

Enhancing student learning in higher education through student input

Kuang Ching Hei
*Faculty of Languages and Linguistics,
University of Malaya, Malaysia*
kuangch@um.edu.my

Abstract

This paper aims to identify possible factors that can enhance student learning in terms of environment and other classroom features. Using action research as an approach, responses were extracted from 27 Malaysian undergraduates. Ten open ended questions were posed and responses were collected immediately and manually analysed. A thematic analysis was applied to separate the factors noted in the data. Data analysis suggested that undergraduates were ready to take ownership of their learning through negotiations of course assignments, deadlines, assessments, weightage of marks and activities. Undergraduates also noted that a relaxing, informal, non-judgmental and interactive learning environment would enhance learning. Lecturers were still viewed as authority but were expected to be equipped with certain friendly qualities. This paper is limited to a very small population thus, findings cannot be generalised. However, the outcomes can be used to enhance student learning in higher education settings.

Keywords: autonomy, conducive learning environment, higher education

Introduction

Education is an important component in any nation because education changes lives. A good education can ensure a better future thereby, improving living standards. Undoubtedly, those with a good education are more likely to hold better paying jobs which incidentally, can help

to raise their personal, social and financial status. However, what constitutes as a good education may be a question that needs to be addressed.

Education involves teaching and learning and it is an important commodity in the Malaysian context. It is even more crucial today because Malaysia aspires to become the education hub for global needs by the year 2020. It is striving to attract more than 200,000 foreign students onto its shores (Lee, 2015). Nonetheless, like a commercial commodity, education loses its appeal if teaching techniques and learning requirements are not constantly updated. The whole concept of good education may thus become diluted and weakened if no research is done to ensure that it is still as relevant today as it was yesterday. If education involves teaching and learning, then these two facets of education have to be constantly updated so that stakeholders such as the students can be given opportunities to remain as competitive as their contemporaries from other parts of the world.

Since Malaysia has high aspirations, its education programmes must be constantly upgraded in order to remain competitive. One way of doing this is through curriculum review which reviews current programmes and courses offered by universities on a rotation basis. Curriculum review helps to ensure that the educational programmes offered by universities meet global needs and requirements. As inadequate and ineffective courses are removed from the curriculum, new and relevant ones are being introduced to meet global demands. Another way to maintain programme quality is to hire excellent and effective lecturers whose teaching techniques can inspire and motivate students.

Aim of study

Currently, Malaysian public universities evaluate the quality of each course offered in the curriculum through a mechanism called the CTES score sheet. Provided with a five (5) Likert scale point, this mechanism allows students to provide feedback on how relevant the courses were to them, how good were the materials used for instruction and how the instructor/lecturer of the courses performed. The input or feedback provided is then tabulated based on percentages and the outcome is given specific numerals which are interpreted as

good teaching or poor teaching for lecturers. A lecturer with less than 3.5 point is regarded as a poor teacher while one who gets 4.5 and above is considered as good. This point is considered passable for the university's Key Performance Index (KPI). The outcome generated from the CTES can affect the respective lecturer's yearly performance. For instance, a newly appointed academic staff may not be confirmed or a senior academic staff may be deprived of his/her yearly salary increment. Although a good mechanism to assess students' opinion about the course relevance, the CTES survey does not allow students to indicate other facets of their needs for the course. For instance, it does not allow students to give feedback on the relevance of the assessment mode, criteria for assessment, number and types of assignments given, appropriateness of assignments, weightage of marks, clarity of instructions and so on. This gap thus warrants some exploration in order to see if students have any feedback to contribute towards their own learning and to be accountable for their own achievements in class. In that regard, this study will extract the feedback of 27 undergraduates in order to gather their feedback of two core courses offered by a social science faculty of a Malaysian public university. This study thus, seeks to identify possible factors that can enhance student learning in terms of environment and other classroom features.

Research Questions

In line with the aims stated, two research questions were formulated:

1. How can learning in Higher Education (HE) be enhanced?
2. What are some factors that can improve the learning environment for students in HE?

Students as partners

Institutions offering higher education (HE) across the world are currently aiming to enhance teaching and learning (see Kelsey, 2012; Partnership for Higher Education in Wales, n.d.; Student learning enhancement unit, IIUM, n.d.). In a university, student capital is the core element that not only brings in income but also elevates the particular institution's reputation.

This is especially so when high achieving students and their accomplishments become visible to the world. Students are important because they are stakeholders. For some universities, the term 'partnership' was introduced to provide students with the leeway to contribute to their learning. Partnership implies equal contributions from both parties (teacher and student) but in reality the relationship cannot be equal because one party, the instructor/lecturer, is often the higher authority.

The concept of partnership was introduced in the United Kingdom (UK) by the Higher Education Academy Framework (HEAF) (see the Higher Education Academy International service, n.d.). It was created as a strategy to facilitate the learning and teaching scheme in HE. Its conceptual framework was based on Healey, Flint and Harrington's (2014) proposition. The rationale for introducing this concept was because the said model carries a set of partnership values. It was noted that these values could be used to enhance and support partnership development. The model specifically emphasises partnership as that relationship between students and staff, among students, and between higher education institutions (HEIs) and their students' unions, associations or guilds in the context of learning and teaching. From this conceptualized model, the term partnership came to be viewed as "a relationship in which all involved are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement" (Framework for partnership in learning and teaching in higher education, 2014, p. 2). HEAF has taken the term a little further to encompass "a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself" (Framework for partnership in learning and teaching in higher education, 2014, p. 2). In this instance, partnership is viewed as student engagement but not necessarily the other way round (Framework for partnership in learning and teaching in higher education, 2014, p.2). HEAF treats partnering students as an approach where students are engaged by their respective institutions either through the engagement of listening or consulting with students.

