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## Students' Feedback in the Foreign Language Teaching: a Systems Theory Perspective

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# Students' Feedback in the Foreign Language Teaching: a Systems Theory Perspective

Svitlana MUNTIAN<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The present paper explores the systems-theoretic underpinnings of academic monitoring activities in the area of the foreign language teaching. The feedback from students is shown to be the central component of these activities. Drawing on the recent literature on the Luhmannian social systems theory, the paper raises the issue of the sustainability of the educational systems concerned with the foreign language teaching. The argument is buttressed with a case study from the Tavria State Agrotechnological University in Melitopol, Ukraine.

**Keywords:** academic monitoring, foreign language teaching, feedback, systems theory.

## 1. Problem statement

In Ukraine and Eastern Europe more generally, student training in foreign languages is expected to undergo the gradual modernization based on the ideas of humanization, implementation of the competency-based educational paradigm, and alignment of the educational standards with the European ones. The language training is being increasingly refocused toward empowering the students to communicate in the personal and professional development context. The effective implementation of these pillars whilst ensuring the high quality of educational services appears impossible without an adequate ongoing adjustment of academic programs. No less crucial is the coordination of the theoretical fundamentals of the modern foreign language training paradigm with the students' needs. Toward this end, it is imperative that the students are engaged in the continual reassessment of the extant educational practices.

In the present paper, we refer to the engagement of students in the reevaluation of the extant educational practices as “academic monitoring” which presents a tool for the complex and continual adjustment of the educational system to the needs of students. The objective of the paper is to lay out the systems-theoretical basis of academic monitoring and to present

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the relevant factual information from the Tavria State Agrotechnological University, located in Melitopol, Ukraine.

## **2. Academic monitoring as feedback**

Drawing on the work of Russian and Ukrainian scholars (e.g., Zinchenko, 2015; Baydatska, 2007; Krylova, 2009; Ivanova, 2004; Ostroverh, 2004), we take academic monitoring to encompass the organization of the collection, storage and analysis of information with regard to the key performance indicators of the students. Academic monitoring should be capable of triggering changes in the educational practices as well as of initiating managerial decision-making regarding the correspondence of the factual results to the planned ones (ibid). Monitoring is a process of the continual evidence-based, diagnostic and forecast-oriented observation of the state of the pedagogic process with the aim to optimally identify educational goals, objectives and tools of their achievement (ibid). Monitoring encompasses the goal setting, sequential planning of the goal achievement, and methodology of the assessment and processing of current and final results. But most importantly, monitoring supplies tools for generating what systems theorists call feedback.

### **2.1. A systems theory framework**

Before delving into the concept of feedback, it is worth recalling that the systems-theoretic aspects of the educational process have received attention in the recent issues of this journal. Serdenciuc (2016, p. 15) referred to the educational process as multidimensional. This term means that “the structural complexity of [education] and the methodological need to examine its component units generate the necessity to adopt a perspective that makes possible to describe, from the different angles of analysis, the reality of the personality development and formation”. This is important in view of the fact that “the area of education is in a strong interdependence with environmental contexts, being in accordance with the economic conditions, political decisions, technological development and... the demographic dynamics” (Gorghiu, 2016, p. 9). Drawing on these and comparable studies, it is possible to think of the educational practices as a social system that is embedded in the multiple and multidimensional social environments.

This brings us directly to the social systems theory of Niklas Luhmann, a prominent contemporary sociologist. A remarkable feature of

the Luhmannian thinking is the emphasis on the precariousness of system-environment relations. Valentinov (2014, p. 14) rendered explicit the idea of precariousness by “crystallizing two interrelated principles underpinning Luhmann’s understanding of system-environment relations. The first principle, which can be called ‘the complexity reduction principle’, posits that systems increase their complexity by becoming increasingly insensitive to the complexity of the environment. This principle captures the basic meaning of Luhmann’s seemingly paradoxical dictum that systems increase complexity by reducing complexity.... The second principle, which can be called ‘the critical dependence principle’, posits that the increasing complexity of systems is associated with their growing dependence on environmental complexity in ways that make the continuation of their autopoiesis increasingly unlikely” (Valentinov, 2014).

