Using Learner Evaluations to Improve Language Teaching

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This article looks at teacher evaluation and program development from a learner-oriented perspective. After briefly reviewing the literature related to observation as an element in teacher evaluation and development, the article explores and then advocates the use of learners as course and teacher evaluators as a central component in language programs. It discusses the rationale for, research on, problems with, and ways of changing and combining three different roles: learners as evaluators, evaluators and supervisors as teachers, and teachers as learners. Mini-cases are used to illustrate the main issues involved.

学習者の評価を使った語学教育の改善

　本稿は学習者の観点から教師評価と教授内容の進展を考察する。まず学習者の評価を教師評価と教育課程の一要素として検討する。
　次に学習者がコースや教師の評価者となり、語学学習の中で中心的要素となる可能性を探り盟道する。その主張の論理的根拠、研究、問題点、方法を論じ、かつ評価者も教師も自ら変化すると同時に両者の役割を合わせ持つ必要性を考察する。又、実例をあげて関連した主要問題点を説明する。

1. Introduction

Improving the effectiveness of instruction in language programs can be very difficult for a variety of reasons. To become more effective implies an understanding of what is important, an ability to evaluate what is important, and then the skill to change whatever needs changing. None of this is easy. As Allwright and Bailey (1991) put it:

Becoming more effective cannot be a simple linear matter. We cannot expect to reach more understanding one day, and then

simply be more effective the next. We have to work continually for increased understanding, and work simultaneously for enhanced effectiveness, in a constant cycle with no starting point and certainly no single and triumphant finishing point. (p. 196)

What can we do as teachers—and as supervisors who evaluate teaching—to improve both instructional and program effectiveness on a continuing basis? This paper looks briefly at various ideas that have been proposed, chiefly dealing with observation, and then investigates the use of learner evaluations of teaching as one component that can offer important information to teachers and evaluators alike in their quest to understand learner perceptions and then to work on improving instructional services.

The focus of the paper is on the evaluation of teachers. McLaughlin and Pfeifer (1988) state that "Teacher evaluation is . . . pursued as a potent strategy for enhancing both quality and control of . . . education," but "teachers share neither this enthusiasm nor these expectations" (p. 1). McNeil (1981) goes further to say that teachers fear evaluation. Stiggins and Duke (1988) sew the threads together by saying that "The paradox of teacher evaluation is that it holds the potential to help nearly every teacher improve, yet in actual practice it helps almost no one" (p. 1). Clearly, then, this is an area that deserves more attention by teachers and evaluators alike.

Teacher evaluation has traditionally been done, at least in part, by observations of teachers in the classroom. Sheal (1989) notes several problems related to this arrangement:

1. Most classroom observations are conducted by administrators rather than by practicing teachers.
2. Much of the observation that goes on is unsystematic and subjective.
3. Most observation is for teacher-evaluation purposes, with the result that teachers generally regard observation as a threat.
4. Post-observation meetings tend to focus on the teacher's

behavior rather than on developing the teacher's skills. As feedback from observers is often subjective, impressionist, and evaluative, teachers tend to react in defensive ways, and given this atmosphere, even useful feedback is often "not heard." (p. 93)

In various ways, then, using observations for traditional evaluation purposes limits their usefulness for evaluation, while ignoring the pedagogical value of classroom observation. Several writers (see Fanselow, 1987, p. 20; Sheal, 1989, p. 92; Williams, 1989, p. 85) have called for descriptive and developmental approaches to classroom observation which downplay or eliminate the evaluative function altogether. Allwright and Bailey (1991, p. 198) see classroom research done by the teachers themselves—"exploratory teaching"—as a solid way to keep improving. Richards (1990, p. 119), calling it "self-monitoring," also sees benefits in this approach, noting that it encourages the use of reflection about one's teaching, helps teachers become more realistic in their views of their own teaching, and makes the teacher, and not the evaluator, responsible for his or her own improvement.

Changing the focus of classroom observations to exploration and self-monitoring is a positive direction for the language teaching profession because it encourages teacher development. However, along with teacher development, there is also a need for program development. Administrators still need information about teaching and teachers in order to make fundamental program and personnel decisions. For example, if one teacher is having major problems in getting along with students in course after course, the administrator may feel obliged to take action in one way or another for the benefit of the program and the learners. It may take years for an ineffective teacher to become an effective one, but administrators may have to deal with the consequences of ineffective teaching on a recurring basis. As such, using learner evaluations of teaching is one component of an evaluation system that can aid administrators in making program decisions and also assist teachers in becoming more aware of certain matters that are

key to their own development, such as how the learners perceive their instruction.

