Lessons to be Learnt from the Course Evaluation – a Case Study of Kaunas University of Technology

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Abstract. The article gives an account of the learners' post-course assessment of the English language modules offered at Kaunas University of Technology (KTU). The survey was conducted to 234 first and second-year students by introducing a questionnaire that served as a tool for evaluating their expectations and achievements and expressing their attitudes. Consideration has been given to the theoretical background of educational evaluation traditions, course-specific aspects and assessment criteria. The findings at KTU were aimed at serving two purposes: ways of improving course programmes and promotion of language acquisition. Also, the role of course materials has been questioned as to their compatibility with the foreseen goals and learners' expectations, as well as their success resulting in significant achievements or failure. Positive criticism on the obtained data and expectations-oriented feedback from the learners call for united efforts to overcome various constraints and limitations and resistance on the path for a mutually beneficial outcome – to improve the learners' proficiency in English and take pride in the pedagogical endeavour.

Introduction

There is growing demand for accountability and increasing importance for evaluation in foreign language education. It is a serious, professional concern to the benefit of everyone involved in language education. As anywhere around, recently a pronounced focus on quality, internal and external audit etc. has been observed in Lithuanian universities, therefore, evaluation issues have been addressed and discussed in a more detailed way. However, with reference to language education, no evaluations have been conducted at a technical university level. The purpose of this paper is to consider post-course evaluation and provide some grounding for a more extended future analysis in the area.

The concept of evaluation is still being defined. It has already emerged as an area of investigation in applied linguistics by revealing its own standards. To be satisfactory, evaluations need to be rigorous, theoretically motivated and data based. The data is intended to foster the self-reflecting attitude in researchers already involved in education and provide a useful input to teachers.

Evaluation can be conducted for a variety of reasons, but the most important question to be addressed is "why is the evaluation necessary"? Generally speaking, it is intended to gather information that may result in decision-making on allocating resources, claims on particular approaches, methods and materials to provide guidance for teachers on how to go about implementing them, etc. The aim also might be to convince language teachers that one or another method or programme "works" and should be introduced more widely, or contribute to decisions to discard it.

There is no one best way of conducting evaluation. A lot depends on the purposes of the evaluation, the nature of the programme, the individuals involved – their personalities and their interrelationships, and on the time scales and the resources involved.

A multitude of "truths" or interpretations can be constructed and presented for inspection by interested parties, and this can be done more or less thoroughly, convincingly or impartially. It also follows that the search for a completely "objective" evaluation is fruitless. No evaluation is ever objective – for evaluators, their sponsors and the objects of evaluation all have their perspectives and understandings, which are subjective. These will inevitably influence the design, implementation and interpretation of any evaluation.

Research object: an evaluation of the English modules in correspondence to learners' needs and course requirements.

Research aim: to reveal the role of evaluation in the English language teaching and make value judgments for the sustainability of the offered courses.

Research objectives: to overview the theoretical background of evaluation; to survey the collected data presented by the learners on their courses; to emphasise the comprehensive and informative features of the current evaluation; to present considerations born on its outcomes to provide the teaching staff with a yardstick against which to value and effect their daily activities and alternative lines of action.

Research methods: a compiled questionnaire on key points that are assumed relevant to language acquisition progress.

Theoretical Background

The major influence on evaluation was Ralph Tyler's book "Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction" (1949). Tyler's approach involved comparing intended outcomes with actual outcomes. Many researches were influenced by his approach. However, its drawback was that it ignores process, what happens during the course of a programme is assumed to be irrelevant (Tyler, 1967).

The 1960s are considered remarkable for broader research on second language education evaluation. Works of Campbell and Stanley, Cronbach, Keating, Stern, Freedman, Smith and others (referred to in A. Beretta's *"Evaluation of Language*

Education: an Overview" (1992)) during the period contributed to the growth of importance for evaluation. Language laboratories came into being and they became places for evaluation. In these settings audio-lingual teaching was compared with the cognitive code, however, vague monitoring description resulted in poor and unreliable outcome results. Large evaluations of the 1960s were disappointing. The concept of evaluation was inadequate to demands as the findings were virtually uninterpretable.

A major model, called "countenance evaluation" was proposed by Stake (1967, 1975), and there is no prearranged evaluation design. Stake recommended picking up on whatever turns up. The model involves descriptive and judgment data. The descriptive element examines compliance between intended and observed, whereas the judgment element refers not to the judgment of evaluator, but that of parents, teachers, students, or subject matter experts.

