

STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF THE SERVICE DIMENSION IN TESOL

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INTRODUCTION

Since its emergence as a discipline, TESOL has been the subject of prodigious amounts of research, most of which has been conducted from the viewpoint of the linguist or the educator. Only in the last decade or so have articles addressing management aspects of TESOL begun to appear in the literature. The majority of these TESOL Management writings focus on the application of *general* management models and concepts to the management of English language schools and centres (e.g. Pennington, 1991, Waites and Wilde, Crichton, 1994). An alternative approach, however, has been to view TESOL from a more specific *services management* perspective since TESOL operations are basically service operations and TESOL staff essentially service providers, as commonly conceptualised in the services management literature (Walker, 1998, 2000). This view of TESOL implies that benefits could accrue from the application of well known services management concepts and tools to the management of TESOL operations. The fact remains, however, that there is in the literature little or no empirical evidence for or against the existence of an explicit service dimension within TESOL operations. This reflects the general state of affairs of the TESOL Management literature since very little actual *empirical* research into the management of TESOL programmes has been reported, let alone into services management aspects of TESOL. The research described in this article sets out to address this deficit by investigating the extent of the service dimension in TESOL through the perceptions of staff in English language schools and centres in New Zealand.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Given the lack of precedence and the exploratory nature of the study, the data collection was based on qualitative rather than quantitative methods (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 1991) and focused on respondent personal experiences (Burgess, 1982, cited in Easterby-Smith et al., 1991), feelings and attitudes (Holloway, 1997) as well as processes and the significance of actions (Easterby-Smith et al., 1991). The focus group interview was selected as a suitable methodology for its economy of

effort in obtaining perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment (Krueger, 1994) as well as its use of group dynamics to stimulate the elaboration and expression of opinions (Frey and Fontana, 1991).

The data was collected over a three month period. Five focus group interviews were conducted in five English language centres located in Auckland, Rotorua, Napier, Wellington and Christchurch. Two of the centres were attached to tertiary institutions and three were private organisations. Each focus group ran for an hour-and-a-half to two hours. A total of thirty-two non-management staff took part, twenty-four ESOL teachers and eight administrative staff. Twenty-six were female and six male, a ratio of 81% to 19% which is a close approximation to Haddock's (1998) finding of an 87% to 13% gender split among New Zealand ESOL teachers. (His study did not include administrative staff.).

The focus group interviews had a semi-structured format and were organised loosely around these six questions:

- What did the participants understand by the concept of providing excellent service in a TESOL context?
- How did they see their role as service providers of TESOL?
- What could their organisation do to make sure that the service they provided to customers was of a high quality?
- How could managers help their staff to provide excellent service?
- What could colleagues do to support each other in the provision of TESOL service?
- What barriers existed to providing excellent service in TESOL?

The interviews were recorded on audio tape, the tapes were transcribed and the scripts subjected to content analysis with the help of the *Hyperresearch 2.0* computer software package. After an initial reading of the transcripts to identify broad themes and issues, the data was examined more carefully and descriptive or interpretive codes assigned (Krueger, 1994, Miles & Huberman, 1994, Vaughn, Schumm and Singagub, 1996). As the work progressed, codes were either further refined or broadened by reformulation, or were discarded and replaced by new formulations. A master code list was then produced which listed all raw codes used and gave the code frequency for each of the five focus groups as well as a total frequency for the code. The codes were then arranged into categories or themes, each of the categories was examined for overlap and completeness and some adjustments were made. A few items could not be found to fit into any category and since they had very low frequency counts and did not appear to contribute anything to a better understanding of the research issues, they were discarded.

FINDINGS

The findings are represented here in two different ways. The first is in terms of the broad themes that emerged. Six broad thematic categories were identified and these are shown in Table 1, in descending order of frequency:

Table 1: Broad Themes From Focus Groups

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|----|---|
| 1. | Service Management Issues |
| 2. | Specific Staff service roles/behaviour |
| 3. | TESOL Manager roles/behaviours |
| 4. | Barriers to excellent service |
| 5. | Service features |
| 6. | Workplace/ HRM issues |

These themes will be the subject of the discussion in the following section. However, it is also useful to identify two key sets of individual codes. The first set of codes relates to issues raised in all five groups and which recorded good to high frequencies across four or all of the groups. This combination of commonality plus frequency render these codes particularly significant and they should therefore be regarded as key service issues for the respondents in this study. These codes are displayed in Table 2, in descending order of frequency.