The central thrust of the paper is for the need of teachers, evaluators, and learners to change and combine roles in order to enhance what goes on in the classroom. There is much we can learn from the learners if we step out of our own roles long enough to reflect on what they have to say. This shifting of roles is seen as essential but not at all common. As Sheal (1989) notes, "the world of education tends to be a 'world unto itself' and teachers and their supervisors often fail to realize that they may learn something from other worlds" (p. 102). It appears easy, for example, for educators to assume that the roles of learner, teacher, and evaluator are completely distinct and different from one another. Though each role does carry with it certain explicit and implicit tasks and responsibilities, there is also much that members of each group can learn from the others.

The paper is divided into three sections: learners as evaluators, evaluators as teachers, and teachers as learners. The context involves both university and adult language learners. As such, the assumptions are more androgogical (human oriented) than pedagogical. This distinction is relevant because of the importance of learner maturity to the notion of learners evaluating teachers. The mini-cases described involve English as the target language, mostly as a foreign language, and ESP teacher education. The implications, however, fit other foreign and second language teaching situations as well.

2. Learners as Evaluators

2.1 Rationale for Using Learners as Evaluators

In university or workplace ESL/EFL settings, learners ostensibly have reasons for and choices in making decisions about learning another language. Even where the learners are required to study English, they can still generally be assumed to be reasonably mature, fully-functioning individuals capable of engaging in meaningful discourse about their language learning process. As such, it seems reasonable to include their views about the course in any evaluation; in fact, this is being done in many educational settings (Pennington & Young, 1989).

According to Aleamoni (1981), there are several key reasons to get information from the learners, including (emphasis added):

1. *Students are the main source of information* about (a) accomplishment of important educational goals, such as the development of motivation for continued learning, and (b) areas of rapport, degrees of communication, and the existence of problems between instructors and students.
2. *Students are the most logical evaluators of the quality and effectiveness of and satisfaction with those course elements* (instructor, textbook, homework, course content, instruction, student interest, . . . attention, and general attitude).
3. *Student ratings provide a means of communicating between students and instructor*, which in large institutions may not exist in other forms.
4. *Student demands for information* about instructors and courses . . . *encourage instructional improvement.* (p. 111)

In discussing the learners' role in change stemming from evaluation, Loew (1979) notes the relation between involving learners at the beginning of the process and their subsequent commitment to the results of that process. For some educators, this may entail a substantial change in perspective—from seeing learners as subordinates to seeing them as partners or clients. That change, however, can yield benefits to all.

2.2 Concerns and Research Findings about Learners as Evaluators

Having stated the basic reasons for involving the learners in the evaluation process, it becomes important to look at the possible problems related to using learners in this way. Aleamoni (1981, p. 111) addresses concerns that have been expressed by teachers in various fields. The concerns are listed below, along with Aleamoni's summary of the research findings in italics:

1. Learner judgments are inconsistent due to "immaturity, lack of experience, and capriciousness." *False—Judgments are very consistent.*
2. Only those who are published researchers can properly teach or evaluate other teachers. *No clear trend is evident.*
3. Learners use popularity rather than effectiveness as their criterion. *False—Learners are precise evaluators.*
4. Learners need to be away from a course to gain the perspective needed to evaluate accurately. *It is difficult to get solid information here, but what research there is indicates agreement between present and past students.*
5. The rating forms lack reliability and validity. *When the forms have been developed professionally, the reliability is high. Most evidence suggests validity as well.*
6. Extraneous variables such as class size, the sex of learner and teacher, time of the class, course level, teacher's rank, course as requirement or elective, and learner as major or nonmajor will affect results. *Research into size of class, sex, course as requirement, course level, and teacher rank is mixed, while that into time and student major indicates basically no effect.*
7. Learners' grades correlate highly with ratings given. *This varies widely, but is most often weak.*
8. Midterm learner ratings are not useful in improving teaching. *Research on this is mixed.*

The concerns listed above certainly point to teacher suspicions about having learners evaluate them. However, the research indicates that some of the concerns may be unfounded while others are much more complicated than some teachers think.

In the field of second/foreign language teaching, cultural differences and other matters may sometimes come into the evaluation picture. Sharp (1990) notes five problems relevant to an EFL course in Brunei Darussalam:

1. Asking a student about your course may suggest that you do not know what you are doing.
2. Students may not give an honest reply to questions; they may respond in the way they think you want them to respond.
3. Students may display some personal antagonism towards individual teachers or situations.
4. Students may feel that commenting on the effectiveness of the course is not their concern.
5. Students may even feel that adverse comments may have some future negative effect on their grades. (p. 135)

The issues of foreign language learner expectations, fears, and diplomatic manuevering are well worth looking into and may be very much culturally, institutionally, or even personally defined. Thus, using learners' views as evaluative input may be very complicated in some contexts in some parts of the world. In such contexts, much preparation and persuasion on the part of the administrator involved may be needed to begin the process. Nevertheless, the rationale for and the research on using learner evaluations in university and adult settings are generally too strong to be dismissed lightly. The author's own experiences with Japanese, Thai, and learners from many other nations mirror closely what Aleamoni (1981) has noted.

