iatefl

ELT MANAGEMENT

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ELT MANAGEMENT SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP

April 2009 Issue 40

www.iatefl.org

Developing a teacher appraisal system through action research

Marie McArdle reflects on her attempts to create an appraisal scheme that is both formative and summative.

Teacher appraisal can be a thorny issue for teachers and their academic managers. One area in particular which has led to ongoing debate is whether or not it is possible to successfully design and implement a teacher appraisal system which is both formative and summative.

This paper focuses on the practical development of a dual function teacher appraisal system in an EFL school. Firstly, the background to setting up the appraisal system will be outlined. Then action research will be defined and explored. The paper will continue with a description of the framework used to conduct the action research and explore the notions of formative and summative appraisal.

Background
My workplace is a busy language school which has undergone rapid expansion in a relatively short period of time. As Director of Studies for over 4 years I have witnessed the school expand from a school with a capacity for 70 adult students to one which can cater for up to 290 students. Such expansion meant that changes were necessary in terms of the overall management and organisation of the academic department.

In 2005 I undertook a Masters in Education, for which I had to conduct a piece of research. Reflective practice in the work-place was continually promoted throughout this course, and we were encouraged to find an area within our workplace in need of improvement and to conduct research in this area.

My own reflection led to the realisation that a number of areas were in need of change and improvement. One

such area was teacher observation. At that stage teacher observations were conducted annually. As an academic manager, I was unhappy with the way they were conducted, why they were conducted and the lack of learning outcomes.

My initial research question was: How do I improve the current system of teacher observation in my school?' Once a research question emerged, the next step was to identify a research strategy which would best answer the question. Action research, which is aimed at real practitioners in the workplace, became an obvious strategy.

What is action research?
McNiff (2002) defines action research, often referred to as practitioner-based research or self-reflective practice, as "a term which refers to a practical way of looking at your own work to check that it is as you would like it to be". For McNiff, action research has three main values; self-reflection, open-endedness and collaboration. These values were important for my research because self-reflection and collaboration with the teaching staff led to a new appraisal system being created by the teachers rather than being imposed on the teachers.

The open-ended characteristic of action research was also appealing because it did not start with a hypothesis, just the research question already mentioned. This question subsequently became more refined:

'How do I create a teacher appraisal system in my school that can address both formative and summative appraisal?'

Developing a framework for action research
McNiff (2002) states that there is no one correct way to view action research. Only by doing some action research, will the actual the meaning of the research 'emerge'. When deciding on how to conduct this action research project, I followed an eight-stage process set out by Cohen et al. (2000). This basic framework can be summarised as follows:

1. Identification of perceived problem.
2. Preliminary discussions with interested parties.
3. Literature review for informed practice.
4. Possible modification of initial problem.
5. Selecting research procedures.
6. Evaluation of the procedures.
7. Implementation.
8. Interpretation.

Identification of perceived problem
The teacher observation system operated in the following way; in my role as Director of Studies I observed the teachers once a year in their classroom performance, as required by ACELS (the branch of the Department of Education and Science in Ireland which governs accredited EFL schools). The system was unsatisfactory and evoked negative connotations amongst teachers for various reasons. Firstly, the observation itself was not related to pay or job security. Secondly, the observation did not lead to any professional development goals as there was no follow-up or support. It was perceived as a process performed for the sake of the process. The teaching staff viewed it as a 'check-up' system with little value on actual teacher progress or development, so they usually conducted the lesson according to how they thought the observer would want them to teach, thus defeating the purpose of practical teacher assessment.

A further need for change was compounded by the fact that the system of observation did not relate to other systems in place in the school which monitored quality and accountability.

Preliminary discussions with interested parties
As action research is collaborative in nature, the proposal to change the observation system was put forward at a teachers' meeting. This proposal was met with enthusiasm as the teachers wanted the system to change and were very open to the idea of this being done in collaboration with a representative teacher group. The

need for change was also welcomed by the Managing Director of the school, as any change for the benefit of teacher development would ultimately benefit the students.

Literature review for informed practice
The literature search revealed that there is already a great body of writing and research on teacher appraisal, evaluation and observation. The initial research question proposed a change to the teacher observation system; however, it became clear that observation was only a small piece of a much larger picture. Observation is one of many methods used in teacher appraisal. However, before considering appraisal methods, the purpose of appraisal must first be defined so that the system will reflect it. So the research question evolved from changing the observation system to designing and implementing a new system, which could manage the dual purpose of formative and summative appraisal.

Formative and summative appraisals
Millman (1981); Wise et al. (1985); Danielson and McGreal (2000) have noted that teacher appraisal systems can be broadly divided into two main types, formative and summative, each with its own purposes. Barber (1990) sees formative appraisal as primarily designed to improve teaching. It is a beneficial considerate process that helps teachers progress. It assumes a professional approach toward teachers and is based on underlying philosophical beliefs:

- Professional teachers constantly strive for continued individual excellence;
- Given sufficient information, professional teachers can and will evaluate themselves and modify their performance as well as or better than others;
- The evaluation procedures provide feedback designed to assist teachers in making judgements about how they can best improve their teaching.