Elaborating on this argument, Valentinov and Chatalova (2016, p. 138) suggested to see social systems as combining two systems-theoretic identities corresponding to the theories of Luhmann and Bertalanffy: “social systems are operationally closed and thus limitedly sensitive to the environment; at the same time, they are metabolically dependent on it. Social dilemmas are shown to originate from the conflict between these two identities, a conflict that occurs when social systems disregard their critical environmental dependencies”. In a recent argument, Valentinov (2017) suggested that the overcoming of conflicts between these identities may be a possible task of systemic feedback which is a key concept in the systems-theoretic literature.

The interesting fact about feedback is the ambivalence of its implications for the systemic sustainability. In an innovative rendering of Wiener’s and Luhmann’s arguments, Valentinov (2017, p. 1) proposed “that every specification of the feedback mechanism implies the drawing of the moral boundary that demarcates those parts of the environment to which the relevant system is sensitive from those to which it is not. A likely outcome of this boundary drawing is the maintenance of intra-systemic complexity at the cost of the deteriorating sustainability of the system in its environment”. On this basis, Valentinov (2017) made the case for differentiating between “complexity-maintaining” and “sustainability-enhancing” feedbacks. Whereas the former feedback supports the operational closure of the concerned systems, the latter one seeks to secure the sustainability of the system in its respective environments.

## **2.2. Implications for academic monitoring**

It seems plausible to think of the educational system as operationally closed in the sense of failing to register and process the infinite complexity of the multidimensional social environments. At the same time, this system is open and “metabolically” dependent on the participation and interests on the part of students. Similar to other social systems, the educational systems is marked by discrepancies of these systems-theoretic identities. Following Valentinov (2017), feedback mechanisms must be called upon to restore the alignment of these identities with a view to making the educational system sustainable with regard to the needs and interests of students. Academic monitoring is a generic designation for these feedback mechanisms. It seems clear that academic monitoring must rest on the “sustainability-enhancing” rather than “complexity-maintaining” feedback.

The present paper is focused on a particular segment of educational system, a segment related to the teaching of the foreign languages. The sustainability-enhancing feedback in this segment must include information on the overall training quality, the conditions and quality of specific teaching methods, and the quality of teaching outcomes. The conditions of the educational process in this segment must be continually registered through the observation of indicators related to the financial, personnel, technical, scientific and methodological fundamentals of the foreign language training process. The monitoring of the quality of teaching outcomes must primarily include indicators of the level of foreign language competencies achieved by the students whilst remaining sensitive to the realization of the objectives of the university administration concerning the quality level of the foreign language training. Last but not least is the lecturer’s ability to achieve the goals of each stage of the training process.

## **3. A case study from the Tavria State Agrotechnological University**

The foreign languages department at the Tavria State Agrotechnological University in Melitopol, Ukraine, maintains the tradition of controlling the teaching quality through the organization of lectures open for attendance for all faculty members. This tradition facilitates the wide adoption of state-of-the-art teaching practice, whilst helping individual lecturers to improve their specific methods and working styles. Another part of this tradition is academic monitoring which is practiced through regular student surveys whose methodological design relies on the publicly

approved workstream on “The optimization of foreign languages training of students using active teaching methods”.

