

Good Reasons to Use Psychological Questionnaires in Enhancing Teaching English as a Foreign Language

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ABSTRACT

This article argues for using general psychological questionnaires as part of teaching English as a foreign language. It is claimed that questionnaires, particularly psychological ones, enjoy many of the characteristics of effective instructional material, raise foundational learning-related awarenesses, can function as the ground for meaningful and authentic tasks, and help learners develop academic autonomy. Teachers can easily prepare questionnaire-based material and be sure that it is both engaging and conducive to language learning as well as to other learnings which may be highly relevant to personal and academic development. A survey which was conducted to empirically explore the perception of a group of English learners about the appropriateness and effect of using questionnaires as language learning material is very briefly reported as part of the argument for this teaching strategy. Some limitations of the proposed idea are also mentioned.

Keywords: English as foreign language; language instructional material; learner engagement; psychological questionnaires

INTRODUCTION

Although there is currently no dearth of good language teaching materials (e.g., fiction, non-fiction, representative snap shots from life), they are mostly good in similar ways and some gaps are left unattended to. It is felt that in spite of decades of theoretical focus on the learner, what drives the choice of material is either the fulfillment of everyday needs— economy, job, and business— or the satisfaction of pleasure needs. But language learners, who, more often than not, are young projects in the making, have also other needs and meta-needs related to their personal growth and general knowledge development, which may not apparently match with the immediate goals of the courses. They can be capitalized on as means of reaching language teaching goals or should be taken care of as grass-roots cognitive or affective elements of linguistic and communicative competence.

The purpose of this article is to make a case for using questionnaires, particularly psychological questionnaires, as English teaching material. In arguing for this idea, I have had in mind classic, language teaching issues, overlapping as they are, such as the importance of

context and meaningfulness, philosophy and goals of ELT, learners' engagement, the relation between language and content, the needs, motivation, and interest of learners, authenticity and authentication, scaffolding and comprehensibility, the importance of having an ecological perspective for sustainable learning, and the importance of raising awareness about language and language learning.

It is hoped that the juxtaposition of these considerations in support of the questionnaire as instructional material will be compelling reasons for the embracement of this highly versatile and user-friendly tools to achieve substantial portions of linguistic and non-linguistic curricular goals. To further buttress the argument, having elaborated on the above-mentioned issues, a brief report of a lexical frequency analysis of a number of popular questionnaires is provided as well as an elaboration on the linguistic characteristics of questionnaires. Some limitations and snags in this idea are also briefly discussed from an instructional perspective.

LINGUISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF QUESTIONNAIRES

1. Doing questionnaires can furnish various awarenesses of high educational value

It is established now that having awareness of a domain affects behavior and orientation regarding that domain (e.g., Cohen, 1998). Regarding language, language learning and language use, learners' awareness about human mind, cognition and emotions, interpersonal relations, group dynamism, and sociopolitical realities can be quite instrumental, particularly if they realize where they are standing and how they are faring as a result of the new insights. This awareness-raising is truly learner-centered as learners are not told what to do; they are just given options.

It stands to reason to argue that such awareness provides a clear orientation with respect to language learning goals. In answering items about such issues as perfectionism, delayed gratification and language learning strategies, learners have the opportunity to embark, at a grass roots level, on relevant reflection on language learning tasks, strategies of language use, and the nature of macro and micro language skills they are dealing with. Flexibly, the process can be with or without guidance and facilitation from a teacher.

Self-awareness, language awareness, learning-mechanism awareness, strategy awareness, sociopolitical awareness, as relevant aspects of foreign language learning, can be targeted through well-chosen questionnaires. There are many good questionnaires which are designed to elicit learners' strategies in language use, language learning and cognitive styles. In addition to raising awareness about language and language learning, these questionnaires can cue learners to effective strategies or strategies that better appeal to them. Interested learners are expected to try some of the options in real life. The questionnaires can be very general, like Oxford Strategy Inventory for Language Learners or very specific, such as a questionnaire dealing with aspects of dictionary use.