2.3 Ways of Changing the Learner's Role

With all the perceived problems noted, it might be easy to dismiss the use of learners as evaluators as a wonderful idea which is not realistic. That would be analogous to throwing the baby out with the bathwater, however, because some problems are more imagined than real, and others can be dealt with to negate any major drawbacks that may exist. Sharp (1990), for example, mentioned that talking over the purposes of his questionnaires with the learners and emphasizing the use of anonymity helped him to avoid some of the problems.

Waters (1987) and Lewkowicz and Moon (1985) have noted specific ways of involving learners in the evaluation process. Lewkowicz and

Moon (1985) state that in the communicative approach "the learners can share some of the management responsibilities with the teacher" (p. 47). This seems to be both a reasonable notion for the adult learning situation *and* a natural cause of concern for individual teachers worried about having even more pressures put upon them. It could also be said that the whole move toward communicative teaching has involved a paradigm shift so huge for some teachers that the idea of sharing classroom *and* evaluation responsibilities would be seen as threatening. Nevertheless, *if* the focus is on the learning process, then it seems essential to involve the learner *and* to work towards enabling the learner to evaluate various aspects of the learning process (Breen and Candlin, 1980).

Some of the ways of using learners as evaluators include (a) using anonymous end-of-course rating scales; (b) using anonymous end-of-course open-ended questionnaires; (c) having informal discussions with learners throughout the course (Waters, 1987); (d) having student government committees; (e) having student-teacher curriculum committees (Loew, 1979); (f) having learners write dialogue journals throughout the course; (g) interviewing learners at the end of the course or at the end of their stay in the program; and (h) giving all learners questionnaires at the beginning of the course so that even dropouts may provide feedback (Scriven, 1981). There are pros and cons, and cautions, with each way mentioned.

Rating scales are probably the most common way of getting learners to evaluate teachers and courses. Doyle (1983) lists the pros and cons as:

PROS	CONS
1. Easily analyzed & stored	1. Unable to reflect subtle thoughts
2. Efficient (quick & cheap)	2. Do not promote reflective responses
3. Structure allows precise & uniform data-gathering	3. Can be seen as tedious, repetitive & irrelevant
4. Detailed guidelines available	4. Do not facilitate dialogue

The cons noted above are important and can be neutralized by other more responsive measures, such as informal discussions, interviews, and quick action on problem areas mentioned. As in other types of evaluation, triangulating the data is valuable here no matter which technique is the main focus of the effort.

Waters (1987) mentions definite benefits of involving learners in course evaluation throughout the course, through the use of regular, informal feedback sessions. Such benefits include opportunities to respond quickly to any weak points in the course, the establishment of trust, and building commitment to the course goals into the process. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987) note, "an open and trusting relationship between the teacher and the students is the best basis for promoting frank and useful feedback" (p. 154). Thus, student involvement can include both reaction to the teaching *and* participation in the planning of what goes on in the classroom.

2.4 Uses of Learner Evaluations

Learner evaluations of course elements such as content, materials, teachers, and teaching can be used both for formative and summative purposes. For formative purposes, such evaluations can be very helpful in adjusting the courses to make them more appropriate to the learners. Such adjustments can be made in teaching techniques, methodology, materials, and in matching content to learner needs and interests. Teachers, curriculum coordinators, and administrators can become blinded to certain practical issues that the learners see very well. As such, getting accurate information from the learners about their perceptions of what is going on can be of great benefit to the faculty and staff— *if* the evaluations are interpreted and used responsibly.

In working towards the fair and worthwhile use of student ratings, Pennington and Young (1989) advise that the evaluation instruments and procedures be made by evaluators familiar with language teaching, that the ratings include room for open-ended responses, and that learners be oriented to both the purposes and the content of the evaluation. They also note that:

Student evaluations of (language) teachers can thus best serve formative purposes if employed in a context of strong administrative support for faculty members, public rewards for outstanding performance, and opportunities for training to achieve growth as a language teaching professional (p. 629)

It remains very important to remember that student ratings are not seen as the sole basis for teacher evaluation, but as one very powerful and relatively direct way of viewing the process, especially for formative purposes. For summative purposes, triangulating the data through the use of other measures—such as teacher interviews, classroom observation, peer review, self-evaluation—is the key to evaluating both fairly and effectively.

2.5 Cases of Learners as Evaluators

Real cases from EFL and ESP teacher education will be discussed briefly to illustrate both the potential and the problems of the evaluation process noted in this paper. In this section, only the learner as evaluator will be discussed; later, the cases will be expanded to include the other roles.

