Evaluating Teaching Strategies in 2002

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This paper highlights issues concerning the evaluation of teaching strategies given its growing importance in Japanese educational institutions. This requires careful consideration of numerous critical factors as well as thoughtful preparation and planning on the part of the evaluator with the ultimate goal of improving the classroom situation. The bulk of this paper explores three ways in which evaluation of teaching strategies can be considered, that is:

1. how we can evaluate our own teaching strategies,
2. how others may evaluate our teaching strategies,
3. how we can evaluate the teaching strategies of others.

The evaluation of teaching strategies is acknowledged by educational researchers to be a key component of many models of teacher development and continued professional growth.

本稿は日本の教育機関でその重要性がますます高まったきている教授法の評価というものに焦点を当てて書いたものである。これは、最終的には授業の状況を改善することを目的とするものであり、評価する側の周到な準備と計画が必要であると同時に多くの重要な要因を慎重に考慮しなければならない。本稿では教授法の評価について以下の3つの方法で調査している：
1、自らの教授法をどのように評価するか
2、自らの教授法を他人がどのように評価するか
3、他人の教授法をどのように評価するか
教授法の評価は、教育学の研究者たちの間では、教師の能力開発および専門家としての成長のための多くのモデルの中でも最も重要な要素であることが知られている。

Introduction

The evaluation of teaching practices and strategies is gaining an ever-increasing amount of attention from all levels of educational management. The "purest" reasons given for performing such evaluations include the promotion of individual growth and professional development, diagnoses of classroom practices, and assessment of the degree of goal achievement attained by the teacher. The most common reason given is that specific performances need to be monitored to ensure some set of predetermined standards are at least being met. In such cases, evaluation is said to be used to determine if any changes are required for the objectives to be reached. Unfortunately, more often than not, evaluations are used to enforce conformity in an institution or even as a type of punitive action. It goes without

saying that poor evaluations of a teacher are usually grounds for dismissal. It is little wonder then that the term evaluation conjures up negative connotations in the minds of many teachers. There are, however, many positive benefits to be gained through the evaluation of teaching strategies if it is done with appropriate criteria, goals and frame of mind.

This paper takes a positive approach in examining the various elements involved in evaluating teaching strategies and suggests thirteen topic areas to help focus future evaluations. Also suggested is that approaches such Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory can be used to add new dimensions and vitality to a sometimes tedious evaluation process. Finally, a brief overview of some of the attributes of a "good teacher" will be proposed.

Defining Terms

The first step is to define the terms used; "evaluation" and "teaching strategies". The latter term, "teaching strategies", is a very broad label encompassing all teaching practices used by a teacher to instruct learners. A great deal of research has been devoted to this topic and the choices are many and varied, however, it is not the purpose of this paper to suggest which teaching strategies are "best" as there is no such determination. For the purposes of the discussion that follows, teaching strategies is defined here as the process and activities employed by a teacher to aid students in acquiring new knowledge or skills in a classroom situation.

Although the term "evaluation" is being used with ever increasing frequency in relation to program and teacher performance, it is a difficult term to define. In particular, administrators and educators constantly disagree about what evaluation is and what it should do. For some it is equated with measurement against some predetermined scale, or an instrument to define how well specific objectives or goals are being met, while for others evaluation stems from a professional judgment on the value or performance of some activity. In addition to these, I believe the term "evaluation" could also be associated with "discovery" in that every evaluation undertaken seeks to explore the state of some event or process.

As for a working definition for teacher evaluation, I would suggest the following:

Evaluation is the gathering of as much relevant information as time permits which will assist the evaluator, using appropriate criteria, in the making of decisions, which will (hopefully) lead to improvement in the classroom teaching situation. This definition highlights the three essential elements of effective evaluation, namely (1) the gathering of relevant data, (2) the importance of appropriate criteria in the decisional process, and (3) the ultimate purpose of evaluation being the general improvement in teaching.

The next step is to address some important basic questions, namely, who, what and how, that will determine the nature of the evaluation to be performed.

Who does the evaluation ?

The question of who performs the evaluation is most often closely associated with the purpose of the evaluation. If the purpose is to get a "snap-shot" of a teacher's current teaching practices, then self-evaluation or peer evaluation may be the most appropriate. If the evaluation is related to a teacher's periodic progress report, it may be done be a peer or a supervisor. However, if it is related to contract renewal, it will most likely be performed by a representative of the school's

management. In each case, the person who performs the evaluation has a different set of goals and objectives related to their specific purpose.

Teachers can evaluate themselves. Although some administrators may harbor doubts as to its effectiveness, self-evaluation has shown itself to be an extremely effective tool in promoting positive change in teaching strategies. With self-evaluation techniques such as those described in O'Dowd (1995), teachers can seek answers to key questions they might have about their own performance and progress in their classes. This can be carried out through a variety of approaches and instruments, with the teacher selecting one or more of those which suites their particular situation. These tools can include:

* personal reflection of a particular question over a period of time,
* keeping a teaching diary for your observations or thoughts,
* self-reporting using some predetermined checklists or inventory,
* using audio or video recording of classes to capture the process for later analysis.