In the current study, students were engaged as participants of classroom research of two courses. They were engaged as active learners who could provide feedback to improve the current teaching and learning process. They do not constitute as equal partners who provided 50% of their input into the learning context. In this regard, the students became

willing participants because they noted from previous courses that instructors/lecturers do not ask them for feedback on assignments, assessments and learning topics (Personal interviews, March15, 2015).

Why Action Research

Sagor (2000) says that all excellent teachers became excellent because they performed some things which most teachers do not do, i.e. these teachers conduct research on their own teaching so as to improve their profession. In pedagogy, this is termed as action research. There are procedures for conducting this kind of research and Sagor (2000) and Pycszak (1999) listed some steps:

- 1) Teacher/researcher identifies the problem,
- 2) Formulate specific researchable questions.
- 3) Construct research question
- 4) Review related literature.

Action research is doing research in one's classroom with one's students as participants. It is user-friendly and practical. It is less formal than other types of research and is conducted for the purpose of improving the process of teaching and learning (Slavin, 2006). It can involve a single teacher or a collaborative team of two or more teachers working together to focus on a mutual topic.

Traditional research, in comparison, is often driven by quantitative and qualitative data analysis which incorporate stringent measures. Such types of research consume longer periods of time and sample sizes can be bigger if not reasonably adequate. Analyses are either quantified or justified in various ways and results are presented via statistics or various forms of presentation. Findings may be shared in scholarly writing through peer-reviewed journals or in research-focused professional conferences (Mason, Lind, & Marchal, 1991).

In action research, a teacher or administrator can conduct research even with a single student, if necessary. However, results shared may vary from formal publication in journals,

conference presentations to mere reports presented at less formal congregations such as faculty meetings or professional development workshops. Action research may span only a few weeks and possibly involve only one individual teacher.

Ross-Fishcer (2008) notes that classroom research is not a common component in many teachers' daily teaching regimen because priority is often given to completing syllabuses at schools. Likewise, in higher education, lecturers also need to complete syllabuses, ensure that assignments and assessments are fulfilled and also prepare students for examinations. Lecturers also have additional responsibilities like supervision, research, publications, maintain active online teaching materials as well as attend compulsory self-development workshops. At the same time, they also need to maintain an immaculate course file for auditing purposes and perform a myriad of other non-academic tasks. All of these responsibilities contribute to their yearly key performance index (KPI). Those who are inactive in some of these tasks may find themselves missing out on their promotions and increments. Consequently, for many academic staff in public universities, teaching becomes a second priority (Personal interviews, March 19, 2015).

The generational theory

Identified by Strauss and Howe (1991), the generational theory looks at the generation cycle in order to identify peculiar characteristics of the various generations of people in America. The description of these characteristics was derived from the history of the United States and comparing these with the generation trends of some developed countries across the world to detect similarities (Strauss & Howe, 1997). The generational theory is widely influential and acclaimed although there are also mixed responses which criticise their lack of rigorous empirical evidence. Today's generation of learners clearly, possess specific characteristics that could and should be addressed in order to make teaching and learning in the current millennium relevant. It is undeniable that many students studying in any undergraduate programme across the world today are those within the age range of 21-23 thereby, making them Millennials. Likewise, Malaysian students enter universities after their pre-university education such as form six, matriculation and A-levels. In this regard, the

undergraduates of this study are what Howe and Strauss (2000) term as Generation/Gen Y or Millennials as they were born between 1982 and 2003.

Gen Y or Millennials have been described as being family oriented, willing to sacrifice for career advancement, are confident, ambitious, unafraid to question authority; they constantly seek challenges, want meaningful work, like to be part of a team and desire to be the centre of stage; they crave attention, seek input and affirmation of others and like to be included and involved in anything (Strauss & Howe, 1997; Howe & Strauss, 2000). In the 2013 poll of the United Kingdom, Millennials were described as open minded, preferring to communicate through e-mails and text messages rather than actual face-to-face contact (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Because Millennials were born into an era of technology filled with mobile phones, laptops and computers, learning for the Millennials also involves technology. They have instant access to presentations via webinars and online classes are common. This phenomenon indicates that the youth, employment and social life of the Millennials can be defined by the various forms of electronic wares.

Since Millennials are ambitious, with a capacity for high level cooperative work, they are also high on stress and conventionality, tending to be over reliant on parents (see Wilson & Gerber, 2008, p.29). Because of these characteristics, it has been suggested that different pedagogies need to be developed (Strauss & Howe, 1997). Millennials have to be balanced with their sense of competence and one way to go about it is to have 'co-designing key aspects of their educational experience'. In other words, engage them (Wilson & Gerber, 2008; Strauss & Howe, 1997).