The second set of codes relates to five issues that were raised in four out of the five groups and recorded good to high frequency in three or four of these groups. While of secondary ranking in terms of their commonality across the groups, these items nevertheless retain some significance; the relatively high frequency of the first item, for instance, *respondent perception of TESOL as a service*, would have placed it in the top five codes, had it occurred in all five groups instead of only four.

Table 2: Codes with Good/High Frequency Across All Focus Groups

1. Importance of support from colleagues
2. Importance of establishing and maintaining customer satisfaction
3. Importance of establishing and maintaining effective service systems
4. Importance of managing client individual needs and wants
5. Lack of money, resources and equipment as a barrier to providing excellent service
6. Role of TESOL staff as an interface between clients and the NZ environment
7. Importance of support from management for professional development
8. Managing the disparity between educational and commercial demands on staff
9. Role of TESOL staff as marketers of their organisation
10. Importance of management support of staff efforts
11. Role of TESOL staff as counsellors/pastoral carers
12. Importance of TESOL managers communicating effectively with/informing staff
13. Management of clients as marketers of the organisation
14. Lack of time as a barrier to providing excellent service
15. Importance of creating a caring service environment

Table 3: Codes with Secondary Frequency

1. Respondent perception of TESOL as a service
2. Importance of establishing/maintaining rapport with the client
3. Nature of the customer as a barrier to providing excellent service
4. Extension of the TESOL service provision beyond the classroom
5. Multidimensional nature of TESOL service

The two sets of codes presented in Tables 2 and 3 are also significant in terms of their content, since a number of them are also common themes in the services management literature. These are:

- the focus on client satisfaction
- the importance of effective service systems

- the management of client wants and needs
- staff as marketers of the organisation
- the management of clients as marketers
- the creation of a caring service environment
- respondent perception of TESOL as a service
- establishment of rapport with clients

The presence of these items would seem to indicate the existence of a healthy service dimension among the respondents and a relatively firm awareness of their role as service providers in TESOL.

DISCUSSION

This discussion covers the six themes presented in Table 1. In view of limitations on space, the focus is on the issues that displayed commonality and frequency across the groups and secondary items have therefore been omitted.

Service Management Issues

Analysis of the data identified *service management issues* as the major theme complex with a large number of high frequency codes. This category describes a series of interlinked activities and behaviours within the service environment which could be described as the very essence of the TESOL service operation. Two sub-categories were identified, namely the *task environment*, which involves the organisation of work, and the *client service environment*, which addresses contacts between service providers and clients.

Task Environment

Because service jobs are frequently frustrating, demanding and challenging, service providers maintain their enthusiasm and provide better service when they are members of a supportive team (Zeithaml & Bitner, 1996). This theme was confirmed in the focus groups since by far the most popular theme *was the need for a supportive, collegial, team environment* as a prerequisite for the provision of excellent TESOL service. Both teaching and non-teaching staff reiterated how much they relied on the support of their colleagues. The development of a team ethos was particularly important:

I guess the secret of the school is that team commitment we seem to enjoy working together, we share a whole heap of things together There's a lot of interaction goes on and I think that the problem solving is done.... through that amicable, collegial respect and cooperation and..... discussion, basically.

This involved regular and continuous interaction with colleagues, the sharing of information about clients and work content – for instance sharing ideas and materials for

classes - and a knowledge of what each other was doing. Respondents likewise emphasised *the need for procedures, processes, structures and consistency as part of an overall service system*:

We have a lot of administrative procedures and we have to be sure that we are saying the same thing.....and it is not easy because you've got to make sure that communications are good across the programmes. This is.....seen as an important part of providing a service.

A feature of TESOL institutions is the existence of professional educators in a commercial context and a sub-category with a high frequency in focus group discussion was *the problem of managing the disparity between educational and commercial priorities*. As one teacher commented:

For me that is the biggest problem, I think,the business versus teaching and I do think often the students do miss out because business wins, which unfortunately is a fact of life, but from a teaching point view, it can be very frustrating.

