

Dealing with Absenteeism in English classes at Takamatsu University

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Abstract

Takamatsu University is a 4 year institution in Japan that has been experiencing high levels of absenteeism in the English classes. In order to better assess the problem, this study focused on the following question: What motivates students to attend English classes at the university? A sample of 12 students out of the total population of 57 students enrolled in one instructor's English classes took part in the study by completing an anonymous questionnaire. Students were given a 24 hour period to think about and answer the research question and to give as much detail as possible. The results showed that nearly 100% of the students were motivated to attend classes if they could receive points toward their final grade for participation by attending, regardless of any other considerations that they may also have. It was noted that on top of offering points for attendance, instructors should make their policies of attendance clear and possibly do something to help students who have problems with attendance.

Dealing with Absenteeism in English classes at Takamatsu University

As an Instructor at Takamatsu University this author has been dealing with a crisis in the classroom in the recent past. The number of students failing to show up for class has increased enough to warrant the concern of the administrators, faculty and staff. In the 2003-2004 school year, a program was initiated to give students 20% of their final grade in classes based solely on attendance in order to curb this problem. But numbers are still not at 100%.

This study will answer the following question: What motivates students at Takamatsu University to come to English classes and participate in lessons?

Researchers have studied this topic from different angles. Some have implemented programs and analyzed them to see what it took to could get students to participate more in classes without involving students too directly in their analysis. In other words, they mainly used simple observation techniques. An early example of this would be research conducted by the National Association of School principals (Duckworth, 1988). This kind of research was modified and repeated by Ingram (2000). These studies used basic methods that mostly focused on having

administrators carefully monitor attendance as a way of controlling it in order to find out what motivated students to come to class.

Another approach has been to conduct experiments trying to analyze if just keeping track of attendance would motivate students. Many of these experiments involve having students sign in by themselves before starting a class (Johnson, 1995). Shimoff and Catania (2001) repeated this approach, and with the use of scientific method, clarified to the students what the procedure and reasoning was for their experiments. They proved that simply having the students sign brought them to class more often.

The other main approach to deal with this problem has been to have students the center of the resolution of the question. For example, Smith (1996) interviewed students to get their opinions and find out what their motivation factors were. Later, Kreps (1999) communicated in a dialectic fashion through peer groups in order to find out more about what motivated students in the peer groups to come to class.

Methods

Sampling

There are a total of 57 students enrolled in this author's English classes at Takamatsu University. 12 of these students are female. Steps were taken to get the highest possible external validity in a stratified random sampling. Table 1 details the sampling procedure. Lists of students in each year of study were obtained (freshmen through seniors). These lists were further delineated to reflect which students had an average of more than two absences in the previous semester and those who had an average of less than three absences in the previous semester. At this point, lists of names for each of these eight groupings were formed and the students on each list were numbered in alphabetical order. An online program called Research Randomizer (Urbaniak & Plous, 2003) was used to choose two students from each group based on the number each student was assigned in his/her respective group.

Since attention was made to keep all of the significant subgroups within the total population represented, it falls under the definition of a stratified sampling as described by Charles and Mertler (2002). Note that 12 females were considered to be a significant number to form a subgroup. However, none of them had problems with attendance. Still, because students with both good and bad attendance records would be represented at each grade level, the external

validity was kept at a high level and helped make the study more applicable to the general population of university students. However, external validity was adversely affected by the fact that the number of students sampled was still relatively low.

TABLE: 1 Sampling of students at Takamatsu University

	Freshmen		Sophomores		Juniors		Seniors	
	> 2	< 3	> 2	< 3	> 2	< 3	> 2	< 3
No. of absences	5	25	2	5	3	5	8	3
No. of students used for sample	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2

Design

The research question asked for students to expand on what motivates them to attend class. It was narrative in nature and that made it a qualitative study. Since the purpose was to depict people and conditions as they currently exist at Takamatsu University, it was clearly “Descriptive Research” as outlined by Charles and Mertler (2002, p.32).

The main threat to internal validity during this study was seen as uniquely Japanese. Japan is a very group-oriented society. When groups in Japan are brought together to discuss a topic, there is a great tendency to quickly jump to consensus (Wolferen, 1989). In order to counter this, the study called for students to fill out a questionnaire prior to the large group discussion that followed. The large group then focused on the different answers that individual members came up with on the questionnaire. This also proved to be a way to add triangulation into the study.

Furthermore, since subgroups of different grade levels reflected different levels of maturity and a length of history at the university, this kept the conditions within the selected group focused to the point of a general approach. This also shows how this study had an overlapping of both internal and external validity factors.

Measures

This study was a descriptive study that is qualitative in nature and therefore required a vast amount of narrative data. Therefore, the measures used reflect this kind of study:

The primary measure used for this study involved having students as the center of the study. The students were asked to give reasons why they choose to attend class under usual circumstances. The questionnaire took the form of an open-ended question: "What are factors that motivate you to attend class? Please try to be as specific as possible." According to Charles and Mertler (2002), this method of using open-ended questioning allows for more depth in the quality of data that you will get from participants as opposed to more structured formats of questioning.