Using their own experience in teaching college students and the generational theory as a source of comparison, Wilson and Gerber (2008) propose that this knowledge about generation characteristics be used as insights into improving teaching techniques. Four pedagogical adaptations were proposed: a) enhance clarity of course structure and assignments, b) student participation in course design, c) pre-planned measures to reduce stress, and d) rigorous attention to the ethics of learning.

However, a mismatch is happening in today's classroom settings, particularly in Malaysia. While the participants/undergraduates of this study are Millennials, their instructors/lecturers,

in contrast, are those of a different generation, born in the 1950s (aged 56-65), 1960s (aged 46-55) and the 1970s (aged 36-45). Under the generational theory framework, these people are either baby boomers (1943–1960) or the Generation X beings (1961-1981). Experts studying the personalities of the various generations claim that each generation possesses a set of different personalities and if a bridge is not created to balance the personalities, conflicts can arise.

Reality

Malaysian educators (see Abdul Karim, August 4, 2015) claim that Millennials are the ‘fast, fast, fast generation’ because they have everything at their fingertips like internet technology and gadgets such as smart phones. Their vast accessibility to online knowledge has therefore, prompted them to also require ‘fast’ feedback from teachers/instructors. If feedback goes against their grain, Millennials become easily agitated and frustrated. In the affective filter hypothesis (Krashen, 1987), such agitations and frustrations can distract learning. Undoubtedly, there is no one best way to teach Millennials since individuals vary in terms of cultural contexts. Nonetheless, it is possible to look for the best strategy to deal with Millennials so that learning can take place and teaching becomes a joy for the different generation of instructors/lecturers.

High Quality teachers

The Coleman Report has confirmed that high-quality teachers raise student performance and it is one of the most important thing a school should provide (Goldhaber, 2002). The finding was based on the influence of a set of quantifiable teacher characteristics which include years of experience, qualifications, and performance on a vocabulary test. Other studies found that the verbal and cognitive qualities of the instructor can impact the successful learning of their learners in the classroom (Ferguson & Ladd, 1996). Rice (2003, p. 37) notes that ‘subject matter knowledge contributes to good teaching only up to a certain point’. Good teachers must know their subjects well. However, having a doctoral-level knowledge of Freudian interpretations of Victorian literature, for example, may not be a good measurement to evaluate the person’s ability to teach well especially if the teacher is not

qualified in the respective area he/she is teaching (Rice, 2003). Baumert, Kunter, Blum, Brunner, Voss, Jordan, Klusmann, Krauss, Neubrand, and Tsai (2010) studied the math skills and knowledge of 194 high school mathematics teachers and their ability to impart difficult math concepts. They found that teachers with some knowledge about teaching were more effective than those with just content knowledge. Students who had teachers with strong pedagogical abilities in teaching the subject were more likely to gain a full year's learning than others whose teachers had weak pedagogical content knowledge.

Conducive learning environment

Bacher-Hicks, Kane, and Staiger (2014) suggest that highly effective learning environment comprises of certain characteristics. It should be an environment that encourages students' learning input. Findley and Varble (2006) suggest that a good classroom is not just about strict and rigid control of the class but also comfort and space which allow everyone to learn and participate freely. These definitions of learning environment imply a context which enables students to participate in a non-judgmental climate where their critical voices could be heard without fear or prejudice. The current paper aims to address this portion of the suggestion by using the action research procedure.

Methodology

At the beginning of the course, all students were informed that they would be held accountable for their own learning and grades. They were also told that they would be engaged as responsible adult learners (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014). They were encouraged to be brave in giving feedback as the information would be used for future teaching improvements. Students were also given instructions on how to do reflections. This was practised in most classes and notably in six classes out of 14 weeks with each week serving as one class. Specific questions like what worked, what did not work and what should be improved for future teaching and learning purposes were posed after every topic. In addition, students were asked if they would like to negotiate on certain matters of the course such as class test and dates, oral presentations and criteria for assessment, deadlines for

assignments, and class activities. Students were also asked what 'makes them tick' i.e. what would make them more eager to learn. In week eight, students were given a quiz related to their course. This has not been negotiated previously thus, it was imposed on them. After the quiz, they were asked to evaluate their own answers with guidelines given. The activity allowed them to negotiate for possible answers and the marks allocated. Consequently, the exercise developed their confidence and trust.

In week ten, ten questions were formulated and written on the white board. Students were requested to look at the questions and to write their responses according to these questions into their own paper. Their personal details were not required but they were told to give truthful answers. In previous classes, students had given their verbal consent to participate in the study. Their privacy and confidentiality were assured to alleviate anxiety and to promote research ethics. All their responses were provided within 30 minutes of class time. Only one student asked for clarification of the questions (Q.6). After the 27 papers were scrutinized for complete responses, a thematic analysis was used to separate the data into specific categories. They were then grouped for commonality and manually counted and classified according to frequency count. These were then tabulated and presented in percentages. The ten questions are as follow:

- 1) What kind of class environment do you prefer?
- 2) In what ways can students become partners in T/L?
- 3) What kind of teachers help you to learn?
- 4) How do you know that you have learnt?
- 5) How should lessons be prepared for students?
- 6) What are some class issues which should be negotiated with students?
- 7) Should teachers be the only authority?
- 8) How can T/L be further improved so that students can become partners?
- 9) Has any of your lecturers told you that you are very important to them?
- 10) Why is it many of you do not participate in the class when you were asked a question in the class?