This approach is by nature non-threatening as there are no outside interventions to deal with and the teacher is solely responsible for their own progress.

Once teachers feel comfortable with various forms of self-evaluation, they may be ready to expand their experience into peer evaluations. In this approach, teachers call upon their peers to assist them in an evaluation of their classroom performance in order to gain different perspectives or others insights into their own classroom situation. It is usual in such cases that the teacher will call upon a colleague whom they trust and share mutual respect. Serious consideration needs to be given to these issues prior to instigating evaluation procedures in order to promote the positive development of professional relationships amongst peers.

What will be evaluated ?

Numerous factors come into play in every classroom situation, most of which are managed by the teacher to varying degrees. But an evaluation cannot hope to track all of these factors at the same time and be expected to extract the data needed. The best that can be hoped for is that the field can be narrowed down to those items deemed pertinent and necessary to achieve the evaluation objectives. Also, evaluations need not be limited to just what happens in the classroom. As Nunan (1988, p18-19) rightly points out, the areas that should be included in an evaluation need not start and stop at the classroom door; initial planning procedures, program goals and objectives, the selection and grading of content, materials and learning activities, and the assessment process itself should ideally also be included. Therefore, the evaluator must decide or negotiate how wide or narrow the scope of their evaluation needs to be.

Before deciding how an evaluation is to be carried out, the first step should be to define why the evaluation is needed and what exactly is to be looked for or at. This requires the evaluation to:

(a) define the nature of the evaluation or the issues to be investigated
(b) formulate evaluation parameters, e.g. investigative questions, time frame, scope.
(c) determine how information is to be collected, i.e. through classroom observations or by other ways.

The question of "What is the evaluator looking for / at?" is usually foremost in the mind of the teacher to be evaluated. The following thirteen topic areas, based on Richards (1990) exploration of relevant classroom issues, provide a variety of investigative questions that may help both the teacher and evaluator to focus on specific factors to be considered in an evaluating teaching strategies.

1. Classroom management

How does the teacher govern classroom behavior?
How are teacher's expectations for positive/negative behavior communicated and reinforced?
How are problem students dealt with?
How is attention to instructional tasks maintained?

2. Teacher–student interactions

How much teacher-to-student communication occurs in a lesson?
How much student-to-teacher interaction is there?
Are the interactions open to different interpretations?
To what extent does the lesson engage the learners?
What turn-taking patterns are observed?

3. Grouping of students

How are students grouped? And are the groupings effective?
Is there a clear relationship between grouping patterns and teaching goals?
Do students always work with the same partners/in the same group?

4. Structuring of the lesson

How clearly are instructional goals related to students?
Is there a clear relationship between different activities within a lesson?
Is there a sense of development within a lesson or does it seem random?
What kind of openings and closings does the lesson have?

5. Learning tasks

What kinds of tasks/activities are employed during a lesson?
What kinds of demands do these tasks create for language/interaction?
Is the pacing of tasks adequate? Is there too little on some/too much on others?
How much of the lesson is spent on procedural / other non-instructional matters?
How much of the lesson are students engaged in learning tasks?
How does the teacher give feedback on task performance? Is it effective?

6. Teaching resources used

What teaching aids were employed? Was it effective?

7. Classroom interactions

What kinds of interactions took place?
How could the variety of interactions be improved?

8. Opportunities for students to speak

What is the ratio of teacher talk to student talk?
Does the teacher give sufficient time for students to answer questions?
Are all students given the opportunity to speak?

9. Quality of input

What is taught explicitly / implicitly?
What kind of language input is the teacher's speech providing?
Is the teacher using natural speaking style or "foreigner talk"?
To what extent does the teacher use the native tongue in teaching?

10. Quality of output

To what extent is accuracy or fluency the focus of activities?
How does teacher provide positive reinforcement?
What standard of student output does the teacher accept?
Are double standards obvious?

11. Communicativeness

Are opportunities for "real communication" provided in the classroom?
How are communication breakdowns dealt with?
How is silence handled?

12. Questions

What kind of questioning patterns are used?
Are questions distributed evenly in the class?
How often are display questions used?

13. Feedback and error correction

How does the teacher correct errors?
How does the teacher answer requests for clarification?
What error correction methods are used?

The abovementioned issues and questions are only a small part of the broad spectrum of the possible factors that an evaluation of teaching strategies may consider.

Types of evaluation

Once it is determined what will be evaluated, the next question is "how" the information will be collected. There are two basic choices: evaluation designs can be predetermined or developmental in nature. A variety of tools and instruments (e.g. evaluation forms) both simple and complex may be employed. Often external factors, such as time or evaluation expertise, will determine the type of evaluation tools used.

Predetermined designs concentrate on set objectives and attempt to be as objective as possible in measuring specific variables. Such "off-the-shelf" evaluation instruments may suit some situations but may be found lacking in others, increasing the possibility of mismatching evaluation instruments to teaching situations.