Some respondents reported that while best practice in TESOL might dictate, for instance, smaller class sizes, commercial constraints might require a teacher to work with a group far larger than she regarded effective. The realities of demand fluctuation might dictate a client being placed in a class of students who were at a different proficiency level, simply because it made business sense. This is likely to lead to concern on the part of ESOL teachers that they are being asked to condone practices they do not consider ethical or in the best interests of the client.

A further issue related to respondent awareness of *word-of-mouth*. When making a decision to purchase, potential purchasers of services are more likely to be influenced by personal, word-of-mouth recommendations than purchasers of products (Mangold, Miller & Brockway, 1999). While actual reported data may vary, research findings imply that a dissatisfied customer will inform considerably more people about his/her experience than a satisfied customer. In such scenarios, satisfied customers are essentially acting as informal marketers for the organisation. There is evidence for word-of-mouth recommendation as a major influence on the choice of study destinations by Japanese TESOL students in New Zealand (Hall, 1996) and by both overseas and domestic students in Australia (Soutar, McNeill and Lim, 1994, Patterson, Romm and Hill, 1998). Most participants in this study appeared to be mindful of the importance of word-of-mouth to them:

Word-of-mouth is our most potent tool in terms of marketing and obtaining students for the school....,

and therefore *the importance of managing clients as potential marketers for the organisation*.

Client Service Environment

A popular theme in the services management literature, *client* or *customer satisfaction* is commonly conceptualised as an outcome of the comparison the customer makes between her *expectations* of the service performance and *perceptions* of that performance and this link between (dis)confirmation of expectations and (dis)satisfaction has been widely supported in the literature through empirical research (e.g. Churchill and Suprenant, 1982, Danaher and Haddrell, 1996, Oliver, 1980, Wirtz and Bateson, 1998). Moreover, customer satisfaction has been shown not only to be directly linked to service performance but is also used as a formal measure of performance (e.g. Churchill and Suprenant, 1982, Oliver, 1997, Wirtz & Bateson, 1999, Voss, Johnston, Fitzgerald and Sylvestro, 1990).

It was not surprising, therefore, that *client satisfaction* was a major theme in the focus groups. Respondents appeared well aware that they were dealing with clients who could take their business elsewhere or by word-of-mouth influence future business, so the most popular issue here was that of satisfying clients and the need to “keep them happy” was an oft-repeated sentiment:

.....Your results are measured by how happy [clients] are.....We're in an industry where we have to please clients who pay.

Although a controversial issue among respondents, one important way of keeping clients happy was *catering to their individual wants and needs* and an integral part of this might involve *respondents making themselves available to clients on an individual basis*. Another common services theme (Lovelock, Patterson and Walker, 1998) which was strongly represented by respondents as an important TESOL service provider skill was *the ability to establish early rapport with clients*, leading to the establishment of social bonds and higher levels of commitment on both sides. Finally, *establishing and maintaining a comfortable, caring service environment* was equally important.

According to respondents, *the management of client expectations* could be tricky, particularly when there was disparity between those expectations and the reality of the TESOL service context. A stock service *motif* is that of client involvement in producing the service and nowhere is this more apparent than in educational services such as TESOL. The success of the service may partly rely on the client's own aptitudes, skills and industry. Respondents told of the problem that might arise if a client had an exaggerated perception not only of her actual language level but also her own abilities and therefore, for instance, an unrealistic expectation of her rate of progress in terms of language proficiency gain:

...Students come along expecting a quantum boost in their level of English proficiency and that is what in fact we spend by far the largest part of our time trying to provide.

.....There is a very high expectation on what we can do. The students come, thinking that we have a magic pill.....

Respondents reported that there was also likely to be a conflict between the client's perceptions of the appropriate learning methodology and the teaching/learning philosophy of the institution. Clients from some cultures, for instance, may prefer to be taught exclusively in a formalised classroom context that emphasises the grammar-translation methodology they are used to, while New Zealand TESOL institutions that pride themselves in being at the forefront of best practice might promote more communicative approaches and learner autonomy:

.....Their perceived need is that they're going to learn in a classroom with a teacher, whereas our perception of how they are going to cope with their needs is by developing strategies and autonomy..... And there is a conflict there. It takes a long time leading a horse to water, to get that across.