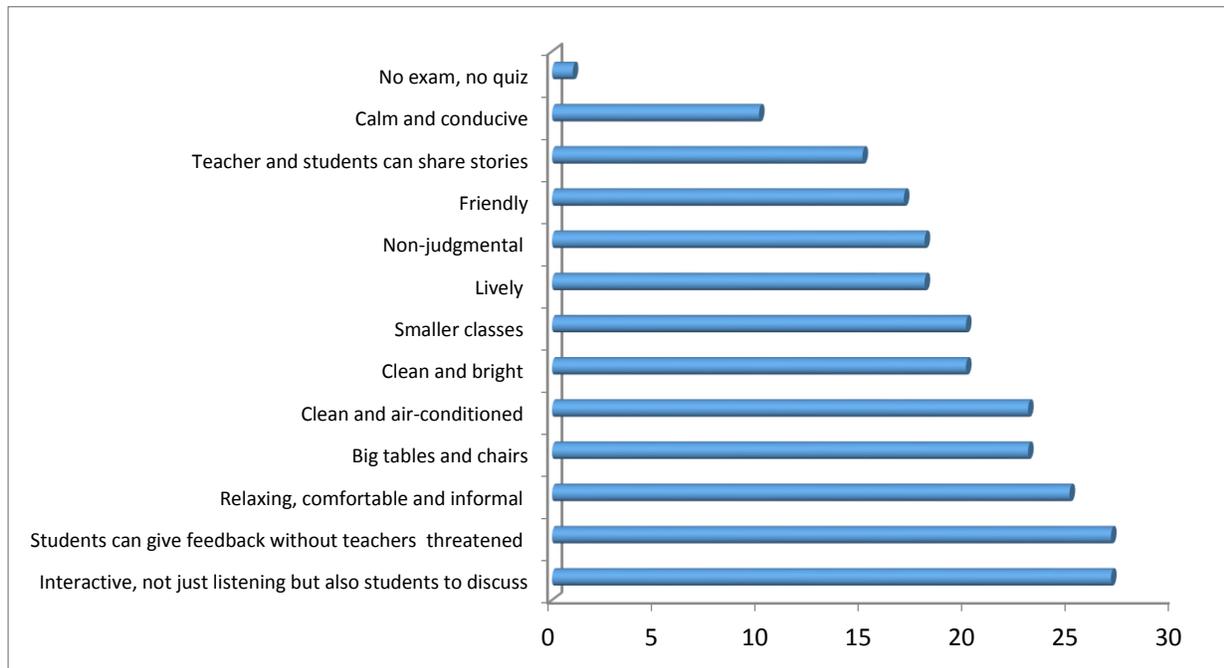
Questions 9 and 10 were posed during personal consultations or interviews with students. These were done in a private office after class time or during their free time. Each interview was about ten to fifteen minutes. It was conducted casually with tea and biscuits to alleviate anxiety and to promote friendship and trust. The interviews were conducted between weeks 10 and 12 of the semester (March 15-27, 2015) and relevant responses were noted verbatim. In addition to this, interviews were also conducted with two colleagues teaching other core courses in the same faculty at around the same time of the year. The topics discussed encompass what colleagues thought about teaching and meeting their yearly KPIs and the characteristics of their students. Only relevant responses were noted and written verbatim. Verbal consent was assured by the interviewees.

Rationale of the questions

The questions were formulated for the following reasons. Question 1 would provide an insight into the kind of classroom that would make learning more conducive. Question 2 would provide an insight into what students think they can contribute in the T/L (teaching and learning) process. Question 3 would draw on the students' mental picture of the characteristics of a facilitating teacher who can enhance learning. Question 4 would draw on the reflections of students to see if they know whether or not they had learnt. Question 5 would indicate what students had experienced and would like to see in an ideal classroom. Question 6 would draw on the students' experiences and needs which could be implemented. Question 7 would provoke students to see if they were able to take some responsibility and accountability for their own learning. Question 8 asks a similar question to question 2 and it aims to verify their answers given to question 2. Questions 9 and 10 were posed as additional questions during the interview. For the purpose of this paper, responses to questions 4 were not included because they were incomplete.

