



Evaluation: the ELT manager's toolkit

Richard Kiely discusses the functions of evaluation in an ELT context.

Group of senior managers and staff discussing a person specification for new post 'Co-ordinator of English Language Programmes'

Head of Unit: This specification has to be specific about the person we want - we can't just say a Diploma or an MA. We have to specify what skills they need for this job.

Marketing manager: They need to be an organiser - there's all that work to be done for the British Council inspection.

Senior Teacher 1: There's also the need to work out a staff development programme.

Senior teacher 2: And get the teachers to come - Is that communication or leadership skills?

Senior Teacher 1: Yes put those down. And something about appraisal - this new co-ordinator will have to work out some link between appraisal and staff development.

Head of Unit: With a limited budget: can we put budget management skills down?

Senior teacher 2: Skills with loaves and fishes more like. And while we are on small budgets, we need someone with marketing skills. Recruitment has been OK, but we now have two new competitors.

Head of Unit: You mean writing brochures, going to conferences and trade fairs?

Senior teacher 2: Yes, and more - market research, for example.

Marketing person: We need someone to be here, to manage day-to-day issues, have a feel for what's going on and trouble-shoot before problems become serious.

Head of Unit: And teach, this person is going to be teaching 50% of the time.

Senior teacher 1: We must put down IT skills. And also developing the IT part of the curriculum - perhaps find out what teachers and students want and build a staff development programme round it

- leadership
- communication
- teaching

And inevitably there will be the people management tasks - to do with staffing and student welfare - which in ELT have, by definition, a complex cross-cultural dimension. This article makes the case for managers having evaluation skills, as a means of discharging the basket of responsibilities they are likely to be given. It examines current conceptions of what evaluation practice involves, and relates this to management tasks encountered in ELT operations. Finally, it sets out an initial list of issues for the ELT manager to explore as part of the task of making evaluation work.

What is evaluation?

Current approaches in educational management tend to be data-based - whether they take an industrial Total Quality Management strategy, or one focused more on professional development for teachers, the basis for decision making is data-based. This gives a central role to data gathering and use, which are the stuff of evaluation. Pennington's (1997) characterisation of evaluation illustrates its relevance to the tasks facing ELT managers:

Language programme evaluation is

What we can see from this is the mixed bag of difficult tasks that today's ELT manager is likely to be handed. These tasks include:

- day-to-day management of the language teaching operation
- curriculum development
- staff development and appraisal
- budget management
- marketing

Evaluation has two main purposes - accountability and development

then less a set of figures or documents than it is a set of activities. These activities involve people and their interaction in gaining increased understandings which allow them to function more effectively in their work environment. At the same time as these activities make it possible for people to adapt to their environment, they also open up the way for changing the environment, so that it better suits their needs and purposes. Thus, evaluation at its most basic level is the process of interaction that dynamically relates to people, processes and things that make up a language programme in a process of mutual enlightenment, adaptation, and betterment.

Pennington 1998:205

The activities referred to by Pennington are what a manager might do in undertaking the responsibilities discussed above. Evaluation has two main purposes - accountability and development. The former is about demonstrating to stakeholders beyond the classroom that a programme of quality is being provided. These include validating bodies, senior management, and sponsors of students. The latter concerns the gradual improvement of the curriculum through staff development; awareness of students' needs and wants, and understanding of how the various curriculum components contribute to quality.

Functions of evaluation

A systematic approach to evaluation, can contribute usefully to a range of management tasks:

- It can provide a rich account of how the curriculum works, informing initiatives such as IT, and supporting critical reflective staff development;
- It can provide information for specific decisions. Materials evaluations, for example, can inform

coursebook choices; data on students' preferred learning patterns can inform decisions relating to the setting up of IT and self-access resources.

