



Performance Standards in Learning and Teaching

Eddie Edmundson (left) and Steve Fitzpatrick explore the applicability of performance standards to ELT.

This article sets out to investigate whether significant insights into the setting of agreed performance standards relating to the learning environment can be gained from the world of business management practice, especially performance management. It is argued that arriving at these standards can help define overall aims and inform objectives. Examples are given that focus on performance standards in the classroom context, and relevant experience at the British Council Teaching Centre in Recife is examined. Tentative conclusions include: the value of applying SMART principles to the formulation of minimum standards; the greater accountability to the external environment that results; and the benefits that accrue from a team approach.

Professional Standards in ELT

The issue of what is meant by the words 'profession' and 'professional' and, indeed, whether ELT is in fact a true profession, is one that receives a great deal of comment. Some very interesting discussion has been prompted by Alan Maley's (1992) open letter to 'the profession', in which he suggests three different interpretations that can be given to these words. The first lies 'at one extreme' whereby "a profession' can in the first instance be fairly loosely defined with reference to a

number of criteria". He suggests that lawyers, medical doctors, engineers and so on readily qualify, but do teachers? "In ELT ... we seem to have decided to elect ourselves to membership of a profession....". The attention given currently to teacher education and qualifications, and accreditation and associations, shows a striving to arrive at criteria for evaluation in this sense of professionalism, and of course this is laudable in its aims and achievements.

A second interpretation offered by Maley is that of receiving remuneration for one's work, as in the case of a professional golfer. But it is his third ("less rigorous") definition which is at the heart of this article. Maley explains that this "would include the notion of 'commitment to an occupation through conscientious workmanship' or 'the application of skilful work to a high standard of performance' ". We feel that there are insights and frameworks which can be borrowed from the world of business management, particularly the now commonly accepted principles and practices of performance management, which can provide the rigour for this interpretation to operate alongside criteria-referenced definitions of our profession. Maley goes on to argue forcefully, and correctly in our view, that "in order to be taken seriously by its clients ... the 'profession' has to be able to show

that it can deliver what it claims".

Three years later, in the *ELT Journal*, Christopher Brumfit and Hywel Coleman (1995) discuss professional standards in ELT with Julian Edge, and their starting point is Maley's (1992) point that there has to be a measure of evaluative control. The speakers agree that high standards have to be maintained, and that the growth of teacher education qualifications and professional associations implies arriving at agreement on the criteria for evaluation and the setting up of evaluation procedures. This is not an easy task; as Brumfit points out, "The English teaching profession is still very diverse, and very divided, so that getting an agenda for evaluation that we can agree on is actually a long and slow process", but he concludes that this very diversity should not be used as an excuse for not bothering to do things extremely well.

The British Council Teaching Centre in Recife

We are very fortunate in being able to count on an ELT institute where experimentation can take place, and is actively encouraged. The British Council Teaching Centre opened in November 1986 as a specialised institute for English language teaching and learning. The learners are all adults who are academics or professionals and,

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generally speaking, they require competence in English prior to following postgraduate study (EAP) or training courses (EOP) abroad in the medium of English. Learners attend month-long modules, and attend two hours of class a day, every weekday. The teachers are committed to an approach which is learning-centred and characterised essentially by a syllabus which is negotiated prospectively with the learners and written up at intervals as a retrospective account.

Many of the learners are trainees on DFID projects that have an association with The British Council; others require a particular IELTS score for a scholarship; and the rest are members of priority groups for The British Council's work in north east Brazil. There exists a close synergy in the office between the teams responsible for the various activity streams, including ELT, and so it is not surprising that when all Council staff were given in-house training in performance management in 1995 there was a gravitation of the ideas across to the area of ELT teaching and learning.

What is Performance Management?

Armstrong (1994) writes that "Performance management is based on the simple proposition that when people know and understand what is expected of them, and have been able to take part in forming those expectations, they can do what they will perform to meet them". He explains that performance management emerged in the later 1980s as a response to a number of factors, including the attention being given then to the concepts of continuous improvement and the 'learning organisation', and the realisation that managing performance was the concern of everyone in an organisation – not just the managers.

Two frameworks are crucial to the operation of performance management; setting performance standards and setting performance objectives. Performance standards are normally expressed in terms of (but not necessarily all) these entities:

Quality Quantity Time Cost

A good example is the list of 12 global indicators for public health established by the WHO to evaluate each country's well-being. One of them deals very well with Quality and Quantity:

"The nutritional status of children is adequate, in that:
At least 90% of new-born infants have a birth weight of at least 2,500 grammes.

At least 90% of children have weight for age that corresponds to the reference values recommended by WHO."

By analogy, the statement that the nutritional status of children is adequate is a duty, and the quality/quantity references are standards.

Let's take an example from the DOS's Job Description:

"Duty: To provide Teaching Centre teachers with induction and ongoing professional support.

Standards:

New teachers are given an interview to explain the approach and the practical details.

New teachers are given a pre-service and in-service training programme.

DOS is available to team-teach up to 4 hours per week.

DOS organises at least 1 teachers' meeting per month."