Figure 1. Preferred class environment

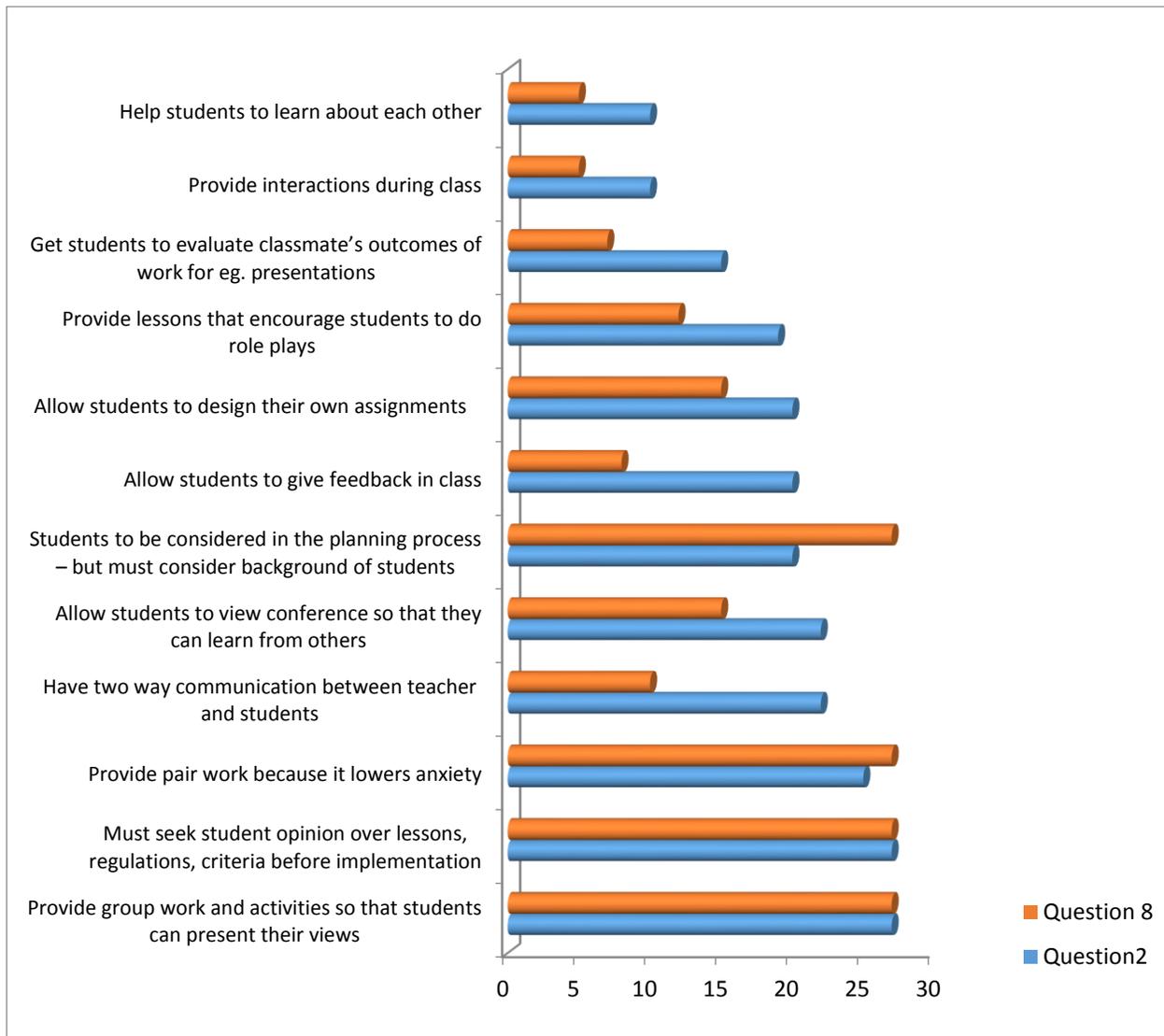
Question 1: What kind of class environment do you prefer?



As Figure 1 illustrates, Malaysian undergraduates prefer an interactive class. They claim that this can make the class less boring as they get to hear other students' input and voices. They prefer a non-threatening environment where lecturers can accept criticisms without being defensive. They claim that some lecturers cannot take criticisms and may intimidate students by making subtle threats (Personal interviews, March 15-27, 2015). A conducive learning environment is a priority on the students' list but students also want other artefacts - bigger chairs and tables, air conditioning, clean and bright rooms, and smaller class size. Students also prefer a friendly, non-judgmental environment where both parties have a good rapport with no anxiety aggravated by exams or quizzes.

The blue and red graphs in Figure 2 represent questions 2 and 8 respectively. 'In what ways can students become partners in the teaching and learning context?' and 'How can teaching and learning be further improved so that students can become partners?'