2.5.1 The ineffective teacher with little support

In a language teaching company in Japan in which classes were conducted at client corporations, one teacher consistently had classes with high dropout rates. Though no formal student evaluations were used by the company, student-generated complaints about the teacher were frequently reported by the client representatives. These complaints described a teacher who was very nervous and lacking in confidence. This resulted in a tendency to mumble and fidget frequently. In addition, the teacher lacked focus in the classroom. He did not indicate to students the purpose of the various activities; he also did not plan lessons or organize the classroom time well. He often rushed through the regular lesson and then fumbled around for topics to discuss or activities to do. This resulted in even more mumbling and fidgeting.

Discussions with the client representatives helped the teacher's supervisor to assist the teacher by giving him much more guidance in

overcoming fear, speaking clearly, planning lessons, organizing time effectively, and using techniques to get the students more involved in the classroom. In addition to giving the teacher guidance, the supervisor began creating supplementary materials for possible use by all teachers in the program. These materials provided the students with more focus for their language activities, gave the nervous teacher a "crutch" to rely on, caused the beginning of a practical resource file for all teachers, and indicated to the client company's representatives that the educators took client concerns seriously.

2.5.2 The course that fit the program's objectives but which generated unsatisfactory process and results.

In an ESP teacher training program, one course was designed to familiarize English teachers with the world of science. This course specifically fit the particular program's objectives in preparing teachers to enter university-oriented teaching. The course was handled by an ESP teacher who had scientists talk to the learners about various scientific disciplines. Student ratings were used in the program and, according to the teacher, had not indicated any problems with the course. However, a program evaluator's interviews with former students of the course revealed intense and antagonistic feelings about the course. The majority of the students indicated a desire, often with much emotion, to eliminate the course from the program. Although the specific reasons for this desire were not obtained, the information from the interviews was valuable to the evaluator in several ways. First, the ratings previously used were not anonymous; the students were instructed to sign their names on their forms, violating one of the basic tenets of evaluation. Second, the complete mismatch between learner and teacher statements about the course clearly indicated a need to rethink the rationale and methodology used in the course. Third, the unexpected discovery by the evaluator of problems with the course helped to broaden the evaluator's own perspective in conducting other evaluative and administrative work.

3. Evaluators as Teachers

Once the information from students is obtained, the supervisor or evaluator analyzes the information and then tries to use it in ways that can improve the program. The evaluator as teacher is an essential part of this effort. As Cronbach (1983) notes, "Teaching begins when the evaluator first sits down with members of the policy-shaping community to elicit their questions. It continues during every contact the evaluator has with program participants or with others in his audience" (p. 9). The commonly perceived role of evaluator as judge, while important, can serve to so intimidate or antagonize teachers unnecessarily that it can get in the way of working effectively if it is not combined with the supportive work of teaching the teachers. Too much emphasis on the judge role can leave the evaluator with the image of a Darth Vader, a dark and sinister force to be resisted; such an image serves only to complicate the evaluation process and create problems for interpreting and using the information obtained.

3.1 Rationale for Supervisors/Evaluators Being Teachers

There are at least four related reasons why evaluators need to function as teachers. First, as mentioned above, the evaluator needs to reduce fears and suspicions so that the evaluator can do his or her job without every move being closely scrutinized by teachers (McNeil, 1981). Second is the need to inform the teachers of the goals, criteria, procedures, and conflicting desires that define and constrain the evaluator (Darling-Hammond, 1983). Third is the need to establish and encourage trust and open communication with the teachers involved (McLaughlin & Pfeifer, 1988). Fourth is the need to persuade the various stakeholders, including teachers, to take action on the evaluation once the recommendations have been given (McLaughlin and Pfeifer, 1988). Any evaluator who ignores these needs risks losing credibility and seeing recommendations or directives ignored.

Supervisors, by the very nature of their work, evaluate in order to enhance program development. Dealing with teachers who are perceived as being ineffective can be at times a very difficult and unpleas-

ant task, but whatever the supervisor does has implications for the program and for virtually everyone involved in it. Tolerating poor performance and sidestepping the problems sends a clear signal to teachers and learners; it teaches them that learner evaluations have no tangible relevance to or influence on their day-to-day lives. At the other end of the spectrum, reassigning an ineffective teacher or removing that teacher from the program entirely sends a signal that ongoing evaluations by learners are extremely important elements of the learning/ teaching environment. In the middle, of course, lies the path of working with the affected teacher to improve performance as perceived by the learners. Ongoing teacher development is at the center of the evaluator's task.

3.2 Characteristics of Supervisors/Evaluators as Teachers

What characteristics does an evaluator need to teach teachers? Brock (1981) notes that the most important relate to "a commitment to student learning, an abiding curiosity about the relationship between teacher, student, and subject matter, an empathic disposition, a knowledge of local resources, a tendency toward self-disclosure, and effective interpersonal skills" (p. 239). Though these are very important, a sense of balance also seems important. For example, some educators indulge in so much self-disclosure that the purpose of the interaction may be lost in the process. Balance is needed to protect against the polar extremes of too little or too much self-disclosure.