The questionnaires can be about self-image or levels of self-confidence, causing intrapersonal soul-searching, self-assessment, and new decisions and beliefs about the amount of necessary personal energy and time investment on language learning. They can be about attributional features and locus of control, which may result, albeit in a subtle way, in second

thoughts and affect learners' perceptions and views of why they succeed or fail. Without involving learners in theoretical technicalities, questionnaires can bestow much information about the mechanism of memory, learning, and language learning.

Even if a questionnaire is not directly targeting an aspect of language or learning, learners are likely to extend the concepts beyond what is targeted by the questionnaire items; thus, growth happens in multiple relevant areas. However, in preparing questionnaire-based material, teachers and practitioners had better consider the immediate awareness needs of learners and use relevant questionnaires so that more awareness needs are covered in a balanced way in the cognitive and affective domains. In so doing, teachers will make sound foundations for foreign language learning possible to form.

2. Doing Questionnaires can help the personal growth of learners

Academic programs may aim at narrow-angle specific objectives or wide-angle broad goals. With the former, the program wants to fulfil the practical, immediate needs of the learners, a process which some scholars (e.g., Widdowson, 1983; Spack, 1988) have called training. Here, the point of learning is to meet certain clearly defined external demands of the vocational market or other contexts, an approach which we may refer to as a factory model of teaching. However, the aim of a sustainable English-teaching program should not be merely to train technicians and technocrats who are proficient in English (Coffey, 1984), but to provide learners with a general capacity to enable them to cope with unnamed eventualities.

To achieve this, the balanced curriculum usually also aims at other growth and development goals for learners beyond the confinements of the subjects at hand. Whether it is secondary level or tertiary level, the responsible curriculum is concerned with more than training objectives, and a "factory view" of learning and aims at educating well-rounded, open-minded learners, who are fully functioning citizens in their respective spheres and lead healthy personal and social lives. For such general goals, questionnaires can contribute noticeably by either directly conveying relevant information, raising questions in learners' minds, and provoking reflection or by being a springboard for group discussions and sharing views. The material can be from a hope scale: "I meet the goals that I set for myself", a happiness scale: "I am not particularly optimistic about the future", or The Big Five Personality Inventory: "I am not interested in other people problems". Such practice would respect Chomsky (2000), who suggests our educational efforts should not be reduced to instrumental approaches and be characterized as mindless drills and exercises in preparation for exams which match the requirements of the market.

Interestingly, if we consider the nature of most questionnaire items, where there are no correct or incorrect answers, we see that such a curricular ingredient fits well with an existential postmodern philosophy of education, which emphasizes that there is no absolute truth and disputes the certainty of scientific or objective explanations of reality. As human being each of us faces the central task of finding our own answers to important questions of life (Parkay Stanford, 2010). Questionnaires can serve as an existential workground for learners to expand their understanding of themselves and human affairs.

The more clearly language learners envision who they are as language learners, the more

detailed and encouraging their guide to the future will be (Gregersen et al., 2014). A clear forward-propelling vision of self will translate into a sort of roadmap, motivating specific performance (MacIntyre, Mackinnon, & Clément, 2009). Language learners' sense of self plays a central role in guiding their behaviors and approaches toward learning language because "it connects together many other aspects of their psychology such as their beliefs, motivation, affective responses, self-regulatory competence, and language use" (Mercer, 2011, p. 58).

3. Doing Questionnaires is a meaningful and authentic task and causes engagement and interaction

Using meaningful material means using examples of language produced by native speakers for real purposes rather than using language produced and designed solely for classroom purposes (Willis, 1990). It is obviously worthwhile for the students to have meaningful experience in classroom, to make language learning an educational process of self-development and discovery as well as learning a language tool (Cook, 1981).

However, as Cook (1981) goes on to remind us, some authentic materials strike non-native speakers or students with horror. One reason is the density of cultural and situational references. Without suffering very much from culture or context-boundedness, completing questionnaires is consistent with the widespread emphasis and advocacy of authenticity by language teaching experts. It is a task which is purposeful, presents useful vocabulary and frequent forms, and provides engaging text-processing opportunities. In fact, a set of activities based on questionnaire completion has the potential of providing different types of authenticity – learner, material and task—mentioned by Widdowson (1990) as a favorable condition of effective language learning. Questionnaires represent real texts, give learners experience with real life application of English language, are concerned with personally relevant issues, and hence have much emotional engagement potential.