The issue of *client wants vs. needs* is another characteristic services management theme (e.g. Schneider & Bowen, 1995) and an often-asked question is, who is the best judge of what the customer actually needs? The dilemma was neatly expressed by one respondent:

Sometimes I feel compromised through the fact that the students are fee paying and therefore I suppose they perceive that they have the right to dictate what they want, which doesn't..... necessarily correspond with what they need.....

TESOL Staff Roles and Behaviours

The roles and behaviours of service providers represent a major theme complex in the services literature. The nature of the interactions between service providers and clients is fundamental to the creation of quality through the production of the "core value" of the service (e.g. Czepiel, Solomon, Suprenant and Gutman 1985, Lovelock 1992, Schmenner 1995). A service job is seen as essentially a relationship (Lovelock 1995) between the provider and the customer, the nature of which can determine the success of the service activity. Service providers have boundary spanning roles that have a critical function in "understanding, filtering and interpreting information and resources to and from the organisation and its external constituencies" (Zeithaml and Bitner, p. 307).

The significance of these common services themes was confirmed in the focus groups. Respondents described four role/behavioural categories and an associated set of attitudes and behaviours involved in the work of TESOL service providers. First, respondents viewed themselves as *an interface between the client and the NZ environment*. This could involve providing clients with practical information on how to go about accessing

the NZ community, for instance in terms of sports, hobbies or cultural activities. It might involve explaining how NZ society works and teaching clients appropriate behaviour.

You almost feel like you're an important link and if they don't relate to you then a big part of their day and their ability to make other relationships with other native Kiwis is quite often seriously affected.....in terms of providing a service as a teacher, you have quite a strong, an important role,..... like an ambassador in a way.....

Teaching students practical lessons such as how to use the telephone, access banking services or apply for and sit a driving test might also be included in such a role.

Second, respondents reported a number of roles and activities subsumed under the banner of *pastoral care/counselling*. This could involve providing help with personal problems, academic issues or in motivational contexts. While some of the larger language schools might have counsellors and homestay coordinators to do counselling work, many respondents, particularly the teachers, saw this role as a major item in their job description:

Being available to listen to them and be sympathetic to them. If they've got a problem, really, try to help them solve it. And so I look upon it not just as a job for teaching English language as such, but becoming someone that they can talk to freely whenever they want to.

The role often took a practical form, such as taking clients for medical treatment or helping them to deal with NZ bureaucracies. In one case, a respondent who suspected a client could not see properly took him to a specialist in Auckland and colour blindness was diagnosed and subsequently treated. Providing motivational support and helping clients with personal development was also part of the role of some respondents:

They [clients] couldn't get a break back home and we're really challenging them and opening them up to possibilities that they never considered back home, you know.

Since the majority of respondents were ESOL teachers, it is not surprising that *teaching* was seen as an integral part of the service provider role. However, it is interesting that this role was not particularly emphasised in the focus group discussions and it was almost taken for granted in some groups. Key responsibilities here were a feeling of responsibility for the success of the client but also the importance of promoting client language autonomy.

A common theme in the services literature is that of *service providers as marketers for their organisations*. This view sees marketing as establishing, maintaining and enhancing relationships with customers and other partners to meet the organisation's objectives (Gronroos, 1990). While promotional activities might be in the hands of formal marketers, service providers in an organisation should be "part-time marketers" and

should act in a "marketinglike manner" (Gronroos, 1990, p. 141). A number of respondents also took this view:

....We're all marketing, every one of us has a vital role. Our jobs depend on it.....

The significance of the staff marketing role and its link to managing word-of-mouth was clearly expressed by this participant:

You see, this is not like a normal school. They come here because they choose to come here. They pay to come here and for that reason, every person that has any contact with that student is a vital cog in the marketing process. If they screw up, that person will go away unhappy and disgruntled and will probably tell a hundred others. If they go away happy, because each one of us has done our jobs, they might influence ten other students to come to the school, so every student is a potential marketer.