Figure 2. Comparison between students’ responses to question 2 and 8

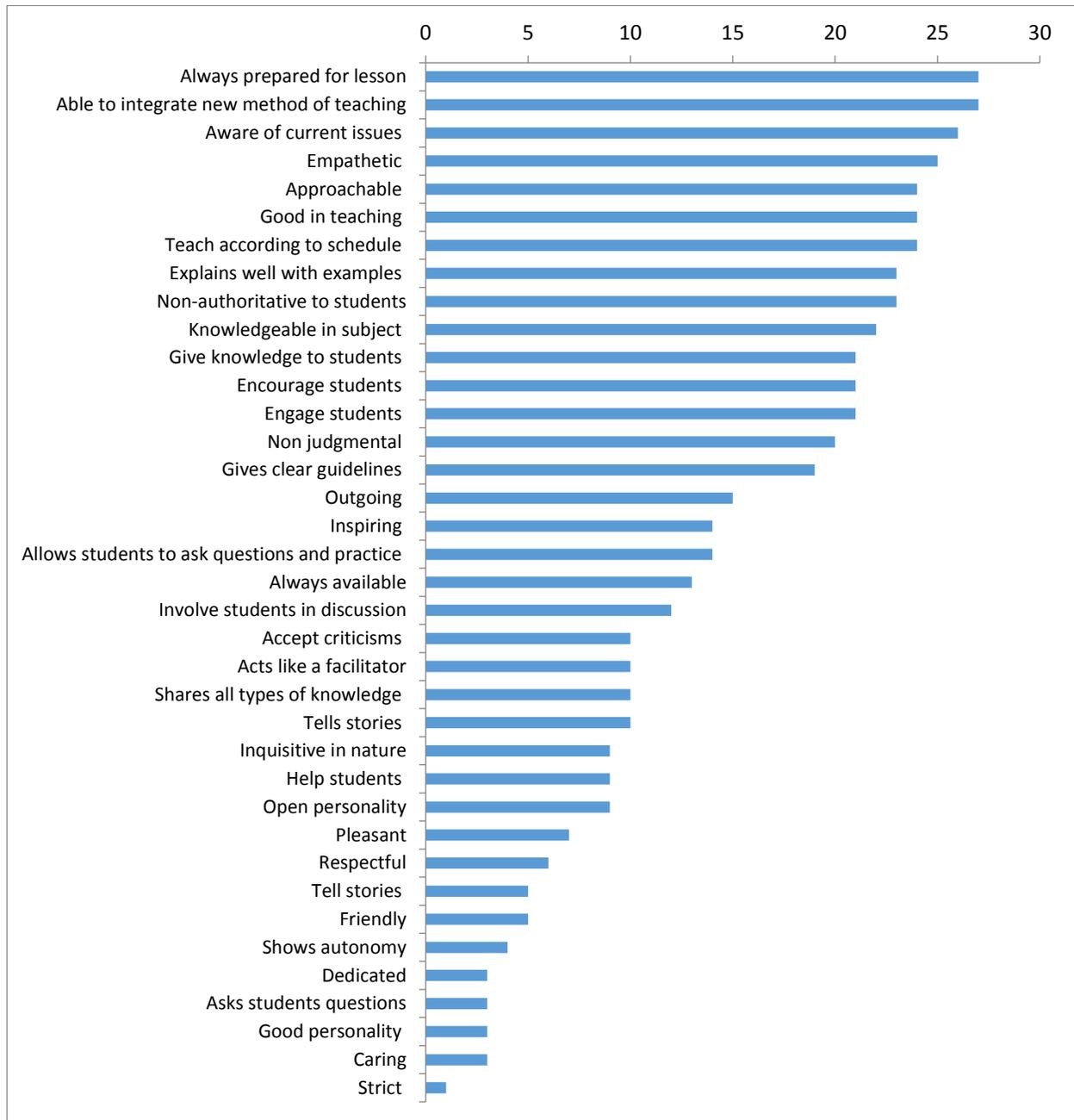


Note that the responses to these two questions serve as the core of the study, i.e., can students serve as partners? From the comparison shown, it appears that students have more or less the same things to say. The findings highlight two issues of utmost importance which are: a) student feedback needs to be consulted in terms of lessons, planning, syllabus, assignments, submission dates, and weightage and b) class activities need to involve group and pair work. Other issues raised by student preference, based on frequency counts, are as follows:

- Two way communication
- Allow students to learn from others (other class mates, students from other universities, conference)
- Allow students to decide and design their own assignments
- Provide online platform to allow students to give opinions and ideas
- Provide more hands-on communicative teaching to encourage students to be more independent
- Strengthen teacher-student relationship
- Give reading list earlier
- Students should be responsible for their own learning
- Involve students in teaching (some may be good in certain areas)
- Make students feel that they belong to the class
- Ensure student equality
- Do not grade students into categories
- Organise games for students
- Help students to be aware of teachers' roles
- Teachers must know how to teach
- Class should be student-centred

Figure 3. The kind of teachers that help students to learn

Question 3 asks students, ‘What kind of teachers help you to learn’ and it raised many desirable teacher/lecturer attributes. This finding is important because a lecturer’s personality can affect learning.



Malaysian undergraduates perceive learning to take place very highly in some orders. For instance, they claim to learn better:

- when lecturers are good in their respective disciplines,
- when lecturers have the knowledge,
- when lecturers are skilful in disseminating the knowledge, and
- when lecturers follow the schedules of teaching.

Malaysian undergraduates also expect lecturers to have certain attributes such as being emphatic, encouraging, friendly and approachable, helpful, respectful of students, outgoing and a good personality. These findings suggest that Malaysian undergraduates prefer lecturers to have the qualities of a good friend, a typical trait of the Millennials.