As authentic language teaching material and tasks and successful simulations of real life issues, questionnaires which immediately relate to learners' personal lives and emotions are sure to provoke real emotions and create engagement. The person who is asked to respond to "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing" on a Likert scale, cannot react just mechanically, but with all his emotions no matter what they are.

4. Being involved in doing questionnaires can help learner autonomy and self-regulation

A big problem which bugs language teaching programs is a lack of orientation in the learners. Learners come to classes with unrealistic expectations from teachers and programs and little by little they are disillusioned as their expectations are flouted. In such settings, which are usually deficient in terms of instructional infra-structure and support in the general context, developing investing self-regulated learners with clear orientations may be an urgent need. Using appropriate questionnaires and doing questionnaire-based tasks can be one way to induce some orientation in learners and help them find the path to or hasten their journey to autonomy and self-regulation. In fact, it can be claimed that such an attempt may go a long way in developing the "L2 motivational Self-System" because the awareness that doing questionnaires brings about

cannot but affect both the ought self and ideal self—two defining elements in the motivational mechanism elaborated by Dörnyei (see, for example, Dörnyei, 2009; Dörnyei & Rayan, 2015). In fact, Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014) expressly emphasize the facilitating motivational effects of envisioning and anticipating future states.

5. Questionnaires enjoy learning friendly linguistic features and create affordances in several areas of language learning

Although a systematic analysis of questionnaires as a text type has not been carried out yet to my knowledge, a cursory examination reveals certain linguistic features and general patterns in them. While, in the absence of research-based evidence, any reference to their specific grammatical, lexical and discourse features should be acknowledged to be impressionistic, one can cautiously mention some tendencies and patterns based on accumulated experience with questionnaires. A questionnaire is a coherent and unified text which for the most part consists of sentences arranged list-wise with few intersentential link words and purports to explore the state of certain constructs in the respondents or seek their opinions on certain issues. To do so, it avoids grammatical and vocabulary complexity. Because of the highly specific goals of the questionnaires, the constructions, vocabulary, and structures used in them are generally frequently repeated.

To give a taste of the linguistic features -of classical Likert types, Table 1 below displays the output of the analysis of a small corpus of 34 general interest questionnaires, comprising a total of 22150 words. (These questionnaires were completed in and/or outside the class during a freshman reading course-- see also Reason 7 below.) While this output is specific to the lexical makeup of the source questionnaires, it can give hints on some general patterns of occurrence and frequency.

Table 1
A General Profile of 34 Likert-type questionnaires

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1. **Word Tokens (total word count):** 22150
 2. **Word Types:** 2642
 3. **Word Families:** 1619
 4. **The most frequent 10 words:** I(1332), to(795), the(622), a(478), of(443), in(437), my(361), you(311), me(287), and(258)
 5. **N-Gram Analysis Results (3-grams):** 2900 items, two times and above; 970, three times and above; 540, four times and above; 335, five times and above; 220, six times and above; 142, seven times and above; 112, eight times and above; 83, nine times and above; 60 items, ten times and above
 6. **The most frequent meaningful 3-grams:** but other adults (49); I do not (30); when I am (21); I try to (17); important to me (17); true for me (16); would like to (16); am willing to (155); about English culture (14); some adults feel (13)
 7. **N-Gram Analysis Results (4-grams):** 1822 items, two times and above; 510, three times and above; 250, four times and above; 140, five times and above; 87, six times and above; 42, seven times and above; 35, eight times and above; 20, nine times and above; 14, ten times and above

8. **The most frequent meaningful 4-grams:** I do not know (17); I am willing to (15); but other adults are (4); no right or wrong (11); I would like to (10); it will help me (10); right or wrong answers (10); role of the teacher (10)
9. **Comparison with 1964 words in the General Service List (GSL)**
 - a. shared with the GSL: 1630 tokens; 918 families
 - b. Unique to GSL: 1027 tokens; 1020 families
 - c. Unique to questionnaires : 3502 tokens; 701 families
10. **Comparison with 570 words in the Academic Word List (AWL)**
 - a. shared with AWL: 1727 tokens; 240 families
 - b. Unique to AWL: 900 tokens; 331 families
 - c. Unique to questionnaires: 7724 tokens; 1379 families

Notes: To obtain the information above these programs were used: *AntConc* (version 3.4.3), Anthony (2014); *The compleat lexical tutor v.8*, Cobb (2015).