The final theme here was *service orientation*, which Hogan, Hogan and Busch (1984) referred to as "a set of attitudes and behaviours that affects the quality of the interaction betweenthe staff of any organisation and its customers" (page 167). Awareness of the significance of service orientation to the success of service operations is now widespread in the literature. Given the importance in services of the provider-customer interaction, the employee who enjoys "people work", is courteous and helpful and has an inherent predisposition and willingness to provide service, will play a key role in creating customer perceptions of service quality. The importance of service orientation has been demonstrated, for instance, in health care services (O'Connor & Shewchuk, 1995) and even manufacturing (Wright, Pearce & Busbin, 1997). In a recent New Zealand study (Burchell, Hodges and Rainsbury, 1999), employers were asked to rank 24 graduate competencies in terms of importance now and in ten years' time. Customer service orientation was ranked among the top four for both time periods.

Although respondents did not volunteer the concept *service orientation* by name, it was inherent in many of the descriptions they offered of their service provider roles, in particular the *pastoral care/counselling/interface* complex within the cross-cultural context. Specifically, they stressed the importance of: *perceiving clients as individuals*, rather than merely paying clients; *empathy* (a commonly cited service orientation attribute) with clients who are struggling to function in a strange environment; *fostering trust* through honest dealings with clients; *professional dedication* to providing a quality educational service. *Personality factors* also played a part:

....You have got to connect with the students and those are the good teachers.....You are taught how to be a teacher but you are not taught your personality.

In some cases several respondents perceived of themselves as *in loco parentis*, especially with regard to younger clients:

I think we often feel that we are like their surrogate family, the tutors here and support staff, and when they leave us.....it's just like parents and the kids leaving the nest.

TESOL Manager Roles and Behaviours

Respondents cited a number of manager roles and behaviours likely to enhance the effectiveness of TESOL operations. While these are items that might be attributed to a competent services manager, they would also be regarded as among the fundamentals of good general management practice. *Support of staff efforts* was seen as the key manager behaviour, in terms, for instance, of dealing with difficult clients, providing encouragement and feedback and acting swiftly and decisively to defuse potential problems. Within a service operation that employs professional teachers, it is not surprising that staff perceived *management support for professional development* as especially important. This might take the form of the organisation of regular in-house seminars or training sessions, encouragement for staff to improve teaching or academic qualifications or support in terms of time or money to attend professional conferences. Another positive manager behaviour was seen to be *communicating effectively* and in particular *keeping staff informed* about the state of the organisation, for instance, in terms of the business direction. Some respondents, however, felt that managers withheld commercial information and provided no rationale for commercially-based decisions which ultimately impacted on the quality of the instruction.

Barriers to providing excellent service

While respondents perceived the greatest barrier to the provision of excellent TESOL service to be *the lack of money, resources or equipment*, the very *nature of the clients* themselves could also be instrumental, particularly if the client was unwilling to cooperate with teachers implementing the learning philosophy of the institution:

There's also the different learning styles..... Some of them are used to being lectured to, and they're quite uncomfortable with moving into pairwork or groupwork and they don't think they're learning. So you've got to get them used to the fact that you can learn from others and through doing pairwork practice and groupwork practice and that can be quite a difficult thing to break down when some of them first come.

Occasionally, a client's cultural norms might also make providing the service difficult:

..... With some cultures, there's a different attitude displayed towards female teachers, as opposed to male teachers. I think that probably is a factor in some cases. We try to break it down and I think we do it quite successfully, but I think incoming students sometimes carry some of this baggage that we have to work quite hard to unravel.

Two standard services management themes presented further barriers. The issue of how their organisations dealt with *demand fluctuation* (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons,

1994) was a concern to respondents and one which could have a direct influence on the quality of the service provided since it could lead to the sort of commerce vs. education discord previously discussed. The *lack of adequate service systems* (Schneider & Bowen, 1995) was also cited by some respondents as a concern, particularly if the TESOL staff were not perceived by clients as working consistently to a standard set of procedures.