Parlett and Hamilton (1977) introduced the concept of "illuminative" evaluation, similar to CIPP model. Here no "product" is of any interest, "process" is all and typically with three stages – observation, further inquiry and explanation.

Another approach called CIPP (Content, Input, Process, Product) was introduced by Stufflebeam (1980). The main aim is to provide information for decision-makers. The "process" part here is focused on observation, interviews, diaries, etc. while the "product" part determines whether the objectives were achieved or not. "Content" evaluation analyses actual and desired simulation. "Input" evaluation shows to what extent the evaluator provides assistance in program design.

Scriven (1972) proposed "goal free" evaluation where the evaluator pays no attention to the stated goals but examines what actually is happening, and it is claimed that the value of a programme is in its correspondence to the needs of the students.

Eisner's (1985) concept was called "educational connoisseurship" with no quantitative data but, having conducted an observation, the evaluator writes a rich narrative report. This concept stems from the belief that life in the classroom is a matter of a teacher's individual artistry rather than a set of behavioural laws.

As the scope of evaluation is boundless, it is instructive to have a look at and reflect upon what evaluations have been done by a number of well-known authors in some cases of their practice.

Rossi's study (1985) was to establish which of the rival set of language teaching methodologies was most successful.

Beretta's study (1986) was to compare the value of effects of innovative approaches, and later to provide information that might be useful to anyone interested in implementing similar approaches.

The purpose of Palmer's study (1992) was to show whether a particular theory of language learning was correct.

Mitchell's study (1992) was to discover whether a particular approach to bilingual education should be continued and extended.

The purpose of Coleman's study (1992) was to establish whether the needs of a group of students have been met by a particular innovation.

Alderson and Scott's study (1992) was aimed at identifying the effects of a particular approach to second language education and informing about the decisions on its future nature.

Nunan (1991) argues that evaluation implies a wider range of processes than assessment, which covers only the processes and procedures determining what learners have mastered in the target language. "Evaluation then is not simply a process of obtaining of information, it is also a decision-making process" (Nunan, 1992). He suggests giving careful consideration to three factors: defining construct, relating outcomes to goals and using appropriate measurement instruments. Finally, he says it is crucial that the instruments validly measure what is purpose oriented.

This lengthy list of different perspectives and perceptions has been viewed as the background setting for the topics discussed in the paper. Following some of the above mentioned authors, On completion of the model-building period some of the above mentioned authors have accepted that there is no one way of doing evaluation. What was possible for this field was the articulation of standards. "Principles for undertaking evaluation were determined by four attributes – utility, feasibility, propriety and accuracy. Utility standards relate to the duty of an evaluator to find out who are the stakeholders and provide them with relevant information on time. The feasibility standards require evaluators to ensure that the evaluation design be workable in real world settings. The propriety standards demand that the evaluator behave ethically and recognize the rights of individuals who might be affected by the evaluation. The accuracy standards are concerned with the soundness of evaluation, requiring that information be technically adequate and that the conclusions are linked logically to the data" (Beretta, 1992).

The instruments and techniques that are usually being utilised by researchers are the following: interviews, learner diaries, questionnaires, protocol and transcript analysis, and observation records (Weird & Roberts, 1994). In our case we base the research on the information collected through a unified questionnaire. This type of evaluation is referred to as summative (Borg & Gall, 1989) and, having taken place at the end of the course, can provide information on the selected issues for the modification of succeeding programmes.

Typically, some of the "official" aims of evaluations are as follows:

- To decide whether the course has had its intended effect.
- To identify what effects the program has had.
- To justify future courses of action.
- To compare approaches / textbooks / etc.
- To show positive achievements of teachers and pupils.
- To motivate teachers.

We assume that these issues are worth being taken into consideration prior to any course. Later, to the advantage of it, they can be discussed in depth and properly judged.

Practical Considerations of the Case Study

In the Centre of Foreign Languages at KTU we believe that evaluation is of crucial importance for providing a feasible service and the account of the above-mentioned topics can bring about improvement in teaching and progress and satisfaction for learners. In our research we did not aim at the evaluation of one particular module, instead, focus was made on the language acquisition by means of a couple of modules offered to the first and second-year students during the autumn semester. The survey was conducted with 234 learners at nine faculties of the university.