If evaluators need to be teachers, how should they teach? McLaughlin and Pfeifer (1988) talk about the need for evaluators to enable others to go through "the process of unfreezing, of reexamining the understandings, beliefs, and practices fundamental to the institution [and note that] some kind of triggering event appears necessary" (p. 30). The concept of unfreezing is one that many educators are already familiar with, at least intuitively. It is both an appealing and powerful analogy. Helping others to unfreeze, however, is not an easy task. Any evaluator who has had to face teachers who have not succeeded in earning the appreciation or respect of the learners knows the emotional turmoil that can be caused by negative evaluations. As unpleasant as this can

sometimes be, evaluations by learners and discussions afterward between teachers and supervisors can serve as triggering events needed to begin the process of development.

Cronbach (1983) adds that "educating is as much a matter of raising questions as of providing answers. Especially where the topic is value-laden, the educator's responsibility is to help others ask better questions and determine what actions are appropriate to their own aims" (p. 9). He goes on to say that the evaluator should "reduce uncertainties, but . . . should also challenge simplistic views" (p. 10). One way the supervisor can do this is to analyze and compare learner evaluations from many classes in depth, including such matters as time of the class, skill area taught, and how the same learners rated different teachers. What is learned from this can then help in responding to defensive statements and clarifying various matters to teachers. For example, an afternoon teacher may get unsatisfactory ratings from the learners and then say that the reason for the bad ratings is the time of the class. By analyzing and comparing data from the evaluations beforehand, the supervisor will be ready to respond to the statement and hopefully trigger, or re-trigger, the process of unfreezing.

3.3 Problems with Supervisors/Evaluators as Teachers

Since both evaluation and teaching are intensely human endeavors, the whole range of human emotions, weaknesses, and pitfalls serves to complicate the situation of the evaluator teaching the teacher. Brock (1981) mentions some of the problems facing the evaluator as helper, such as (a) irrelevance of the advice; (b) lack of awareness of the other person's resistance to the "help"; (c) mixed signals due to rapport building and reluctance to criticize; (d) the other person's desire to keep things hidden; and (e) the other teacher's tendency to deny or shift blame.

Irrelevant advice can sometimes be heard from evaluators who use too much self-disclosure in their interactions. The message may be an irrelevant, anecdotal story rather than a persuasive recommendation of ways to improve teaching. Self-disclosure may also create mixed

signals. Both the rapport-building process and natural reluctance of some evaluators to criticize can work against getting the real message across to the teacher. Bridges (1986) notes that assurances of job security, ambiguity in teacher evaluation, and the desire to avoid conflict and discomfort can confuse the specific teacher and demoralize other teachers, who may feel that incompetence is being rewarded while their efforts and results are being ignored.

The second, fourth, and fifth problems mentioned above relate to the difficulty of actually getting ineffective teachers to improve. Bridges (1986) is critical of "salvage attempts" to improve the performance of poor teachers. He notes that such attempts are characterized by "unmuted criticism, defensive reaction, behavior specification, limited assistance, restrained support, extensive documentation, and little improvement" (p. 48)—in other words, much ado about nothing. Effective teaching by evaluators, then, is complex. The factors which affect the evaluator as teacher, combined with those which affect the teacher as learner, make the situation simultaneously extremely important and extremely delicate.

3.4 Key Points For Evaluators as Teachers to Remember

It is not only what is communicated but how, when, where, and for what ends. McLaughlin and Pfeifer (1988) note the key elements of timeliness, specificity, credibility, and intent. The evaluation should include feedback to the teacher soon after the evaluation, deal with specific concerns, come from someone the teacher respects, and be given in ways the teacher feels are supportive. They also note that:

> Teacher evaluation strategies, through open communication, interaction, and discussion, provide the kinds of professional stimulation and feedback that support individual growth consistent with institutional goals and values. Organizational control achieved through such normative means is the more enduring, robust, and predictable. (p. 84)

Loew (1979) discusses various teacher characteristics that need to be addressed in the process of modifying programs after evaluation. The

evaluator as teacher needs to address them as well. They include skills and knowledge needed for effective change, the process of acquisition of these skills, the encouragement of teacher creativity, and the process of feedback as changes are made. Cronbach (1983) also notes the value of communication skills and planning for communication with teachers. He provides a useful list of questions for evaluators:

- Did each fraction of the audience attend to the message?
- Did each understand it?
- Did each find it credible?
- Were the significant questions answered as well as possible?
- Did the answers alter the preconceptions of the audience?
- Was the dialogue leading to the decisions enriched and elevated as a consequence of the evaluation? (p. 11)

In all of the comments above, the evaluator is seen as a colleague or as a helper, not as a jealous critic or judge from on high. To the extent that the evaluator is respected and is perceived as a positive person, the message is more likely to be taken positively.