While *lack of time* was also a frequently cited item, some respondents felt that *managers* themselves might represent a barrier if they had no background in TESOL:

...There are people who have a managerial type role [and] don't understand the constraints of what we're dealing with or the extent that we have to work, because dealing with New Zealand students and dealing with international students is a completely different ball game, so we can't apply the same sort of rules. You can't, say, because you're stretched for time, just leave the classroom. You can't really do that.

Service Features

This category covers some of the additional features of the TESOL service provision which arose out of focus group discussion. A major theme was *respondent awareness of TESOL as a service*. The question of whether respondents actually saw themselves as service providers was not put directly to them but the assumption went largely unchallenged and most respondents appeared comfortable to use the terminology that had been initiated by the researcher. This coding, therefore, although apparently of minor importance, was actually quite significant as it appeared to indicate that there was unconscious acceptance on the part of the respondents of the service dimension in their work.

Another aspect of this category was the *multidimensional nature of the service* for both teaching and non-teaching staff. Support staff such as administrators and homestay coordinators reported after-hours involvement with clients, especially if an emergency arose. For teachers, this meant that the service was not confined to teaching English since, in addition to materials preparation which often took place outside normal hours, there were other roles to carry out:

A lot of the time the service extends well beyond the classroom, the teachers. I mean, I know for the other staff it does too. Often the students will come to my home and we're often involved with weekend sort of activities and things so it's definitely not just, "OK, you're coming here from nine till three and we don't want to see you when we're off".

The teaching goes on and on.

Sometimes the service transcended even further the boundaries of space and time. Former clients would turn up with relatives or friends to visit or they might contact the language school for help long after they had completed their course.

Workplace/HRM Issues

A number of issues relating to the nature of the work environment and contractual matters were placed in this category. The problems of *obtaining adequate or appropriate resources* were a major item and resources discussed included time, funding, teaching materials, teaching space, equipment, etc. The issue of professional development arises again but in this category teachers were aware of the importance of *taking charge of their own professional development* in terms of improving the quality of the service they were able to provide.

Another theme was *the situation of ESOL teachers*, many of whom are hired on short-term contracts or employed on a demand or an hourly basis, and the lack of job security was clearly a concern for some participants:

....It takes quite a while to get a permanent contract as such, as permanent as permanent is...and still you've only got four weeks' notice, so quite often you're doing the best for the students, but you also do have to look after yourself.

For some respondents, the lack of security inhibited their relationship with management. There were also consequences of being employed on hourly rates, in terms of their own commitment to their organisation:

One of the problems, probably, that, you know..... what this relates to is that teachers are paid on an hourly basis, so when you're finished, there's no point in sticking around.

There were therefore good arguments for TESOL institutions having permanent staff:

I think also having a constant staff is very, very important in terms of providing that high level of service to the students.... I believe that it would be detrimental to their learning if there weren't permanent staff here that they saw on a regular basis.....

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The aim of this research was to investigate the existence of a service dimension in TESOL through the perceptions of TESOL staff of their work and roles. The findings showed that among the respondents interviewed a fairly healthy service dimension was apparent. A number of archetypal service themes were identified as well as themes specific to the context of a TESOL service operation. Most respondents appeared comfortable with the notion of TESOL as a service and with their roles as service providers within TESOL. However, several limitations of the research should be noted. Given the relatively small size of the sample, generalisability cannot be claimed. In terms of analysis, no attempt was made to differentiate between data collected from teaching and non-teaching respondents. Data from both private language schools and tertiary institutions was, like-

wise, undifferentiated and was presented in aggregated form.

The findings nevertheless imply the existence of fertile ground for further research into the management of TESOL service operations. For instance, investigations based on quantitative methods and with larger samples might confirm or otherwise some of the insights reported in this article. Studies of, respectively, teaching vs. non-teaching TESOL staff and private/commercial vs. tertiary TESOL institutions might help clarify some of the themes raised here. The perceptions and service practices of TESOL managers, which were not represented here, likewise bear investigation. Such studies could be part of a wider programme of empirical research into service aspects of TESOL management, which is long overdue. We might then obtain a clearer picture of some of the service management issues specific to TESOL operations, with a view to improving the effectiveness of the service provision in English language schools and centres.

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