

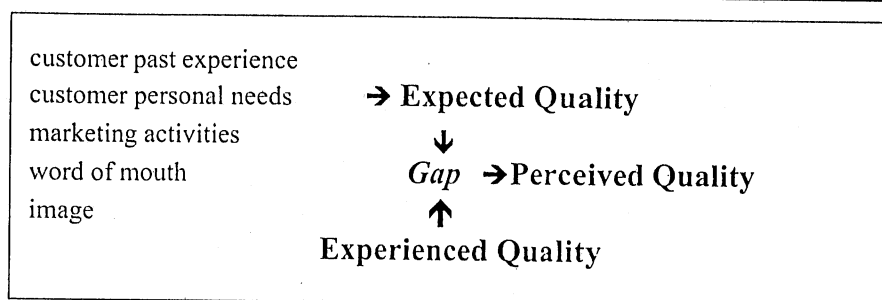
Perspectives on service in ELT operations

John Walker explores some of the implications of being part of a service industry.

The notion that ELT institutions are essentially service operations has gained some currency in the ELT literature (de Waal, 1994, Godfrey, 1994, Hirons, 1994, Pickering, 1994, Barlow, 1994, Savage, 1996, Walker, 1997). ELT professionals in commercial contexts are gradually being viewed not just as teachers but also as service providers and marketers (Barlow, 1994, Walker, 1998, Kingsley, 1998). Students are, likewise, increasingly being regarded not merely as language learners but also as paying customers who are entitled to expect quality service in terms of both the learning/teaching experience and the ELT service as a whole. The service management literature has over the years attempted to explain the nature of service quality by developing several classical dimensions which can also be used as a basis for measuring customer satisfaction. What are these dimensions and how applicable are they to the management and measurement of quality in ELT?

The Nature Of Service Quality And ELT

Within service management writing and research, service quality is widely regarded as what customers perceive it to be (e.g. Gronroos, 1990, Gummesson, 1991, Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, 1994). Perceived quality has been hypothesised as disconfirmation (Anderson and Fornell, 1994) - the discrepancy



between expected quality and experienced quality, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Customer Perceived Quality

(based on Gronroos, 1990 and Parasuraman et al., 1988)

Should a customer perhaps have unrealistic expectations of the quality of the service, he or she may be disappointed and perceive the service to be unacceptable. On the other hand, a customer may be pleasantly surprised when the experienced service quality actually exceeds what was expected. When experienced quality matches customer expectations, satisfaction is likely to result.

Expected Service Quality And ELT

The criteria that determine customer expectations of service quality can be applied in an ELT context as follows:

- **Customer past experience**
This would include the student's prior experience with the language as

well as perceptions of previously attended language courses, both in the home country and abroad, with the competition and/or with the same provider. Repeat custom could be an outcome of a positive experience for the student.

- **Customer personal needs**

While some students may not have well-developed preconceptions of what needs they expect their language course to fulfil, others will come with specific notions, for example in terms of ideal teacher characteristics, teaching methodology, study/learning level, desired proficiency level, ambience of the teaching venue, facilities, variety of leisure activities, host family, climate etc.

- **Marketing activities**

These may be centred on the activities of overseas agents for the language provider as well as any publicity material the provider chooses to distribute using print or electronic media. Providers are likely to be held to account by customers who perceive that the provider's operation does not match up to an overly-positive impression presented in a glossy

brochure or web site.

● Word-of-mouth

"Satisfied customers spread positive word-of-mouth that can increase sales levels" (Kingman-Brundage, 1994), while negative word-of-mouth can have the opposite effect. A study of overseas student perceptions of Australian higher education institutions found that over 50% of respondents regarded word of mouth either as extremely or very important in their selection of an institution (Soutar, McNeill and Lim, 1994). There is no reason to doubt that a similar situation exists as far as ELT services are concerned. Anecdotal evidence points to the phenomenon of a potential student's strong reliance on the perceived experience and opinion of "my friend", for instance, among students from some Asian countries.

● Image

This would include not only the image of the individual provider but also that of the town, the area and the country itself. It is likely that certain venues and locations are likely to go in and out of fashion with specific national groupings and/or age groups, while others (e.g. traditional English language learning venues such as Oxford) may enjoy more or less permanent status.

Although some of these criteria, e.g. customer past experience, may be outside the control of the ELT manager, an awareness of them might enable the manager to exercise some control on a customer's expectations of service quality, for example through marketing activities.

Perceived Service Quality And ELT

Perhaps the best known criteria of good (customer-) perceived service quality were synthesised by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) from the findings of a series of empirical and conceptual studies and Gronroos (1990) from an analysis of the service literature. These are the criteria that

Anecdotal evidence points to the phenomenon of a potential student's strong reliance on the perceived experience and opinion of "my friend"

would be expected to be inherent in the service provision when the customer's expectations are either fully met or exceeded. While both sets of criteria cover approximately the same ground, Gronroos's (1990) criteria have been chosen here for discussion of the ELT context together with Parasuraman et al's concept of tangibles.