3.5 Cases of Supervisors/Evaluators as Teachers

Three cases will be discussed here, including the two mentioned previously.

3.5.1 The ineffective teacher with little support

In this case, the curriculum coordinator served as the supervisor in charge of dealing with the situation. Both the supervisor and the teacher were Americans. Private discussions were held with the ineffective teacher about the concerns and complaints of the clients. Since general rapport between the two was good, communication during the discussion was open, friendly, and frank. Upon hearing the concerns, the teacher immediately expressed regret and vowed to try to do better. The supervisor showed concern for the teacher's well-being and offered some general ideas and specific techniques and activities to produce better results in the classroom. The supervisor also encouraged the teacher to create worksheets to use with the book and volunteered to create others.

In the ensuing weeks, repeated discussions were held with the teacher to help with lesson planning and to discuss various ways of dealing with classroom situations. In addition, many new worksheets for learners were developed, mostly by the supervisor, both to help the particular teacher and to begin a teachers' resource file for all teachers in that branch of the company.

The supervisor used this case of an ineffective teacher to generate new processes and improvements for others. In so doing, more teaching was needed to persuade other teachers to join in the effort to create a teachers' resource file. The philosophy underlying the effort was "All for one and one for all," but some teachers resisted the idea, including a couple who actively resented any calls for sharing their good ideas with others. However, after a few months, when the resource file was filling with supplementary text exercises, vocabulary and grammar worksheets, language games and quizzes, and descriptions of teaching techniques and activities, the resistance melted away. Teachers recognized the value of the file to their own teaching.

The supervisor in this case spoke to the teacher in a timely manner, discussed very specific concerns and ways of dealing with those concerns, demonstrated his credibility through general knowledge and ability to help, and displayed good intentions by offering positive suggestions and then helping to implement some of the suggestions. As such, McLaughlin and Pfeifer's (1988) four elements were covered. Using Cronbach's (1983) questions to look at the case, it can be seen that the supervisor's communication with the ineffective teacher was solid. With some of the other teachers, however, the message was not understood completely in the beginning, nor seen as credible. The effort to teach them took more time to be successful.

3.5.2 The course that fit the program's objectives but which generated unsatisfactory process and results

In this case, the evaluator arranged a private meeting with the teacher to discuss the very negative findings. These two people were from different cultural backgrounds. The meeting was held prior to the

evaluation report being turned in to the department head and becoming public within the department. The evaluator discussed his own experiences and past problems in coordinating other speakers and empathized with the teacher's predicament in this regard. The evaluator also probed the teacher for possible factors that could explain the intensity of the student views. Finally, the evaluator and teacher discussed their thoughts on modifying the course. At the meeting, the communication seemed open and productive. The teacher asked for the evaluator to help teach the course in the future.

3.5.3 The ineffective teacher who did not admit the problem

One university teacher repeated received poor ratings from students in every class she taught. At the time a new evaluator first talked to her about the situation, her problems were well-known throughout the language teaching department. After documenting the poor student ratings for one semester, the evaluator talked with her about the ratings and tried to empathize with her situation. The teacher, however, was already defensive and stated that it was the students' problem, not hers. The evaluator tried to explain that it was a problem not only for the students, but also the teacher and the evaluator/supervisor. This discussion was intended as a gentle yet straight-forward awareness building session.

During the next semester, several influential teachers in the department advised the supervisor to dismiss the teacher from that particular program. The supervisor listened quietly and thought carefully about what was best for the students, for the teacher, for teacher development generally, and for the department. The effect of any decision on future departmental politics had to be considered as well. After poor student ratings came in again that semester, the evaluator again went to talk with the teacher about the problem. Again, the teacher was defensive. The evaluator tried to find a solution that would help the teacher improve her teaching while saving face and also help the program. He suggested and she agreed to have another teacher become co-teacher with her in the course, with the idea of the two teachers working together. This case illustrates both the process of the evaluator as teacher *and* the problems involved in dealing with defensive teachers in politicized situations.

4. Teachers as Learners

Teachers generally fear or are suspicious of evaluations and often see them as punitive rather than instructive. Omaggio, et al. (1979) note that some teachers view evaluation as an "invasion of privacy" (p. 236). From an organizational viewpoint, this may seem petty and short-sighted; however, from a teacher's viewpoint, the fears and suspicions are often justified. Evaluations from supervisory observers are often just snapshots and may not be very good snapshots at that. Administrative biases and blindspots may work against the program goals rather than for them, leaving some teachers feeling like Don Quixote, doing their best against impossible odds.