Figure 4. How lessons should be prepared

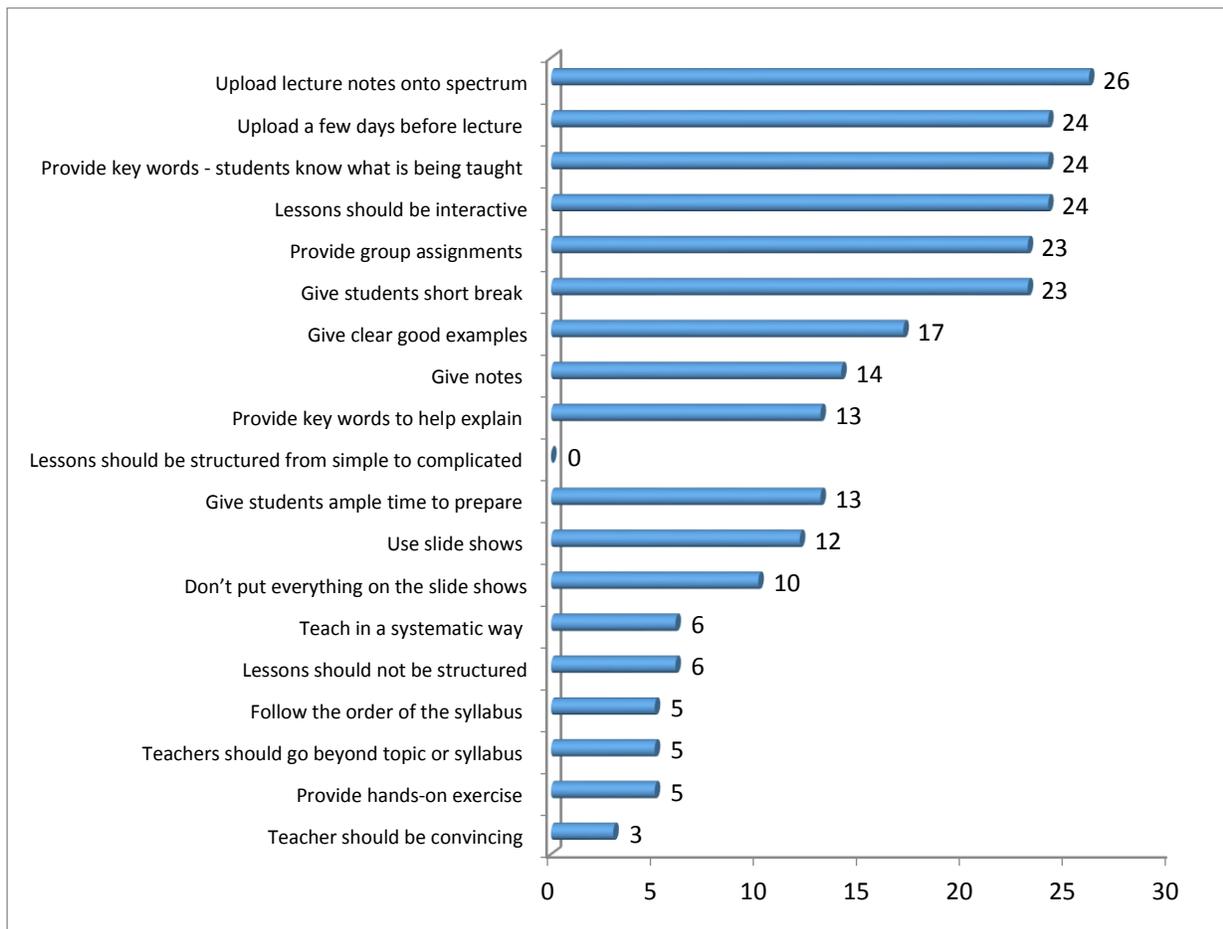
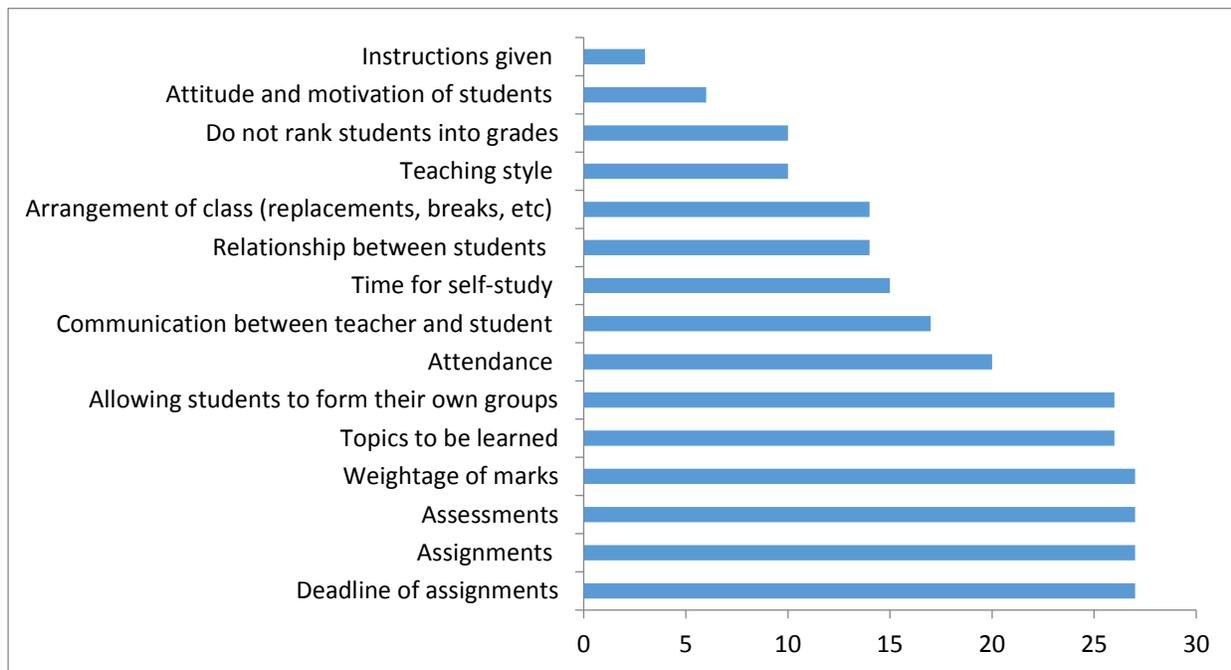


Figure 4 suggests that Malaysian undergraduates prefer lecture notes to be uploaded online (Spectrum) in time for them to use and prepare for class. They also indicate that providing them with key words would ease their learning process. More than half of the students also prefer group assignments and breaks especially, for classes that last two or three hours in a row. They also note that lessons should be structured from simple to complicated.

