36	34	4	4	7	0	22	37	27	4	8	2	0	13	31	43	7	4	2	0
Q14	36	34	25	4	0	0	2	36	45	11	4	2	0	0	31	33	22	10	4	0	0	35	37	22	6	0	0	0
Q15	30	39	29	2	0	0	0	27	43	21	5	0	0	0	33	31	25	8	2	0	0	30	41	26	0	4	0	0
Q17	25	50	23	2	0	0	0	21	54	13	7	2	0	0	27	35	27	4	6	0	0	22	41	35	2	0	0	0

Table 6.2: Feedback in semester 08 (%)

	x							y							z						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0
Q4	43	29	11	7	4	4	4	46	19	19	4	0	12	0	25	21	29	4	8	13	0
Q5	32	57	7	4	0	0	0	15	65	15	0	4	0	0	33	46	13	8	0	0	0
Q6	0	25	21	36	18	0	0	12	27	12	42	8	0	0	0	21	38	25	17	0	0
Q7	4	14	25	36	21	0	0	15	19	19	27	19	0	0	4	29	29	29	8	0	0
Q8	18	36	32	11	0	4	0	19	38	38	4	0	0	0	17	46	29	8	0	0	0
Q9	14	14	18	21	32	0	0	4	8	27	27	35	0	0	4	8	21	38	29	0	0
Q10	39	32	25	4	0	0	0	15	35	46	4	0	0	0	13	50	29	4	0	0	4
Q11	32	46	21	0	0	0	0	46	27	15	8	0	0	4	33	29	25	13	0	0	0
Q12	46	32	14	7	0	0	0	50	35	4	8	0	0	4	38	46	8	8	0	0	0
Q13	29	32	25	11	4	0	0	19	46	19	8	0	4	4	13	54	29	4	0	0	0
Q14	43	39	18	0	0	0	0	35	50	8	4	0	0	4	38	46	17	0	0	0	0
Q15	43	36	14	4	0	4	0	50	35	12	0	0	0	4	46	33	8	13	0	0	0
Q17	32	54	11	4	0	0	0	35	38	12	12	0	4	0	33	42	8	17	0	0	0