Nevertheless, *if* we can obtain reasonably valid and reliable evaluations from learners, and *if* the evaluators can show that they want to improve the program and the teaching that goes on within it, *then* it seems obvious that the teacher should be willing to learn and keep on learning throughout his or her teaching career. Indeed, even if the first two conditions are not met, it behooves every teacher to keep learning whenever and however for self-actualization purposes. As Brock (1981) notes, "Motivation is probably a key characteristic. Those who naturally seek to understand their effects on students and who are committed to finding improved methods of teaching are likely to benefit from evaluation-based development" (p. 240).

4.1 Rationale for Teachers Becoming Learners

Performance in education is not constant over time and the process of learning is, or should be, lifelong. Reflecting the need for teachers to keep learning throughout their professional careers, Smith (1977) notes four specific reasons for doing so, noting that learning can:

1. remedy the teacher's deficiencies arising out of defects in . . . initial teacher training preparation,
2. advance the teacher's skills and pedagogical knowledge required for new teaching roles,
3. advance and update the teacher's knowledge of subject matter,

4. train the teacher for non-tutorial positions. (pp. 179-180)

Given the state of affairs in much of teacher education, Smith goes on to note that lifelong learning often needs to be remedial in nature.

In discussing teacher education, Widdowson and Candlin (1990) discuss the terms awareness, knowledge, understanding, concern, and action. If we think of ourselves as teachers, we can also ask which of the above qualities we have. To improve teaching over time, all of the five qualities are needed and none can be taken for granted. Knowledge does not necessarily lead to concern, for example, and concern does not necessarily lead to positive or successful action.

Awareness, however, is one of the keys to this whole process. Teachers need to be aware of a variety of personal characteristics and course elements and processes as they do their work. The teacher as learner needs to be able to use self-assessment in a reflective way (Loew, 1979). As Murphy (1985) states, "A teacher who has awareness understands the processes, as far as that is possible with our limited knowledge. This teacher realizes that we do not know all the answers and cannot be answerable for everything, that defensiveness and secrecy do not help" (p. 14). These qualities describe the professional perspective, but insecurities and suspiciousness abound in many ESL/EFL contexts. However, if teachers can overcome their fears and take some risks, the benefits can be substantial in both personal/professional growth *and* organizational effectiveness (Nunan, 1988; Stenhouse, 1975). As Nunan (1988) notes, "it is not enough that teachers' work be studied, they need to study it themselves" (p. 147).

4.2. Methods of Teachers Learning

There are many ways in which a teacher can become a learner again. Information received from learner ratings and feedback can be used to direct explorations of classroom strategies, techniques, and interaction as well as personal habits that may help or hinder instructional aims. Classroom action research is now widely advocated in language teaching (Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Nunan, 1988; Pennington, 1988; Widdowson & Candlin, 1990). One example of action research is the

questioning of one's own teaching through the use of diary studies (Maurice, 1989). The purpose of such research is to enhance teacher awareness and performance by reflecting upon what is done and what goes on in the classroom.

Another example of action research for teacher development is to study specific questions of importance in the classroom. Nunan (1988) gives a few examples of such projects, including (a) seeing whether referential questions lead to more complex language than display questions; (b) getting learners to talk more and monitoring their efforts; and (c) checking whether small group activities improve the quality of learning (p. 149). Other methods of teachers being learners involve the use of systematic observation of classrooms by others, team teaching, and using video to record and analyze classroom processes (Nunan, 1988). Still others include attendance and participation in specific skill workshops, seminars, and conferences.

Whatever the method used, the importance of ongoing teacher development is obvious. ACTFL's provisional program guidelines for foreign language teacher education (ACTFL, 1988), though they deal with preservice education, seem generally applicable to most, if not all, inservice teachers as well. The guidelines focus on three general areas of development: personal, professional, and specialist. The area of personal development, which includes communication, acquisition and use of knowledge, and leadership, serves as a good example of what all of us need to work on to become the best possible teachers we can be. The sub-area of communication, which includes such matters as attuning to non-verbal cues, explaining clearly, and tailoring messages to fit different audiences, is one that is critically important, but which may take a lifetime to master.

4.3 Possible Problems with Teachers Being Learners

Brock (1981) calls for caution in expecting too much of solutions generated by evaluation-based development. He notes, for example, that evaluations seem to work better with those teachers who feel that their teaching is the chief cause of student progress than it does with

teachers who feel it is all up to the students. Likewise, those who receive fair-to-fairly good ratings from learners tend to improve more than those who receive low ratings. Also, teachers who rate themselves better than students rate them are more likely to change than teachers who agree with student ratings. Brock (1981) adds that "patience and persistence are required to alter the complex set of behaviors that comprise a teacher's style" (p. 241).

4.4 Cases of Teachers as Learners

This section completes each of the three mini-cases discussed earlier.

4.4.1 The ineffective teacher with little support

Because part of the problem with this teacher's performance was due to inadequte training and support for teachers in the program, and because the teacher was sincere about improving and open to suggestion, the actions taken to build a support system helped the teacher to learn how to use materials more effectively. The personality of the teacher remained basically unchanged, but his willingness to use what others suggested and gave to him led to somewhat improved evaluations from clients. The teacher did learn.