These duties and performance standards are agreed with the line manager and when written up they constitute the Job Description. The Job Plan, on the other hand, is made up of performance objectives which are characterised by wording which is SMART:

Specific
Measurable
Agreed (not imposed)
Realistic (but challenging)
Time Bound (with regular reviews)

For example, the DOS might agree with the Director "To induct at least

one new IELTS examiner certified by UCLES for the Speaking and Writing tests, by end August 1998". A final point - it is important that these performance objectives should not be regarded as static, and that they be reviewed periodically.

Performance Management at The British Council Teaching Centre

Performance management procedures have had an impact on learning and teaching in four key ways:

1. Teachers have Job Descriptions & Job Plans agreed with the DOS. Here is an example of each:

Performance standard: (from the general job description)

Duty: To take advantage of opportunities for attendance on relevant workshops and courses.

Standard: A minimum of 15 hours' attendance on workshops/ seminars/ courses directed to ELT over the year.

Performance objective: (from a senior teacher's job plan)

To give at least one paper or workshop at a local or regional ELT conference, by end January 1999.

From another perspective, teachers are provided with TACOS (terms and conditions of service), which is the institutional statement of duties and standards – this is agreed practice in all British Council Teaching Centres in the world.

Furthermore, performance competencies inform the statements that define the career structure for teachers at the Recife Teaching Centre. There are 4 levels.

e.g. Level 1: "The teacher has the ability to adapt existing materials to match group wants & needs".

e.g. Level 3: "The teacher has the ability to bring learners up to band 6 on the IELTS test.

2. Learners have performance standards for each of the major bands of study which have been negotiated and agreed on, and a list of

these standards is posted in the classrooms and the common room. For example, at the elementary level: (Duty) To reactivate previous knowledge of the English language and build on it, paying particular attention to the language functions that facilitate the management of learning in the classroom.

(Standard) The elementary level is completed with a competence equivalent to at least band 4 in IELTS.

Learners are also given at enrolment a statement of the Teaching Centre's duties and standards – a kind of TACOS for students.

3. Teachers and learners negotiate the learning aims for the month and incorporate performance management tools in this process. For instance, a hypothetical intermediate level group indicates that they want more listening practice. The teacher agrees that there is a need for focused listening skills practice. It is also agreed that there is a target situation need for note-taking practice, especially listening to locate specific information. The learners cite the reasons for their difficulty: speed of delivery, fear of talking, vocabulary. The negotiation finishes with agreement on learning preferences (e.g. pair & group work, video, songs) and on topics/themes (e.g. current affairs, British culture).

At this point, discussion can turn to the performance objectives for the block, which are dressed in SMART language: At least 20% of lesson time in the first week is devoted to note-taking. At least 80% of the learners state in the end of block evaluation that they are satisfied with their progress in note-taking skills. All learners from the group who take IELTS at the end of the Intermediate level, or subsequently, achieve at least Band 5 on the Listening Test.

4. Clients are given performance standards and objectives in the contract that is drawn up for ELT tuition to their employees. For example, this is how the perceived needs of the various stakeholders were resolved, and a contract secured, in

recent negotiation with the state-owned regional electricity generation board. The board is readying itself for imminent privatisation, and English language tuition for 24 managers was requested.

Needs as perceived by the sponsors (the company): to ensure that these managers are prepared to enter a competitive market resulting from the privatisation process.

Needs as perceived by the learners (the managers): to develop English language skills in order to keep their jobs and to be able to negotiate with future partners.

Needs as perceived by the British Council Teaching Centre (the providers): the company needs to have guarantees of cost effective language training, and the managers need a means of measurement in order to support self-assessment/self-monitoring of their language development.

Constraints: Extremely busy managers, the more so with privatisation on the horizon, could lead to poor attendance.

The solution agreed on by the stakeholders was that the courses would be short and intensive, and that there would be a clear sharing of responsibilities.

After consultation with the British Council Teaching Centre, the company drew up a contract with the managers stating:
The maximum percentage of absences permitted per course (standard)
The minimum score on the British Council Placement Test required to enter a given level of study (standard)
The minimum band on the IELTS Test expected on completion of each level (objective)

The British Council Teaching Centre, in agreement with the company, negotiated with the managers the training priorities which stemmed from the student self-diagnostic tests. The managers, in agreement with the company, negotiated with the teachers issues concerning the learning materials - the emphases to be focused

on in the lessons. They also negotiated with the company, in agreement with the Teaching Centre, issues concerning place and intensity of study.

The result was that a 200 hour course was agreed on, distributed between classes held daily on the company's premises, and two one-week immersion courses - one half way through the course and the second at the end of the course just prior to the IELTS exam. Interestingly, presumably due to the agreed contract concerning attendance, only two managers missed classes - a total of 4 hours only.

Conclusion

So, we feel that the Teaching Centre in Recife wears a SMART 'raincoat', visible to all the stakeholders - clients, teachers, learners, specialist visitors, senior managers, and competitors. The alternative is an empty raincoat: the inability (as Maley says) to be taken seriously by the client unless the profession can show that it can deliver what it claims. This symbol of the 'empty raincoat' is engagingly used by Charles Handy (1995), who writes: "The empty raincoat is, to me, the symbol of our most pressing paradox. If economic progress means that we become anonymous cogs in some great machine, then progress is an empty promise. The challenge must be to show how paradox can be managed".

References

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