

Evaluation Means Innovation in ELT: The Experience of the Algerian School

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Evaluation is a natural activity that is not directly connected to teaching alone. It is a response to the emerging attitudes and understanding of others towards us. Evaluation has become an intrinsic part of the teaching/learning processes because it provides much information for management of the classroom practice, the planning of courses, and the handling of both the learning tasks and the students. Evaluation is a criterion to develop the level of proficiency of English language teaching (ELT). All the contributing items to the teaching/learning processes must be subjected to close scrutiny early. Therefore, evaluation as an overall system pilots the pool of items in education so as to arrive at a decision to what might be suitable or unsuitable for learners. This article is to explore the relationships between evaluation, innovation in the teaching/learning processes, as well as the evaluation areas of emphasis and some of the procedures that are used in ELT. The experience of the Algerian school is given as an example of necessity of evaluation to meet both the learners' needs and to respond to current requirements.

Keywords: ELT evaluation, innovation, Bechar, social context, symbolic representation

Introduction

Evaluation is a concept that can be used in every domain of our daily life, such as weather, the caring of the sick, fashion, and teaching. It helps us make judgements on different levels of people's actions and attitudes and results in convenient responses to take decisions for the future. In Algeria, evaluation in education is now considered as one of the basic elements of English Language Teaching (ELT). In classroom context, evaluation combines both the education interpretations and perspectives in teachers' mind. In ELT, interactions between tutors and students have a conspicuous result on the nature and quality of language acquisition (Candlin & Mercer, 2009, p. 1). In the absence of an effective evaluation programme, teachers can hardly be aware of what parts of their teaching are most important, how well their students are expected to perform, or how best to address student learning needs. Evaluation is nowadays a profound and well-established link to education as it is very attentive to teachers and learners alike in order to improve foreign language teaching in our country.

Types of Evaluation

Evaluation is strongly linked to our natural activities in our daily existence. We might unconsciously evaluate an interview or a political speech and we can make judgements about the speakers to whether these are

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honest/dishonest, harsh, reliable/unreliable, or uncaring. Moreover, as speakers, we may constantly respond to our listeners' (audience's) emerging attitudes and thus decide what we say accordingly. This kind of evaluation that is related to our behaviour is known as informal evaluation. A second type of evaluation that is formal evaluation is academic and more scientific. Ill-prepared and ad-hoc evaluations are unreliable, unfair, and cannot be a source, on which we can base our future educational decisions.

Formal evaluation is very necessary for both the teacher and the learner. It provides the teacher with much information and the framework to use for the future direction of classroom practice and the planning of the courses besides to the management of the learning tasks and learners (Rea-Dickins & Germaine, 1993, p. 9). Teaching is not limited to testing students' abilities, but also to presenting a clear idea of the tools to be used in improving the students' learning and to make of them lifelong learners. For this, students need to abstain themselves from being confined to working for grades or marks only. They are more likely to perceive learning as its own reward when they are empowered to help their own progress. As an alternative, the students must be more concerned with what they have learnt than what the teachers want from them; with the things that they became able to do which they could not do before and with what items they are required to learn in the future.

Motivations for Evaluation

Evaluation in ELT can be planned for two main reasons:

(1) Evaluation functions as a means of explaining and confirming existing procedures, i.e., to obtain feedback about teacher's classroom practice. The evaluator explores why something is working well in the classroom and why it is appropriate for a given target. He/She tries to justify the practice of something through explanation of what happens during the teaching and the learning events.

(2) Teaching requires continuous change in our techniques, tasks, and attitudes. This means if we do not accept change for renewal and reform, we (teachers) deny dynamism to our profession. From this, evaluation has become synonymous to innovation (change). Innovation implies, here, a planned change in education. According to George B. Leonard, to learn is to change and that education is the process that changes the learner (Toliver, 2004, p. 112). The two words of evaluation and innovation are closely related concepts because evaluation forms a basis for subsequent change or modification within the textbook or curriculum. Textbook evaluation might be related to changing the whole textbook or to something smaller as a new procedure for developing a given skill for learners of English.

Evaluation, Assessment, and Testing

Many people confuse evaluation with testing and assessment. The terms "assessment" and "evaluation" are often used interchangeably. However, it is worth making a distinction between these two terms. Assessment involves collecting information on the full range of student learning in a variety of contexts, so that a clear and valid picture is made of students' knowledge and their learning skills in English language. Assessment aids in the diagnosis of individual learning needs (Rea-Dickins & Germaine, 1993, p. 7). It is used in the process of learning in order to improve learning and to care about the outcomes (Fulcher & Davidson 2007, p. 68). It differs from tests that are the products which refer to what the learner can do at a given time. In EFL, tests require measuring the time learners need and students' storing, and presenting information in a variety of ways and their analyzing

language (Chapelle, 2003, p. 152). Tests are either internal or external to the institution of work or school and their marking can be subjective or objective.