The approach to a programme and its evaluation is usually discussed under the traditional WH-question headings: WHY (purpose), WHEN (timing), HOW LONG, WHAT (content), WHO (evaluator), WHO FOR (audience) and HOW (method). Only the WHAT and HOW ones have been selected for our purpose, since we have been restricted by the limited scope of this paper. The provided questionnaire (see Appendix) was composed of closed responses that are easy to compare and analyse. The questionnaire was kept relatively short and questions laid out within the frame of reference of the respondents. Certainly, we do not consider it completely adequate to try to compress educational outcomes into a single dimension of measurement. But in spite of some reservations we strive to be objective, which is very hard in evaluation. However, certain sound conclusions can be drawn from these evaluation findings.

"WHAT did they learn" correspond to questions 9 and 10 in the questionnaire, and the learners' were asked to evaluate their performance in understanding the language prior to and after the courses. The results have been presented in the following table.

Table 1. Language acquisition evaluation in percent.

%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
Before	3	5	6	21	31	41	43	44	18	6
Now	0	1	4	7	12	25	40	*99*	*66*	10

The findings in "before" showing a lower percentage compared with "now" suggest that the course was beneficial to learners in highest evaluation (80%-100%) and is a positive increase in understanding the language on the completion of the course, which places a considerable optimism for the course teaching staff and its future service.

Further, the HOW corresponds to skills development that has been assessed with prevailing choice of "a little". Whereas with regard to reading and speaking, the learners' responses indicated the "yes" preference suggesting a pronounced progress in the skills, for reading in particular. These findings speak in favour of the sufficient focus on these skills during the learning process in the English classroom. It is obvious that the learners themselves appreciate the importance of constant language practice. The results also give a good feedback for the teachers indicating that the assignments have been beneficial both in the amount and in the mastery of the target language. This is presented in the following table.

Table 2. Skills development evaluation (n=234).

Answers	Hearing	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Pronunciation
YES	72	*98*	*121*	89	70	65
A LITTLE	117	96	95	115	128	131
NO	45	40	18	30	36	38

Also, an indication of a limited learners' progress in hearing especially (no improvement recorded) gives clues that focus has to be made on the skill causing most difficulty, i. e. listening. As is known, this practice could lead to speaking proficiency too.

With regard to WHAT questions, we analysed the importance of homework assignments. Students agreed upon their impact on language mastery with a very strong "yes". What is more, the respondents approved of "the right amount" of it during the semester with a pronounced certainty. The following table gives a clear view of it.

Table 3. Importance of homework assignments.

A	Yes	A little	No
	134	90	10
B	Too much	Just the right amount	Not enough
	32	197	5

A. – Homework helped in language studies.
B. – Appropriate amount of homework.

A variety of choices was provided for the learners to assess their classes, course books and the teaching. Due to the students' belonging to different faculties, we expected diverse attitudes and opinions; therefore, a number of responses were expected from one person. As a paradox, a more subjective approach on the students' part has lead to a more objective assessment of the learning settings.

Finally, we questioned the respondents' attitudes to their classroom activities. The results have exceeded our best expectations indicating that more than half of the learners were completely satisfied with their classes and enjoyed them, as is displayed in the table below.

Table 4. Evaluation of classes, materials and teaching.

Labeling	Classes	Materials	Teaching
Interesting	*106*	*64*	*105*
Easy	11	10	-
Useful	*139*	-	*115*
Average	31	-	25
Just right	28	-	-
Boring	13	29	8
Helpful	-	*90*	-
Difficult	-	24	-
Attractive	-	20	-
Flexible	-	-	*63*
Inspiring	-	-	14
Too much Lithuanian	-	-	3
Enough Lithuanian	-	-	*39*
Not enough Lithuanian	-	-	16

"Interesting" and "useful" scored best opinions in both classes and teaching evaluation. It obviously points out that the delivered lessons must have been of benefit to learners, on the other hand, it suggests that it was what they had expected from the course. Label "helpful" gives a very rewarding assessment of the applied materials and sounds rather objective and trustworthy, under the given range of alternative evaluation options in the questionnaire. Furthermore, "flexible" has shown the appropriate teachers' response to their needs. It suggests that a variety of approaches and techniques has been successfully used and approved by the learners in the classroom. Concerning the use of the mother tongue, it was applied to translate and compare as much as expected – "enough", which indicates a good balance of using both languages in the classroom.