Professionalism and Skills

The student perceives that the language institution offers a professional service based on the knowledge and skills of the service providers. Teaching staff would, for example, be expected to be trained, qualified and possess the appropriate experience. Administrative staff should be knowledgeable enough about both the provider's service delivery system and the local "scene" to be able to inform, advise and counsel students when necessary.

Attitudes and Behaviour

The language service providers display a friendly concern for the student's welfare and spontaneously assist to solve the student's problems. A common feature of service operations in general is that they are characterised by a series of individual interactions between service providers and customers, each encounter being referred to as a "moment of truth" (Normann, 1984) since it defines in the mind of the customer the quality of the service being provided (Fitzsimmons et al., 1994). ELT is typically a high contact service operation with students sometimes continuously

interacting with teachers, administrators, facilitators or host family members. Each of these moments of truth contributes to the overall mosaic which makes up the student's perception of the quality of the ELT service. The more service providers demonstrate a "service orientation" (Gronroos, 1990) during these encounters, through for example, courtesy, flexibility and the willingness to initiate service recovery (see below) when necessary, the more likely it is that customer satisfaction with the quality of the service will result.

Accessibility and Flexibility

Access to the ELT service operation is straightforward and it responds flexibly to the wishes and needs of the student. The former would imply not only that administrative procedures are uncomplicated and that the provider's offerings present no obstacle to the student but also that the venue is easily located and accessible in practical terms. The latter would imply that the provider is for example willing to offer the student optional solutions should, for example, either the language course or the homestay accommodation prove to be unsuitable.

Reliability and Trustworthiness

The student can rely on the service providers to keep promises and act in the best interests of the student. These dimensions are particularly important in the context of a client whose language deficits may oblige her to rely far more on her hosts for assistance and guidance than she might have to in a home situation. In addition, there should be a clear expectation that the service provider and the co-workers adopt an ethical orientation towards a visitor who is unfamiliar with the nuances, constraints and perils of the host culture.

Recovery

Whenever there is a breakdown in the service provision, the student can rely

service quality

on the providers to take prompt action to rectify the situation. Service recovery has been described as "emotional and physical repair" (Lewis, 1995, page 81) which has the potential to turn disgruntled customers into satisfied customers. It has been said to include (Lewis, 1995):

- **anticipation, prevention and identification of service failure points**

Student enquiry, enrolment and placement procedures are, for example, potential fail points. Enrolment difficulties may occur as a result of language difficulties and misperceptions on the part of the client of the extent of the language service actually being offered. Placement of a student in a class at a particular language proficiency level may be met with resistance by the student if he/she disagrees with the ELT provider's perception of his/her proficiency level.

- **making it easy to complain**

Setting up a harmonious complaints procedure for students may be a key issue, particularly for clients from specific cultures that tend to avoid face-to-face confrontations.

- **conducting research**

Carrying out formal surveys of client opinion on a very regular basis, for example weekly, may be vital. Many ELT students are teenagers or young adults who may be experiencing a range of difficulties in a strange culture and a new learning environment. Early recognition of such problems would assist an early resolution and enhance client satisfaction with the service.

- **analysing failures**

This would involve, for example, conducting feedback/debrief sessions with staff on issues such as student withdrawals or homestay problems.

- **measuring performance against standards**

This could be done through the establishment of a customer satisfaction index based, perhaps, on quality service dimension determined by the ELT provider and based on past client and teacher surveys.

Reputation and Credibility

The service operation can be trusted, gives value for money, performs well and shares the values of the customer. In other words, the ELT provider lives up to both the word-of-mouth reputation and the image presented in publicity materials. The actions of the service providers are generally in the student's interest and in line with the goals and ambitions of the student. Some ELT managers may find this last point somewhat idealistic but providers who do keep in touch with student opinion and encourage feedback ought to have a fairly good idea of customer values, at least in terms of their own organisation.

Tangibles

In a largely intangible domain (as services generally are), Parasuraman et al (1988) maintain that customers tend to lean on the few available tangibles to provide some indication of the quality of the service operation. An English language student, for example, is likely to place considerable emphasis on, initially, the quality of marketing materials, then the physical make-up of the institution, decor, facilities, furnishings and equipment, facilities such as the self-access centre or the student common room, the physical appearance and dress of administrative and teaching staff, textbooks and teaching materials, as well as certificates, diplomas and other awards.

From the examples and applications discussed, it would appear that these classical service quality dimensions might well be applicable in an ELT setting and awareness of them might be of some use to the ELT manager concerned about the quality of their

service offering. However, the actual extent of their applicability may not be 100% clear and this is addressed further below.