An internal test is frequently established by teachers themselves or by the school administration. The purpose of such testing is primarily related to the needs of the teachers and learners working within a particular context. Tests that are under local control are mostly used to place learners into classes, to discover how much they have achieved, or to diagnose difficulties that individual learners may have. However, external tests are usually imposed on teachers. The teachers' role becomes subordinate when strict external tests are applied because the objective is to bring the teaching into line with the standards intended by external authorities (Uljens, 1997, p. 56).

Furthermore, in testing, results are the quantitative record of the learner's performance using a number (mark) or a grade. What would be more helpful to the learner is not the mark. The ideal desire is knowledge of why marks are awarded on a given test and why marks are not given in other situations, i.e., what was good and adequate and where the test performance failed. This feedback is, in fact, the task of evaluation. Evaluation opens paths, provides opportunities for students' progress, and perceives future teacher intervention and learner action. Therefore, evaluation can be defined as an overall process in education of which assessment and testing are just components. Evaluation is the process of analysing, reflecting upon, and summarizing assessment information, and making judgements or decisions based upon the information gathered.

Materials of Evaluation

Learner Involvement

During evaluation, learners can be involved in the assessment process by means of their feedback from a learning task during a given lesson. From comments from the part of the learners on the different aspects of the language use, the study of the combined syntactical elements and the vocabulary items can be considered. Learners' involvement can be in testing, too. For this, it is very important for the teachers to find manners to correct tests easily so as the feedback on the test is both immediate and qualitative (effective). Learner involvement is pedagogic, formative, and decisive.

Teacher Evaluation

Making decisions about a teacher's work in the classroom involves his/her performance while teaching. Teachers have a key role to play in the development of the educational process. Classroom practice must be in the forefront evaluation enquiries (Stenhouse, 1975). It is worth extending the teacher's knowledge about teaching and learning; the idea is to be familiar with what actually happens during people's teaching rather than to what might happen.

The example of evaluating a teacher's practice to introduce something new in his/her class is when as a novice teacher, the author tried out a few of the ideas that had learnt in in-service courses that had attended in El-Achaari Secondary School, Bechar. After a series of courses related to preparing students for written tasks, the author observed that the teacher's evaluation of a writing activity, for example, can be reached by means of enquiries such as:

- Whether most of the learners have understood or not.
- Whether most of them have taken part in the activities or not.

- Whether the learners have used more English than they usually do.
- Whether the written work is more organised than usual.
- Whether it was easier for the learners to get what to write about.
- Whether most of the learners enjoyed the preparation of their writing.

Positive answers to these enquiries from the part of the novice teacher indicate that the new approach in the classroom practice is working (Rea-Dickins & Germaine, 1993, pp. 11-13).

A good teacher needs to evaluate the activity effectiveness during the session and may intervene to keep the course on, or he/she may decide to evaluate his/her performance later with the view of improving his/her way of teaching. If teaching a class without evaluating, the activities effectiveness is a bad management practice.

Attendance of in-service courses is very good training for new teachers. It leads them to understand the content of the syllabus, to distinguish between a unit plan and a lesson plan, and to know to prepare courses taking into account both the gradation of the activities, as well as the timing considering the learners' speed of acquisition, i.e., to make a balance between the learners' coping time and the teacher's coping time. These organised demonstration classes can give more experience to teachers about how to adapt the textbook, the lesson, and the activities to the level of the learners. Wording and re-wording instruction for the purpose of increasing students' participation is another advantage that a new teacher can learn by participation in them. To further exploit the course, it can be followed by a discussion. Discussions after demonstrative courses can function as coordination meetings where the most experienced teacher could tell the rest of the attendees about the pieces of advice that he/she has learnt from the inspector. In-service courses compensate for the inspector's rare visit to remote places. One can easily learn from his/her colleagues, but he/she cannot have many opportunities to learn from the inspector as the latter is not always present.

Textbook and Curriculum Evaluation in the Last 10 Years

Because of dissatisfaction about a school textbook/curriculum that became outdated and thus failed to meet the Algerian learner's prospects in the various domains: uninteresting thematic and linguistic tools, ineffective teaching strategies, unguaranteed learning outcomes, traditional approaches, scarce opportunities to assess learners' attainment, and above all a high number of novice teachers; the Ministry of Education made a giant step when deciding to replace the old systems of education with new more appropriate ones to overcome the above hampering shortcomings as well as to match the current needs from 2005 onwards.

- After having noticed that the learners in the Algerian school at all levels being stuffed with unnecessary items seemed void of the mentioned prospects, the EFL teachers were summoned for seminars and meetings to discuss the new amendments in education. The old textbooks offered activities which helped students to recall grammar rules or even to translate a passage, yet the student was not learning to speak. The Algerian students, too, used to be learning to master the different tenses; unfortunately, results showed that our learners faced failure in expressing themselves in free writing. Consequently, the thought of the competency based approach (CBA) came as a relief to the Algerian school professionals' disappointment.