- It can build up an account over time of investigation, reflection and action. The documentation accumulated - evaluation instruments, reports on findings from specific classrooms and across programmes, minutes of meetings, etc. - improve communication and can go a long way to satisfying the needs of external stakeholders such as validating bodies.
- It can demonstrate a responsible and accountable approach to management, such that teachers and students as well as stakeholders beyond the classroom feel there is a transparent, ethical basis for making the decisions which affect them.
- It can empower teachers to innovate in their classrooms, document these innovations and use them for professional development purposes. The management process of teacher appraisal is more likely to be a dialogue where the teacher has a case to put, or evidence to counter a

Evaluation can empower teachers to innovate in their classrooms, document these changes and use them for professional development

view developed by a manager. In this way the practice of evaluation generates further evaluation, and management becomes an ongoing cycle of enquiry, debate and action.

Types of evaluation

Patton (1995:192-4) in a survey of evaluation types in social programmes generally lists fifty-two alternative ways of focusing evaluations, from 'accreditation focus' to 'utilisation focus'. Evaluation in ELT has always encompassed a broad range of purposes and activities. It includes formal research studies into theoretical programme issues at one end, routine quality management processes at the other, and somewhere in the middle, the kind of investigative, reflective activity which increasingly has come to characterise professionalism among teachers (Hopkins 1985; Hopkins 1989; Rea-Dickins & Germaine 1992; Weir & Roberts 1994). We can identify four types of evaluation which are relevant to the management of an ELT operation.

i) Consumer feedback

This is where teachers and managers seek feedback on the service they provide. Procedures generate attitudinal data which can be used for needs/wants analyses, or for fine-tuning programmes and curricular resources. Instrumentation typically involves tick-box questionnaires, though there are serious problems with exclusive reliance on these - see, for example, Block (1998). More recently interview and structured discussion methods are used, to provide a fuller account of the student experience, and guidance for teachers and managers to improve the programme. Kiely (1998) provides an account of programme evaluation using a modified form of nominal group technique - a structured discussion method. Where the focus of enquiry is in the needs and wants of

evaluation

potential clients - market research - similar procedures can be used, once the difficult task of identifying groups of potential clients has been completed.

ii) Quality Management

This is a form of evaluation where a group of professionals - teachers and managers - seek to demonstrate that their work meets a threshold quality level. Traditionally, evaluation here has relied on test results - if the Cambridge results are high, it must be a good school. Increasingly, there is a focus on a wider set of indicators. Patton (1995:205) describes a management information system (MIS) which routinely gathers data which can serve as a platform for evaluation activity, and guide interpretations or other evaluation findings.

Where such a system is in place the task is to utilise it, and decide where it needs augmenting. In many institutions the quality management of programmes is achieved through a focus on the checklists and inspection procedures of validating bodies such as ARELS, BASELT, BALEAP or BATQI. The evaluation procedures here look at all aspects of the learning environment, and bring together the experience of teachers, classroom data for teacher appraisal and feedback from students and others. Meetings where managers and teachers review operations and decide on action to be taken are the principal procedures for this form of evaluation. The key here is to create an environment of collaboration between managers and teachers, rather than one characterised by confrontation and recrimination. Hopkins (1989) describes these processes as GRIDS - Guidelines for the Review of Internal Development of Schools - and Blue and Grundy (1997) provides an account of how the criteria of an external body - BALEAP - is used to frame a review of quality in a university language centre.

iii) Process studies

These evaluations are collaborative and problem-based. Typically a team

within a ELT operation are aware of a persistent problem, and decide to investigate it. The aim is to develop policy which impacts on the experience of all teachers and students. The focus is likely to be on specific components of the curriculum, such as coursebooks, or the role of computer-based resources. The data is provided by teachers and students, and is used to a) provide a coherent account of how the issue in question relates to the experience of the programme, and b) as information for discussion in quality management meeting as described in ii) above. The issue of coursebook evaluation is pertinent here: much attention has been given to checklists for the selection of a book for a given classroom, but much less to the 'in use' evaluation (Breen 1987; Rea-Dickins 1992), which focuses on how a given coursebook actually works in the classroom. Other issues which are best investigated on a team basis are the use of electronic resources and self-access centres by students and teachers. Clark et al (1996) provides an account of how four teachers took a longitudinal look at the experience of eight students in an EFL programme included the use of such resources among a range of innovative features.

iv) Action Research Studies

Where the emphasis in iii) above is

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on groups of teachers working in conjunction with management, action research studies are forms of evaluation where teachers act individually to explore issues in the classroom which are problematic or curious. There are many characterisations of action research, ranging from uncompromising challenges to established orthodoxies, to small scale enquiries in the classroom which seek to mirror faithfully the concerns of conventional research. From a management point of view, what is important is that such investigations are taking place; that individual teachers feel they are working in an environment which welcomes and supports such activity.