Measuring Service Quality in ELT

A useful step in attempting to improve quality is attempting to measure it, i.e. trying to obtain a clear picture of customer satisfaction with the quality of the service provided. One of the major problems in measuring customer satisfaction lies in the fact that since it is based on customer perceptions, i.e. on largely subjective insights which are influenced by such dimensions as those discussed above, accurate measurement can be problematic.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988, 1991, 1994) have spent much of the past decade attempting to develop and refine a generic approach to the measurement of customer satisfaction with service quality based on gap analysis. Their SERVQUAL instrument consists of a two-stage 22-item questionnaire based on five service dimensions, namely tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. SERVQUAL was designed to measure not only the gap between customers' expectations and perceptions of service quality but also the gaps between the expectations/perceptions of service providers and management and those of customers. Used in its complete form, SERVQUAL is claimed to have the potential to provide a detailed and comprehensive picture of the various quality dimensions of a service operation.

SERVQUAL has been applied by researchers to the measurement of quality in a number of service industries, for example, health (Reidenbach and Sandifer-Smallwood 1990), banking / finance (Lewis, 1989), retail (Richard and Allway, 1993), hospitality (Saleh and Ryan, 1991), professional services (Bojanic, 1991) as well as higher education (Ford, Joseph and Joseph, 1993) and overseas student perceptions of higher

education (Soutar, McNeill and Lim, 1994) but it has not yet, to the writer's knowledge, been used in the area of ELT services.

The findings from these various SERVQUAL studies have been subjected to rigorous quantitative analysis with sometimes controversial results. Not all researchers agree about how the expectation versus perception model can be operationalised for survey purposes and various SERVQUAL "clones" and alternative questionnaire formats are still being trialled.

One fairly recent, extensive study (Danaher and Haddrell, 1996) claimed respectable levels of reliability, validity and managerial value by using a simple disconfirmation questionnaire format that has been recommended by a number of researchers (e.g. Devlin, Dong and Brown, 1993, Rust, Zahorik and Keiningham, 1994). Each dimension of the service was addressed by getting customers to select one of three responses, as in the example:

SELF-ACCESS FACILITIES

better than I expected -
about as I expected -
worse than I expected

It may well be that a questionnaire using such a format and based on the sort of dimensions discussed above would be of use to ELT managers in attempting to assess student perceptions of quality in the ELT operation. However, as previously suggested, attempting to implement such expectations-perceptions models in an ELT context may not be entirely straightforward, for several reasons.

First, doubts have been raised about the absolute validity of such questionnaires in a cross-cultural context. As Triplett, Yau and Neal (1994), for example, point out, the concept of service quality may vary across cultures. Since instruments such as SERVQUAL were developed principally in and for the American market and trialled mainly in western societies, the concepts it is based on - such as assurance and reliability - may not be as relevant for

customers from non-western societies. While little work has been done to trial SERVQUAL in cross-cultural contexts, one study at least (Snow, Bartel and Cullen, 1996) has shown that customers from different ethnic groups respond in a markedly different manner when surveyed on the same set of service quality dimensions. Since the customers of ELT services are generally from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds it may well be somewhat premature to assume that the traditional service quality dimensions do in fact apply in their entirety. It is clear that further research is required in this area to clarify whether or not this is the case.

A related area of difficulty lies within the dimension of language competence. While overseas students with high levels of proficiency in English may have few problems responding to such questionnaires, students at lower levels may not be able to appreciate the exact meanings or nuances of the survey items. This could be partly addressed by using the simplified disconfirmation format described above but a more appropriate solution might be to have the questionnaire translated into the student's mother tongue. Again, this is not without its problems: issues of the exact translatability of specific concepts arise, as well as the costs involved in doing this for a multinational student body within one institution. This latter difficulty might be solved through the development of a generic questionnaire in several languages which can be made available to a wide range of ELT institutions.

Another issue relates to student perceptions of teaching quality. As

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Barnett (1992) succinctly puts it (writing, albeit, in a higher education context): "Clients of a professional service are not necessarily the best judges of the service they receive." (p 17). While such a comment appears to contradict the view that quality of service is based solely on customer perceptions, it may have some validity when applied specifically to a professional service such as teaching. The implication is that while the student's perception of this part of the service must certainly be acknowledged and acted upon, a more professional assessment of teaching (e.g. peer observation, self-assessment, third-party audit) may also be required to complement that of the student and provide a more comprehensive, multi-faceted view of this aspect of the service provision.

Recommendations for Further Research

It appears, therefore, that while models and dimensions of traditional service quality management may indeed be translatable to the ELT context, some questions remain when it comes to measuring customer's perceptions of the quality of the service offered. In particular, research is needed into the question of whether the classical dimensions of service quality actually apply in their entirety in a cross-cultural context like ELT. Similarly, it would be helpful to be able to develop a standard instrument which can reliably be used to survey customer opinion across the wide spectrum of ELT operations. Such a standard instrument would not only bring with it savings from economies of scale; it would enable individual ELT operations to measure themselves against each other and to identify more clearly areas for improvement of their service provision.

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