Developmental approaches, on the other hand, are flexible and responsive to situations. Here evaluators frequently adjust information-gathering devices (e.g. home-made evaluation forms, video, audio tape) to the emerging needs discovered. Information is shared and discussed with stakeholders (policy makers, employers, teachers, supervisors and even the students) in an attempt to involve everyone in the process and may include negotiation of how the evaluation will proceed.

Evaluation Instruments

Deciding on what evaluation instruments to use is not easy, even though there are a large number of pre-designed instruments available. Some evaluation instruments are complex and need considerable study and practice to achieve usable results. Others may simply not be suitable for particular evaluative purposes. Major types of instruments can be classified according to the following categories:

1. Recording procedures: coding predetermined behaviors listed on a form every time it occurs in the classroom, or recording what occurs at specific time intervals, e.g. every minute, every five or ten minutes.
2. Item types: observing instances of specific types of behaviors.
3. Multiple coding: requires an observer to code various mixes of interactions.
4. Real-time coding: use of video /audio taping of lessons.
5. Source of variables: have categories been derived from an explicit theoretical or empirical base, a modification/synthesis of existing schemes or home grown categories derived from Institutional needs?
6. Intended purpose: is evaluation needed for research, teacher training, contract requirements, control, or punitive reasons.
7. Units of analysis: is a time frame used, or move types.
8. Evaluation schemes: e.g. FOCUS developed by John Fanselow (1987) in which different aspects of classroom interaction/behavior are focused on, including verbal, paralinguistic, non-linguistic, cognitive, affective, pedagogical, content and discourse. (can be somewhat complex in its entirety and takes considerable practice in order to gain maximum results).

Again, the selection of appropriate criteria for the type of evaluation being considered is absolutely critical. In many instances, a fair amount of trial-and-error will be involved as the evaluators come to terms with the consequences of their prior decisions regarding evaluation choices.

The abovementioned questions and criteria will not be unfamiliar to those who have been involved in traditional types of teacher evaluation, but the field is far from static. New ideas about the roles of teaching and learning and how these can be integrated into the modern classroom setting have given rise to new ideas that impact on evaluations as well. One approach the author has used in his evaluation of his teaching practices and students' classroom learning is based on Dr. Howard Gardner's 1983 theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI).

Multiple intelligences theory

Basically, Gardner believed that traditional ideas concerning what constituted intelligence were too limited and proposed the concept of multiple intelligences that described a broader range of human potentials. Gardner's concept considered there are eight intelligences:

1. linguistic,
2. logical or mathematical,
3. bodily or kinesthetic,
4. musical,
5. spatial,
6. interpersonal (social),
7. intrapersonal (self-knowledge).
8. naturalist (in tune with nature)

Gardner's theory hypothesizes that each person has all eight intelligences, but usually has one or two of these in greater degree. He suggests teachers should aim to provide opportunities for developing all students' intelligences, but states that too often educators focus primarily on the first three or four. To assist teachers expand their focus, several questionnaires are now available to explore how these intelligences are being developed in the classroom. An example is the questionnaire developed by Tanner (2001, p58) that aims to help teachers examine their teaching practices in relation to MI theory applied to their students. Using such questionnaires enables teachers to evaluate their teaching strategies and work to build their own intelligences strategies in those areas where they may perceive some weakness.

Of course, even the application of such new ideas doesn't alter how evaluations are basically regarded, that is, in general terms of what is "good" and "bad". However, perceptions of what constitutes "bad teaching" usually stems from different styles and unfamiliar approaches. What needs to be emphasized, but is largely forgotten, is that evaluation is a vital part of the evolution of the education process and that a good teacher is one who has the flexibility to be able to alter their teaching strategies to suit their classroom situation and maximize students learning rather than one who blindly conforms to some predetermined format. In short, evaluators need to reconsider what defines a "good teacher".

What defines a "good teacher"?

A review of ESL/EFL literature suggests the following behaviors are desirable in a "good teacher":

1. teachers encourage students to become active in their learning efforts
2. they motivate students to learn
3. they encourage discussion of points of view other than their own
4. they are knowledgeable in the subject they are teaching
5. they are well prepared to facilitate learning
6. they are well organized
7. they are enthusiastic, dynamic and energetic
8. they are committed to teaching as a career
9. they have interactive styles of presentation
10. they explain clearly, often repeating important materials

Clearly, not all teachers teach the same way, but they can all become "good" teachers if they make their primary goal the maximization of their students' learning experience.

Conclusion

The evaluation of teachers in their teaching roles is no simple task. However, this paper has argued that there are indeed positive benefits to be gained from evaluating teaching strategies if the evaluations are done with appropriate criteria, goals and frame of mind. Indeed, evaluation of teaching strategies is acknowledged by educational researchers to be a key component of many models of teacher development and continued professional growth. In the final analysis, however, it is still the teacher's choice of teaching strategies that will be evaluated and which will determine, fairly or otherwise, whether they will be regarded by others as a good teacher or not.

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