- Teachers' opinions were solicited through regional seminars and inspectors presented their views while observing teachers' performances.
- There were views of learners through interviews.

- Professionals (teachers and inspectors) highlighted the positive sides of the textbook/curriculum, taking into account the appropriateness of the level, the topics in the textbook, the types of the activities, the type of the pictures, etc.
- The inadequacies (weaknesses) were also mentioned; and the awkwardness of the structures and the insufficiency of the grammatical items were to be covered.

Since then, the approach of “the doctor-knows-best” which is based on the idea that the teacher is the expert and the learner’s role is irrelevant has been reversed to give the learner a priority in the teaching/learning processes. An example is that in the latest approach in the Algerian school, the social context, has been given much priority in teaching EFL. Learners are believed to enrich the learning situation with a variety of beliefs, attitudes about the nature of language and language learning, the learners’ background, and the learners who use different learning styles (Behrooz & Pourmandnia, 2013).

The social context. The social context is very important in contributing to learners’ foreign language free expression. The Algerian social context is responsible for shaping the individuals’ minds in different situations and it has developed their personal characteristics to behave accordingly. For example, the amount of violence escalated, during and after the “black decade” (the 1990s), the news of terrorism everywhere and the horror the Algerian students were exposed to some time ago must be considered nowadays by a foreign language teacher when facing our offensive learners. In other words, the social context constitutes the road map containing individual learners’ activities that depend on each learner’s motivation. Of course, these motivations become apparent in surroundings where a learner mingles with peers. Here, the learner gets opportunities to express himself/herself depending on his/her own learning styles (innate predispositions) to interact with others. The importance of individual learning styles is evident when as teachers we feel the differences in learners’ speed and manners with which they pick up new information and ideas, and the confidence with which they process and use them (Coffield, Moseley, Ecclestone, & Elaine, 2004, p. 1). It is true that the environmental circumstances for L2 learning differ systematically from L1 learning, except where infants are reared in multilingual surroundings (Candlin & Mercer, 2009, p. 16), the bilingual Algerian surroundings that causes the prevailing attitude seems to contribute to the learner’s interaction in L2 even with sign language if necessary. As a result, we deduce that the success of the foreign language teacher in either a bilingual or a multilingual society relies much on his awareness of the learners’ social milieu and his understanding of their conduct while using their own language in everyday situation, as this helps him in his evaluation. The following diagram shows the overall process of the L2 acquisition that is much dependent on the teacher’s knowledge of the L1 context.

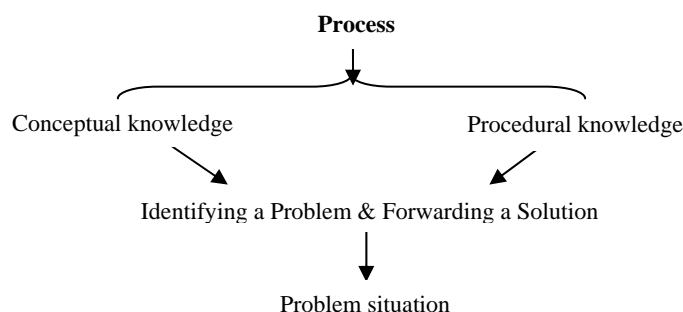


Figure 1. the Contribution of the teacher’s knowledge of the learner’s use of L1 to his acquisition of L2

Foreign languages teaching and learning cannot take place in isolation from the world of experiences and outside the classroom. In that sense, the wider socio-context of life outside the classroom has an important effect on what takes place in the interactions among learners and between learners and teachers. Also, as teachers, we need to take account of the socio-cultural context by which communicating partners in the teaching/learning process evoke and create shared knowledge and use it for making sense for a successful language learning (Candlin & Mercer, 2009, p. 2).

Perceptual presentation and symbolic representation. As Keefe defined, a learning style is the composite of characteristic cognitive, affective, and physiological factors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how a learner perceives, interacts with, and responds to the learning environment (Kritsonis, 2015, p. 8). Opposite to the classical and behaviourist approach of learning that was based on the stimulus-response activities, scholars and professionals in ELT confirm that people can learn by perceptual presentation and symbolic representations. Miller (1987), very clearly, distinguished between perceptual presentation and symbolic representation. Perceptual presentation refers to “the way the real world presents itself to us or, more precisely, to the awareness we have at any moment of this real world we have constructed” (p. 9). Symbolic representations are again based on those cognitive categories that are created through perceptual presentation and upon historical and traditional conceptions in our culture. This means that a distinction is made between a presented world and a represented world, i.e., what the learner is exposed to and his/ her own interpretation. Learning is not dependent on what students observe or limited to what is provided as a context. If one says so, this means that as teachers we will prevent our students from processing what is taught using their brains.