The most recent survey was held in April-May 2015. Its objective was to determine how students (who were enrolled in the program at the time of the survey or 1-2 years prior thereto) assess the foreign language training organization as well as quality. The survey contained the following questions:

1. How many course hours did you have in the discipline of foreign languages per week? (2 hours per week; 3 hours per week; 4 hours per week)

2. Was the number of course hours sufficient? (yes / no)

3. Has the foreign languages training course met your expectations? (yes / no)

4. How would you qualify the contents of the foreign languages training course? (interesting / not interesting; useful / not useful; up-to-date / outdated; manageable / not manageable)

5. How would you quality homework volumes in foreign languages? (insufficient / sufficient / excessive)

6. How would you grade the foreign language training quality in your class? (excellent / good / sufficient / poor)

7. Have you achieved / are achieving progress in mastering the respective foreign language in your training? (yes/ no)

8. How much time do you spend / used to spend on average on homework preparation? (15 min / 30 min / about 1 hour / about 1.5 hours / about 2 hours / more than 2 hours)

9. If you could choose the respective foreign language discipline as an elective of your choice, would you do so? (yes / no)

First- and second-year students of various majors pursuing a Bachelor degree as well as fifth-year students of various majors pursuing a Masters degree took part in the survey. The total number of participants was 194 students.

When characterizing the number of course hours per week, per the survey, about two-thirds of the respondents (65.4%) stated that they have / had 2 course hours per week, 23.4% – 3 hours and merely 11.2% - 4 hours per week. About 72% of the respondents consider the number of course hours in foreign languages insufficient. When assessing training course contents about 90% of the respondents concluded that it was interesting, with 10% qualifying the contents as not interesting. 96% of students noted that the contents of the curriculum is useful and only 4% deemed it not

useful. 95% of the respondents believe that course curriculum is up-to-date, with only 5% perceive it as outdated.

For 80% of the surveyed students the course curriculum appears manageable, with 20% (i.e. every fifth student) perceiving the contents as unmanageable. Approximately the same proportion of students (23%) believe that homework volumes are excessive. However, nearly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the respondents (74%) believe that the homework volume is sufficient, while 3% of respondents see it as insufficient.

With regard to the time spent on one unit of homework in foreign languages, 12% of respondents note that they require about 15 minutes, 25% of the respondents spend about 30 minutes, 34% spend about 1 hour to prepare, 14% about 1.5 hours, 8% spend about 2 hours, with the remaining 7% investing more than 2 hours.

With regard to the students' assessment of the foreign language course quality, about 63% (i.e. nearly two thirds of the respondents) graded it as excellent, one third of the respondents (34%) – as good, while only 3% consider the quality sufficient. No respondent assessed the quality of the training as insufficient. Further, 92% of students note that the foreign languages training course meets / met their expectations. 84% of all respondents stated that they have managed to achieve progress in their respective foreign language course.

The survey also applied indirect questioning with regard to the quality of the foreign language teaching. Students were offered to model a case where they would be able to choose part of their subjects according to their own preferences. As a result, it has been established that in such a case 80% of students would choose foreign languages. This clearly demonstrates that the prevailing majority of students are satisfied with the quality and conditions of the educational process at the Foreign Languages department.

The obtained findings were communicated to the university faculty and consulted when designing and updating training course plans and methodological materials aimed at the improvement of the foreign language training level. The department's experience in conducting monitoring procedures reinforces their importance as a basis for cooperation between students and lecturers and as a feedback channel allowing a prompt reaction to any potential flaws in the educational process.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

The case study of academic monitoring at the Tavria State Agrotechnological University presents an example of the „sustainability-enhancing feedback” oriented toward registering the needs and interests of the students. It remains certainly possible and on some occasions even necessary to conduct surveys framed by the idea of the “complexity-maintaining feedback”. It might be conjectured that the latter surveys would be focused on the needs of lecturers and administrators rather than students. The contribution of the present paper is in driving home the distinction between these types of feedback, and offering preliminary scholarly evidence on how the sustainability-enhancing feedback can be determined and utilized in a university setting. Just as Valentinov (2017) associated the sustainability-enhancing feedback with the idea of sustainability of the concerned social systems, so does academic monitoring pursue the goal of the sustainability of the educational process. It is the hope of the authors that the presented systems-theoretic view of academic monitoring will stimulate further discussions on the pages of this Journal.

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