The features which questionnaires present can be both liabilities and weaknesses and assets and affordances. For instance, repetition of vocabulary and constructions may mean boredom or practice and recycling of learning. Teachers and material developers can counter the shortcomings and misgivings by taking learners realities and needs into account in adopting and adapting questionnaires. A questionnaire which includes 35 items, many of which being reversed items or paraphrases of the previous (lie detectors), can be shortened to 20 or fewer items, considering the repetitive items, the linguistic challenge of items and the need for the recycling of the target vocabulary and constructions. The audience of the questionnaire can sometimes also be a guide for selection. Questionnaires targeting native speakers tend to be written in language which may be challenging for learners while those which deal with learning issues and address learners are usually of lower difficulty. It seems there are opportunities for lexical and structural variety by choosing questionnaires from various domains and by including questionnaires with different styles of presentation and levels of linguistic difficulty

6. Questionnaires are highly practical and versatile, readily available, and easy to prepare and use

As a fascinating feature, particularly for the busy and snowed-under teacher, the idea of using questionnaires for language teaching is a highly practical one. Questionnaires are abundantly and readily available from the public domains in wide variety, virtually on every significant issue of interest to learners. There is little risk of copyright infringement, and in case there is, it can be easily avoided as questionnaires are plentiful and reliability and validity are not serious issues here. Many questionnaires can be used with minor modifications of their original published versions. In fact, questionnaires are reading comprehension tasks with inbuilt context, text, and questions, and all the trappings of comprehension passages and comprehension check questions, with little pressure for correctness.

Even if there are areas of concern and interest to teachers or students for which there are no satisfactory questionnaires available, it can be just a breeze to reformat seminal statements from that domain in questionnaire format, Likert-type being the first alternative. In fact, this is a

frequently used strategy by material developers, who hunt statements from the body of target passages and pit readers against true/false statements.

Questionnaires are also easy to use. Because language learners are likely to have already been exposed to similar material, not much briefing is needed. Again, what is at issue here is not accuracy and reliability, and trustworthiness of answers but learners' attention to and noticing and processing of language. In fact, the processability of input (e.g., Pienemann, 1998), and the crucial role of noticing and attention to the linguistic input (e.g., Schmitt, 2001; Van Patten & Cadierno, 1993) are issues which take center stage at most SLA discussions and theories.

7. There seems to be empirical evidence to support using questionnaires in language teaching

To explore the effect of using questionnaires for language teaching, the author designed and administered a 17-item Likert questionnaire toward the end of a course, which used 34 psychological questionnaires as part of the instructional material (See Appendix A). Forty English learners (n = 40) including 33 females and seven males aged 20-24 took part in the study. These learners were all Iranian with Persian as their native language. The items in the teacher-designed questionnaire asked about learners' sense of purpose and interest in doing questionnaires for language learning, their relevance to language learning, and their effect on language proficiency. The participants answered the items after they studied two instruction packages in their reading comprehension course: (1) *Discovering Fiction: A Reader of American Short Stories* (Kay & Gelshenen, 2001) and (2) a booklet of 34 level-appropriate questionnaires compiled and edited by the teacher (this author). It was made clear to the learners that they should answer the questions relative to the instructional packages that they experienced and other material typically used for language learning. The overall Chronbach alpha was 0.82, which is enough reassurance about the reliability and internal consistency of the questionnaire items. Table 2 summarizes how students responded to the items in the fields covered by the questionnaire.