Conclusions

As a result of active involvement in evaluation, the teaching staff could be led to reappraisal of learning objectives, preparing and adapting materials in response to unfolding students' needs, developing techniques to monitor performance and progress – both theirs and students'. The current evaluation has been seen crucial to the development of professional competence and the capability of the staff to sustain courses for further service. It has also enabled us to make value judgments and take measures to remedy the observed shortcomings and insufficiencies of the programmes. In order to be objective, a number of other issues not included in the scope of this paper are having an effect on learning, to name just a few – the relationship between administrative and teaching stuff, resources available at an institution, emotional and intellectual climate.

Addressing the following aims of the evaluation, the findings have been satisfactory and have led to mutual benefit both for the learners and teachers:

- The evaluation has been informative;
- It has helped the participants to become more critical;
- It has encouraged the students and teachers to take evaluation more seriously;
- It has shown that a significant progress resulted;
- It has indicated what has to be done to improve language acquisition;
- It has raised the learners' awareness in terms of language skills development;
- It has indicated attitudes to materials / homework;
- It has displayed participation / responsibility of the learners and teachers in learning / teaching and in evaluation.

The process of evaluation has been of great benefit to both the staff and the course in that it has maintained and developed the staff awareness of goals and objectives. It has enabled us to reflect upon, understand and assess what we are doing, why we are doing it, and how to improve it.

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Mokomasis vertinimo vaidmuo – Kauno technologijos universiteto praktika

Santrauka

Straipsnyje aptariama svarbi vertinimo, kaip edukacinės priemonės reikšmė kalbos mokymo ir mokymosi procese, apžvelgiamos švietimo vertinimo tradicijų ištakos ir tyrimų praktika, svarstomi programų ypatumų aspektai ir vertinimo kriterijai.
KTU atlikto tyrimo rezultatai atspindi, kaip studentai vertina kai kuriuos anglų kalbos modulius, dėstomus universitete. Išanalizavus gautus rezultatus bus siekiama dviejų tikslų – tobulinti esamus modulius ir efektyviau padėti studentams išmokti kalbų. Kurso pabaigoje 234 apklausoje dalyvavę pirmojo ir antrojo kurso studentai pareiškė savo nuomonę ir apibūdino pasiekimus bei lūkesčių išpildymą. Straipsnyje aptarti mokymo priemonių atitikimo, dėstymo metodų ir formų parinkimo, kalbinių įgūdžių vystymo, studentų poreikių patenkinimo, pasiektos pažangos ir kt. įvertinimo rezultatai. Pozityvi kritika, dėstytojų išvados bei studentų vertinimo rezultatai bus naudojami įveikiant pasitaikiusius trūkumus, ribotumą bei suvaržymus, taip pat šalinant nepakantumą lankstumui ir naujovėms, siekiant abiem pusėm naudingų tikslų: studentams – tobulėti mokantis kalbų, o pedagogams – didžiuotis savo darbo rezultatais.

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APPENDIX

COURSE EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE

(in questions 4, 5, 6 and 8 choose as many answers as you wish)

1.Do you think your English has improved?

1.1.hearing   a. yes   b. a little   c. no

1.2.speaking

1.3.reading

1.4.writing

1.5.spelling

1.6.pronunciation

2.What do you think about the amount of homework?

a. too much homework   b. just right amount   c. not enough homework

3.Do you think the homework helped you to study English?

a. yes   b. a little   c. no

4.Do you think your English classes were:

Interesting   c. helpful   e. just right

easy   d. average   f. boring

5. Do you think your textbook was:

a. interesting   c. helpful   e. just right   g. difficult

b. easy   d. average   f. boring   h. attractive

6. What do you think of the teaching?

a. interesting   d. boring   g. too much Lithuanian

b. useful   e. flexible   h. enough Lithuanian

c. average   f. inspiring   i. not enough Lithuanian

7. Did you enjoy your English classes?

a. yes   b. a little   c. no

8. How did you compare this class to the other English classes you have taken?

a. more interesting   c. more useful   e. the same

b. less interesting   d.less useful   f. don't know

9. How much could you understand at the beginning of the semester?

10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

10. How much can you understand now?

10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

11. About how many times were you absent from class?

a. less than 5   b. more than 5   c. more than 10

12. Your comments of the course.