The findings of this kind of evaluation may never be formally presented to management, but the institution can benefit in three ways:

- a) the classrooms of reflective, critical teachers are likely to provide responsive learning experiences for students;
- b) teachers develop specialist skills in meeting the needs of specific types of students, for example certain age groups, or learners from specific age groups or geographical areas;
- c) teachers can write up their evaluation reports for ELT conferences and publications, furthering their own professional development, and marketing their institution.

Conclusion

Evaluation is a continuously developing set of strategies and techniques for knowing how well our efforts and enterprises are doing. It is not a panacea for all shortcomings in all contexts. It is however, an appropriate starting point for an ELT manager who wishes to bring systematicity and transparency to the myriad tasks to be undertaken. As Cronbach, a key figure in the development of strategies for 'scientific' programme evaluation states: *Evaluation is more of an art than a science*, and a key element of the art is deciding which particular

evaluation activity is appropriate for a given task. To start, the ELT manager might initiate a broad ranging discussion to understand what evaluation activity are taking place already. The next steps involve establishing policies within the unit to clarify the purposes of evaluation and provide support and resources (if possible) to teachers who are prepared to invest time and energy in evaluation activity. Evaluation types I) and ii) are likely to be required in most contexts - the management task is to make these as stress-free and usable as possible. Evaluation types iii) and iv) may be less essential, but can make a significant contribution to the quality of the learning experience.

Finally some questions for the lucky -ordinator who gets the job discussed at the start of this article.

- What attitudes prevail towards the evaluation processes of data gathering and sharing? Do senior members of staff share an enthusiasm for evaluation as a management strategy? How do teachers feel?
- Who has time and energy to invest in evaluation? Is it possible to allocate resources of time to individual teachers willing to do development work? How is the work of administrators organised to collate data routinely encountered?
- What data has been systematically gathered in the past? Is there data on the MIS performance indicators listed above?
- What are the priority evaluation tasks? What problems do participants identify as needing solutions?
- What policies or schemes already in place can contribute to or benefit from evaluation practice? Teacher appraisal? Peer observation? Professional development programme?
- What can a new coordinator with an enthusiasm for evaluation achieve, without antagonising colleagues, or doing all the work herself?

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Richard Kiely teaches courses for the Centre for International Education and Management, University College Chichester. He has worked as a teacher, teacher educator and consultant in a range of countries. He is currently doing a PhD in ELT programme evaluation.

ELT flies blind into the technological future

Uncertainty is the only certainty for the next ELT generation, argues

Rhodri Jones.

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Would you want your child to be an EFL teacher? Why not? Doesn't English seem set fair to continue into the next millennium as the world's favourite language? Isn't EFL coming of age as a profession? I joined in the heady summer school days of the Sixties and learnt my trade in the pub at lunchtime and now, 30 years later, the problem is technology.

Whether you see it as an opportunity or a threat, it is the wild card that makes the immediate future almost impossible to call. For example, the hi-tech manufacturer NEC has already demonstrated translation software that allows a Japanese tourist to speak Japanese into a mobile phone that in turn produces English. Not great English, but certainly good enough for hotels and shopping, even for those hesitant chats with taxi drivers. Think of the effort saved and the software works just as well from English into Japanese. It took me five years of frustration to learn enough Japanese to fend off the average Tokyo taxi driver. Now I can buy the smart card. If it works for Japanese and English (currently at number nine and number two in the Top Ten of world