Styles of Evaluation

Research, Development and Diffusion Model (RD & D)

Despite the possibility of referring to the above mentioned procedures, when it comes to textbook or curriculum renewal, the Ministry of Education sometimes resorts to the RD & D approach (Research, Development and Diffusion Model). It is an approach that is widely used. It is to initiate an agent external to the teaching situation without direct consultation with teachers (Rea-Dickins & Germaine, 1993, p. 11). The individuals with the expertise are people in the Ministry. Meanwhile, the teachers whose views are supposed to be taken into account are excluded from the planning process. Very often outside experts are called to assist with the innovation. Textbook writing and curriculum revision has, unfortunately, been often managed this way in Algeria. Among the drawbacks of the RD & D approach, it is a directive style, there is poor access to the information, there are high financial demands, and there is minimal communication between the planners and the teachers who are in the forefront of the teaching process.

Social Interaction Model

Because of the number of the disadvantages of the RD & D approach, the social interactive model (SIM) comes as an alternative style for textbook and curriculum RD & D evaluation approach. Here, the emphasis is on user involvement. The planning and the management of the innovation is carried out by a number of people or groups including teachers, the relevant departments in the Ministry of Education, the examination council, the teacher training college, the relevant university department representatives, etc. Therefore, this style that is described as collective and cooperative (collaborative) has been taking place in our schools for the last two decades.

In 1992, there was a thorough review of education in Algeria for several months. On 20th December, we started this process with a coordination session attended by the teachers of English from various secondary schools in the district of Bechar from 9:00 am to 10:00 am. Then, after a coffee break, we continued in a group session from 11:00 am to 12:30 pm; after lunch at 1:00 pm, there was another session for document evaluation. The objectives of the 1992 evaluation process were: firstly to analyse the syllabi in groups of teachers, secondly to write reports that would be sent to the inspector by the following April, and thirdly the teachers reports from the different districts in Algeria were to be studied by a group of inspectors together who would make a unique report to be sent to the Ministry of Education at the end of the year 1993. Our reports (fiche d'évaluation) were a file on the second year secondary school level.

The practical method was to collect information and to answer questions related the units.

At the end of April or latest at the beginning of May, the report would be written in Arabic, French, or English. Each question consists of a criticism, suggestion, or argument.

The questions were on following:

1. objectives of school syllabus;
2. contents of the syllabus;
3. methodology: (a) learning activities; (b) evaluation; and (c) presentation;
4. other remarks;
5. advantages of synthesis.

Q1. Do the finalities translate the politics of teaching foreign languages?

Are the objectives and goals, adequate, coherent realizable...?

Q2. Is the content adapted to the pre-recruit of the pupils?

Is there an agreement or logical continuation of the programme of 1st year?

Does the textbook go with the programme?

Is the learning process easy/difficult?

Q3. Do directives provide teachers with a true methodology?

Do they enhance/support research work?

Do they increase the level of teachers' participation in teams?

Do teachers have sufficient materials of teaching, such as dictionaries, books, computers, over-head projectors...?

Q4. Do the activities correspond to the level of the pupils?

Do activities in one unit reinforce/consolidate what has been dealt before in a unit before?

Can the pupils work without the teacher?

Is there a shift from teacher-centred learning to learner-centred teaching?

Q5. Does the teacher precede evaluation?

Is it the learner who evaluates him/ herself?

Q6. The syllabus is just the frame while the textbook is the means, do they function as so?

Is the programme well exploited; is it well presented?

Conclusion

Evaluation is the backbone of education; without it, the teaching/learning processes cannot progress to catch up with currents. Strengths and inadequacies of education must be known in order to better improve the teacher personal qualities for the sake of the learners' success. With the process of innovation in the Algerian educational system, the argument has been in the ways where learners contribute in learning, guided by teachers in their road map towards understanding the foreign language. This reversed the former attitude firstly towards teachers whose role was limited to transmission of the knowledge and items in the textbook and curriculum they were equipped with. Secondly, learners are now taken as major elements of the teaching evaluation process, thus the aspects of their personality in response to problems and complexity of their surroundings or life that confronts them (social context) during the teaching/learning processes should not be overlooked. Because of evaluation that has become a very important factor in modern teaching, the Algerian experts in evaluation have moved from the traditional ways of teaching, which used to consider learners' foreign language acquisition similar to animals' response to their surroundings (stimulus-response process), and to further get feedback on learners' brain-process acquisition. Nowadays, it has been confirmed by experts that consideration of individuals learning styles in ELT is of a great benefit in enhancing classroom learner-learner interaction, especially the teachers are no longer the sole providers of knowledge, rather their role is to give guidance and to facilitate language learning.

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