Moreover, Both Smith (1996) and Kreps (1999) reported that having students as the center of a study that required an analysis of the problem of attendance as worthwhile. They both proclaim that analyzing data from the students' is better than just analyzing data from the instructors' or administrators' points of view.

This study was limited in the amount of time that was required to produce the final results. Since the question seemed significantly narrow, the results and analysis were reviewed by a colleague within the university as a method to keep the internal validity high.

Procedures

The procedures used in this study were very representative of a descriptive study that is qualitative in nature. The sampling method used was to find a number of students at Takamatsu University who had problems with attendance and an equal number who did not have problems with attendance.

Once the students were chosen, they were presented with a questionnaire that had one open-ended question: "What are factors that motivate you to attend class? Please try to be as specific as possible." The students were then given a 24 hour period in order to give them enough time to answer the questions. The students were assured confidentiality by not having to write their names on the questionnaires. They simply returned the questionnaires to the researcher's mailbox.

Since the procedure used was an open-ended question requiring the students to give their thoughts, feeling and opinions, the reliability and validity of the data collection instrument was not considered a major issue for this research.

The next step required a coding of the data followed by an analysis. In order to maintain high standards of validity for the study, a colleague who is a professor at Takamatsu University,

were asked to check the data and offer advice and opinions.

Since the research question only asked students to discuss their personal motivation for attending classes, the only variable was that some students indeed had varying reasons for deciding to attend classes or deciding not to attend classes.

Table: 2 Data codes and respective comments 1

Fear	Points	Interesting	Regardless	Morning	Rarely
I'm afraid to miss class.	we get points for attendance	If class is interesting, I will come.	I always go to class.	I can't wake up early and go to class.	I don't like class... I go only once or twice.
Maybe the teacher is angry if I don't come.	Part of our grade is based on attendance	the lecture style is good, I will come.	Students should go to class every time	I always oversleep.	I sometimes go to class.
Sometimes teachers will be angry if I miss class	I will come to class if the teacher gives me points	the class is interesting, so I go.	Don't we have to go to class?	Afternoon classes are better because I am awake.	My class attendance is very poor.
The teacher is scary if we don't go to class.	if attendance is required for your grade.	good lecture brings students	Attendance is a school rule.		
	The teacher gives us points to come to class.		I go to class every week.		
	only if we get points to come to class.				
	if we get points for attendance.				
	part of our final grade is for attendance				
	I want points for going to class.				
	We should get credit for attendance.				
	I will come to class if I get points every time.				

Table: 3 Data codes and respective comments 2

Sickness	Misunderstanding	Make-up	Check
I only miss class if I am sick	Sometimes the teacher doesn't explain the attendance policy.	We should be able to make-up a missed class	ometime teachers don't check attendance.
I don't go to class if I have a fever.			the teachers in big classes do not take attendance.
When I have a cold, I sometimes miss class.			

Results

Table 4 summarizes the results of our question: What are the main motivation factors for students at Takamatsu University deciding to attend classes? It also relates some secondary factors that might need to be considered when trying to think about what motivates students to attend classes.

Table: 4 Motivation and other factors for students to attend classes at Takamatsu University. (Total No. of respondents = 12)

Conditions	Number of respondents
Would attend if points were offered for attendance.	11
Would attend classes regardless of any other conditions.	5
Would attend if they felt the class was interesting.	4
Is afraid of the teacher if they do not attend class.	4
Has trouble getting up in time to attend classes.	3
Rarely attends class regardless.	3
Never attends class if they are sick.	3
Feels bad that teachers do not always check attendance.	2
Complained that teacher does not explain attendance policy well.	1
Said that students should be allowed to make up missed classes	1

The dominant theme is that students want to be awarded for their classroom attendance. This theme holds true even for those students who would attend class regardless of points for attendance, students who might have troubles getting up to make it to classes, or even students

who have personal difficulties making it to classes.

Other emerging themes seem to indicate the following:

1. Students want instructors to allow for times when they cannot make it class.
2. Students want the instructors to do things like check attendance and explain the attendance policy.

Discussion

From this research, the main answer to what motivates students to attend class is obvious: Nearly all students are motivated by receiving credit for their participation. No matter what other problems students have related to attendance, they are willing to come to class if they are given points that will effect they grade.

Furthermore, these findings seem to imply that the English instructors have not given students much support for their efforts, or a clear understanding of the system and how it works. Some students are actually scared of their instructors and what might happen if they do not come to class. Moreover, they want the policies for attendance clearly defined.

All of these findings agree with the research done by both Kreps (1999) and Smith (1996). They both showed that students want to have some feel of control and an understanding over the way the system works. They also showed overwhelmingly that students want some kind of reward and accountability for attendance.

This study was limited by the number of students that were involved in the study. But, the overwhelming number of students who said that they wanted credit for attendance still makes that a remarkable finding.

Finally, future studies should focus on finding what students feel is reasonable in terms of policies for attendance and/or student input in making attendance policies. This study also shows that there is room to research what might be done to make up missed classes, or otherwise help students who have problems with attendance.

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