Danielson and McGreal (2000) state that formative appraisal enhances a teacher's professional skills by providing constructive feedback, guiding staff development, improving student learning and promoting exceptional practice.

The main purpose of summative appraisal, on the other hand, is to make consequential decisions. It is more focused on accountability. Danielson and McGreal (2000, p.8) list the following functions of summative appraisal; 'screening out unsuitable candidates, dismissing incompetent teachers, and providing legally

defensible evidence'. McGreal (1983) lists a number of common characteristics of a summative appraisal model:

- high supervisor – low teacher involvement;
- evaluation is seen as synonymous with observation;
- similar procedures for tenured and non-tenured teachers;
- the existence of standardised criteria.

Multiple methods of data collection

One of the most stubborn characteristics of most appraisal systems in many countries' education systems is the notion that classroom observation is the only valid way to appraise a teacher's performance. However, teaching and learning are complex acts that occur in many forms and contexts. Peterson and Peterson (2006) state that 'multiple data sources improve teacher evaluation because teaching is so complex that no one source sufficiently captures all the role or performance'. Thus, it is necessary to collect information about classroom performance from a wide range of sources.

A productive appraisal system should reflect the complexity of the teaching process. While it has been noted that classroom observation is a useful data collection method, it is not the only one. Examples of formative appraisal methods would be self-assessment, peer appraisal and portfolio assessment.

Dual function appraisal system

In the past many schools operated summative appraisal systems. Stiggins and Bridgeford (1985) claim that 'most evaluation practices address summative goals. Formative teacher evaluation ... often assumes a secondary role'. They argue that the reason for neglecting formative appraisal is that it requires more time and effort than is often practical.

In practice, those appraisal systems which have attempted to achieve both accountability and professional development duality of purpose have actually addressed neither purpose effectively. This is supported by Danielson and McGreal (2000). However, they also state that this is due to the structures and procedures used in schools and that by carefully designing an appraisal system the two purposes can indeed be served.

The idea that an appraisal system can serve more than one purpose effectively is echoed by Middlewood and Cardno (2001) who state that the two main purposes are on either end of a continuum and a system of appraisal can be situated at any particular point (see Figure 1).

Professional development   Performance outcomes

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Figure 1: Continuum of emphasis in systems of performance appraisal.

However, they (2001) caution that any system which aims to appraise performance needs to reconcile any tension there may be between the need for professional development and accountability. Danielson and McGreal (2000) state that over the past 35 years the literature has supported two findings, firstly, appraisal has always been seen as important, secondly, appraisal systems which support professional development while still being accountable produced more satisfaction. It would appear that by investing time and resources into an appraisal system which can support the dual purpose of formative and summative appraisal, will lead to teachers, schools and ultimately the students reaping the benefits.

Selecting research procedures

As action research is collaborative in nature the research procedures involved discovering teachers' opinions, suggestions and reactions. A number of methods were chosen to gather data: a questionnaire, a focus group and interviews. The first step involved gathering data, by means of a questionnaire, on how teachers felt about 'observation' as a method of appraisal. The next step was to create a focus group, comprising of five teachers, who would collaborate on designing the new appraisal system. Interviews were then conducted to see what teachers thought of the new system.

Evaluation of the procedures

In order for action research to be valid, it is essential to evaluate the research procedures. Cohen *et al.* (2000) state that 'validity is the touchstone of all types of educational research'. My action research project relied on self-validation, validation from the focus group and the other teachers as well as feedback from a critical friend.

It was never my intention for the results of my research to be generalised so external validity was not as important as it would be in other bodies of quantitative research.

Implementation and Interpretation

When considering the design and implementation of a teacher appraisal system, it was imperative to review the literature on change dynamics and to establish a proper climate for the transition to be successful. For lasting changes and effective appraisal, those affected should be involved in developing, refining, and implementing the

system. Through involvement in the appraisal process, teachers can also reflect their interests, concerns, aspirations, and needs. This is also echoed by Burke (1992, p.218) who argues 'reform has to take place from within, for excellence cannot be parachuted either into schools or into teacher education'.

With a positive climate for change established, the new system was implemented and necessary documentation kept. The teachers were subsequently interviewed to discover their views on the new system in terms of its transparency, appraisal criteria, level of involvement, satisfaction with balance of formative and summative appraisal, equity and flexibility.

Conclusion

Through the collaborative action research process, the research question of 'how do I establish a teacher appraisal system which attends to the dual purpose of summative and formative appraisal' was answered. With the help of my colleagues, I am confident that an effective teacher appraisal system has been established that is informed by research, negotiated by the teachers involved, in addition to being based on best practice.

The research has shown that teacher appraisal should be designed in conjunction with the teachers who are to be evaluated. Each school has a different ethos, environment and different needs and as such an appraisal system should be tailor-made to suit each school. This can be achieved by school management inviting teaching staff to take an active role in the design of such a system.

Further details and documentation on the appraisal system at Atlantic Language is currently available at: www.acorcd.com/iatefl/

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