Figure 5. Class issues that should be negotiated with students



Question 6 provides an insight into the critical thinking ability of the students. Clearly, students have the means to detect issues which they could negotiate with lecturers. In Figure 5, majority of the Malaysian undergraduates are keen on negotiating for deadlines of their assignments followed by the types of assignments, assessments, weightage of marks, topics to be learnt, attendance and subsequently, the communication between lecturer and student. Half of the participants are keen on finding time for self-study, inter-relational rapport among themselves, arrangement of replacement classes, and teaching styles. More than a quarter insist on not ranking students according to grades, another typical trait of the Millennials.

Two other questions (9 and 10) were posed as interview questions. The aim of question 9 was to gauge if students noticed their importance to the university as a whole. A hundred

percent (100%) said none of their lecturers had ever told them that they are important to the lecturers. The aim of question 10 was to gauge their anxiety during the T/L process and their responses are indicated below:

- Too much information to process
- Afraid to ask the wrong question
- Topic is new
- Afraid of being seen as dominant or aggressive
- Question does not make sense
- Like to find answers on my own
- I am an introvert
- I cannot process the question in that short time, I need to think about it when I am alone
- Afraid of others staring at me
- Afraid to ask a question which others already know the answer
- Not good at expressing myself and don't want to be judged
- Afraid of being disliked by others
- I feel intimidated by people who are superior
- Not sure if the question I ask is relevant or not
- I forgot what the question was
- I feel intimidated if I ask question
- I don't want to make others look bad with my question
- I am not feeling comfortable in the class

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, the background and procedure for conducting classroom research were explained. Under data collection, it was also mentioned how rapport between lecturer and students was developed so as to facilitate classroom research. Reflections by the

participants were conducted over six classes and in week ten, data were collected in the classroom.

A thematic analysis was performed and categories were then identified and presented according to frequency counts. The analysis of seven questions were presented in graphs with question 2 and 8 being placed into one figure. Additional findings were extracted from interviews conducted of students and two colleagues. These were used to support some of the claims and observations.

The answers to the two research questions of 'How can learning in HE education be enhanced' and 'What factors can improve the learning environment for students in HE are discussed below. Overall, the findings of this study suggest that Malaysian undergraduates want a conducive learning environment. This environment should be a cool and relaxing atmosphere with bigger chairs and tables and competent lecturers who are good in their respective disciplines as well as take an interest in their students.

Malaysian undergraduates are able to contribute to their own learning when engaged as participants who can provide relevant feedback. As university customers, they can negotiate their own learning in terms of assignment deadlines, types of assessments, weightage of marks and anything that concerns their grades. This aspect of the engagement can give them more confidence in taking ownership of their own learning.

It was mentioned that most lecturers in public universities can be overwhelmed by many other responsibilities which are indicated in their annual KPIs which include teaching, supervision, research, publications, maintaining course files, and other non-academic matters. Perhaps these issues are the reasons why lecturers in Malaysian public universities were unable to find time to develop a good rapport with their students. Consequently, as lecturers strive to meet their own KPIs, they miss out on the opportunities to engage their students in the teaching and learning process. This oversight is a crucial factor that will determine how students learn because the personality of their lecturers can impact on their learning. Moreover, as adult learners, many of these students already have some exposure to other facets of life thus, they are capable of becoming intelligent learning partners in the

process, if given the opportunity and context to do so. However, for this to happen, lecturers need to give them space so that their views/voices can be heard. It is possible that the lecturers who are from another generation and have a different set of characteristics, have not come to understand the characteristics and needs of the Gen Y or Millennials. This has therefore, created a mismatch of teaching strategies with learning capabilities (see Ross-Fishcer, 2008; Sagor, 2000; Slavin., 2006; Strauss & Howe, 1997; Wilson & Gerber, 2008). It is possible that as the authority, lecturers are still traditional in their classroom approaches. Some could possibly be carrying an inflated ego of authority which creates a personality conflict between themselves and the Millennials. This can lead to a friction which could cause poor mutual understanding and so, affect the learning and teaching process. Nevertheless, if attention is given and a compromise can be reached, as is evidenced by this study, Millennials can be guided to acquire information for themselves and to teach each other. This is especially so when the learning environment becomes conducive enough for them to develop confidence. Both the lecturers' traits and the students' characteristics need to be understood to enhance learning through sharing. This study is confined to the responses drawn from a small fraction of participants hence, findings cannot be generalized. Further studies of a bigger population should be conducted to verify the findings and to make a stronger impact on higher education in this country.

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