Table 2
 The combined frequencies and average percentages of responses about studying questionnaires for language learning¹

	Strong disagreement	Moderate disagreement	neutral	Moderate agreement	Strong agreement
Being an interesting activity (4 items)	7(4.37%*)	13(8.5%)	21(13.12%)	78(48.75%)	39(24.37%)
Being at least as effective/interesting/appropriate as stories (5 items)	14(7%*)	49(24.5%)	50(25%)	61(30.5%)	25(12.50%)
Being more appropriate than current material (1 item)	4(10%*)	7(17.5%)	8(20%)	12(30%)	8(20%)
Positively affecting language proficiency (2 items)	2(2.5%)	1(1.25%)	16(20%)	47(58.75%)	14(17.50%)

Being relevant to language learning (4 items)	3(1.9%*)	19(11.87%)	30(18/75%)	82(51.25%)	22(13.75%)
Raising self-awareness (1 item)	1(2.5%)	4(10%)	4(10%)	17(42.50%)	14(35%)

¹ Overall Chronbach alpha = 0.82

**Cases where the percentages do not add up to 100 are because of missing responses.*

As can be understood from Table 2, there is enough support for using psychological questionnaires in an English teaching program from a group of English learners who had enough exposure to such material. Questionnaires were perceived as interesting, relevant, effective, and consequential material, which bring about self- and other awarenesses and operate on a par with stories as standard instructional tools. True, these limited results cannot warrant that questionnaires have all the potentials of such standards instructional material as stories and non-fiction prose texts. However, there is much anticipation that, if chosen wisely for the right occasion, and applied properly, questionnaires may appeal to a wide range and good number of language learners. Moreover, they may cover some areas of learners' needs which are left out by other material.

Some caveats

This article emphasizes the educational potentials and affordances of questionnaires as methodologically sound content among a wealth of other content, e.g., stories, poetry, jokes, games, sports-texts, inspirational passages, quotations, scientific selections. With the absence of empirical evidence, there is no claim of superiority to other instructional strategies and the idea is offered not as a cure-all but to add to the already rich tool-kit of the foreign language teacher. A result of such mindset should be some caution as not to overuse this tool. While moderate doses of questionnaires can bring about engaged language practice and lead to interesting topical discussions, it is very likely for the language teacher to receive negative reactions from learners if all or too large a bulk of material and tasks come from questionnaires. Moreover, questionnaires and questionnaire items should be selected and adapted in light of students' language ability, knowledge, personal experiences and preferences.

The privacy of learners should be respected at all stages. Questionnaires which include very sensitive content or may cause embarrassment had better be avoided and every attempt should be made not to pressurize learners to self-disclose and share their answers against their will.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that this introductory suggestion is in need of elaboration and development and the claims as to its usefulness ultimately cry for further empirical support. It should be remembered that, even if the usefulness of questionnaires is established, the effect on learning and relationship with key affective factors in learning are not linear but moderated by learner-related and/or contextual variables. As a first step, professionally designed questionnaires on different domains can be compiled and tested at different proficiency levels. Researching learner's interests and significant intervening factors can be promising.

CONCLUSION

Considering the global scene and needs, it is high time ELT buttressed its professionalism and raised its standards by going beyond short-term language-training goals and purposes and focused on more far-reaching purposes which included identity development, global citizenship and sustainable education.

Using questionnaires can result in different types of awarenesses and give language learners a sense of orientation particularly in their academic life. The awareness and orientation thus obtained can be conducive to personal growth on the one hand and self-regulation and autonomy in language learning on the other hand.

Moreover, the linguistic and discorsal features which questionnaires enjoy make them an attractive pedagogical option, which can support the language textbook and enhance and substantiate the language-teaching task. Questionnaire-based practice-books and reformatted glossed questionnaires can be promising options for language teachers to attempt at.

All these said about the usefulness of this idea, the hope of the author is that other language teachers will also find it applicable and of some value and will add their own ideas to increase its usefulness.

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APPENDIX A

Selected Questionnaire Items

The English Learning Value of Doing Psychological and Educational Questionnaires

Please indicate how far you agree with the following statements about using questionnaires for learning English. If you agree strongly Circle Extremely True; if you strongly disagree circle Extremely Untrue; and if you have no idea circle Neither True nor Untrue.

3. I did the Questionnaires with interest.

Extremely Untrue Somewhat Untrue Neither True nor Untrue Somewhat True Extremely True

4. Other types of materials available in our context are more appropriate for language learning than questionnaires.

7. Stories are more appropriate for English learning than Questionnaires.

8. Questionnaires are more appropriate for English learning than stories.

10. I have a sense of purpose when I study Questionnaires for language learning.

12. Doing Questionnaires helps me know myself better.

17. Questionnaires can offer some learning benefits to learners of English.