In addition, the teachers' resource file evolved so that teachers in that branch of the company became involved in building, expanding, and improving it. Later, when the contents of the file were shared with teachers in other branches, many more teachers learned to use the materials and to support the idea of sharing. Still later, the company decided to publish a workbook of many of the worksheets; teachers who contributed were recognized for their efforts. This in turn helped to further develop a sense of pride and desire to pursue excellence among the teachers involved.

What began as one set of problems with one particular teacher was turned into an opportunity to explore ways to improve not only that teacher's work, but also, potentially, the work of every other teacher in the company.

4.4.2 The course that fit the program's objectives but which generated unsatisfactory process and results.

The teacher in this case at first seemed open to learning but later, by choosing to take a reduced role in the course, and then not being involved in the course at all, turned away from the learning opportunities in dealing with the course. The evaluator became a co-teacher in the course, by necessity, and learned much through trial-and-error about what worked and what did not work with the students. From a program and learner perspective, improvements were made in the course, but not because of the initial teacher's development.

4.4.3 The ineffective teacher who did not admit the problem

In this case, the learners' continued discontent moved the evaluator to try to gently nudge the teacher toward revising how and what she did in the classroom. Her refusal to face the problem, however, led to a further isolation of the teacher in the course. The person who became her co-teacher reported that her previous well- documented tendencies persisted and that she resisted any efforts to collaborate or revise her teaching. Learner evaluations of the teacher, while extremely helpful in identifying patterns of behavior and giving insights into problem areas, could not successfully be used in this instance to persuade the teacher to improve her professional performance. From a program perspective, however, improvements were made in the course and more improvements could be made based on what was learned from the learners. Both the co-teacher's efforts and the supervisor's actions were appreciated by the learners.

5. Conclusion

One of the purposes of this article has been to indicate the value of using learner evaluations of teachers and courses in language programs. Learner evaluations, if designed, collected, interpreted and used properly, can have far-reaching implications on program and professional development. First, they provide valuable data to teachers about levels of student interest in the class, pace of classroom activities, rapport between teachers and learners, and other classroom concerns. This data

can help teachers to look at their teaching from another perspective, reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses, and seek ways to improve on the weak areas. Second, this data can also help supervisors to determine program strengths and weaknesses, make changes in teaching assignments according to program priorities, identify areas to be pursued in staff development activities, and provide a foundation from which to make important personnel decisions about promotion and contract renewal. Third, the professional use and follow-through actions taken as a result of such evaluations can tangibly and emphatically indicate to all concerned that the program's philosophy is client-centered and that its operations are designed and implemented with that philosphy in mind.

Another purpose of this article has been to show that the changing and combining of the roles of learner, teacher, and evaluator are key elements in whether learner evaluations are effective in improving program and instructional effectiveness. Despite widespread apprehensions among teachers, adults and university-age learners tend to be fair, consistent, and precise in their evaluations (Aleamoni, 1981). Learners *can* evaluate. In situations where learners have not evaluated their courses previously, supervisors need to prepare and explain the reasons to both the learners and the teachers to ensure that the evaluations will be seen in the proper perspective and taken seriously. For teachers to benefit from such evaluations, they must be able and willing to learn from the learners. For some, this may mean a significant shift from seeing learners as subordinates or adversaries to seeing them as clients or partners. However, if teachers need to learn and improve throughout their careers, as the professional literature suggests, then this shift is essential.

Supervisors and evaluators also need to shift roles to make the best use of learner evaluations. The teaching function of the evaluator is just as important as the judging function. Evaluators need to use triggering events to help teachers ask better questions about their teaching and to discard frozen and ineffective beliefs and behavior (McLaughlin & Pfeifer, 1988). Evaluators need to help teachers learn soon after the

learner evaluations are in, focus on specific concerns, merit the teachers' respect, and guide in ways that teachers feel are generally supportive (McLaughlin & Pfeifer, 1988). None of these desiderata are easy, but all are important to the health of a language program.

As the mini-case studies indicate, not every effort succeeds. However, the process of having learners evaluate and of taking those evaluations seriously can help supervisors to improve a program in many ways, from changing teaching and work assignments, to choosing which areas to pursue in staff development, to making promotion and contract renewal decisions.

Many specific ways of designing and handling feedback and evaluations from learners are available to the language teaching profession. What fits one program may be not be entirely suitable for another. However, certain goals need to be met: (a) Learners should be given opportunities to give useful feedback; (b) teachers should be willing to listen to the learners; (c) evaluators and supervisors should establish an environment in which learners can contribute their ideas; (d) teachers should realize that they need to keep learning; and (e) the process should lead to more effective learning, teaching, and working relationships.

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