THE NEED FOR DEVELOPING A FRAMEWORK FOR CURRICULUM EVALUATION

Khalid Salim Saif Al-Jardani
Curriculum Officer for English Language, Ministry of Education,
Sultanate of Oman
PhD Student, The University of Malaya, Malaysia
kaljardani@hotmail.com

Abstract: The importance of developing a framework for curriculum evaluation will be highlighted in this article. This framework should be based on quality standards, made public and be able to be used to help different practitioners and people involved in any institution to know what their role is and the best way to evaluate the curriculum. The article will start by presenting the main theoretical issues about curriculum evaluation, the different purposes of curriculum evaluation, who should be involved in the evaluating process, the various types of evaluation, methods of gathering evaluation data, ways to show results and the keeping of records. The paper will end by presenting what a curriculum framework should include, the idea of quality standards, and suggested research towards developing a framework for curriculum evaluation.

Keywords: *Curriculum Evaluation, developing a framework, quality standards, research*

CURRICULUM EVALUATION

There are different definitions of curriculum evaluation found in the literature about the topic. It can be defined as a systematic process of collecting and analyzing all relevant information for the purpose of judging and assessing the effectiveness of the curriculum to promote improvement (Nichols, et al. 2006; Simons, 1987 in Marsh, 2004: 106 and Brown, 1989: 223 in Brown, 1995: 218). The definition consists of key words such as systematic, process, collect and analyse, relevant information, curriculum effectiveness' assessment, and to improve. There are some common characteristics of different types of curriculum evaluation. It starts with needs analysis which is on-going as it never finishes (Brown, 1995). This shows that there is a need for curriculum evaluation within any curriculum system and within any teaching and learning process. It cannot be only one short task although that can be part but not all of it. Generally curriculum evaluation helps to connect all other elements of curriculum and also to highlight positive and negative issues related to these elements such as the aims, goals and purpose of different subjects, guidelines for course design, teaching and learning principles and others. Brown (1995: 217) says that the absence of curriculum evaluation will result in the other elements lacking cohesion. Curriculum evaluation can be either a small-scale task involving a very limited number of participants if it is classroom based, or a massive large-scale task involving a number of schools, teachers, parents, officers and some community members. An action research conducted by a teacher in his/her class with learners can also be part of curriculum evaluation. On the other

hand, an internal or external evaluator evaluating a whole curriculum covering several schools, a large number of teachers and learners and which may cover the schools surroundings is also seen as curriculum evaluation.

The purpose of curriculum evaluation

As there are different types of evaluation, the purpose of each type will differ in needs, and stages. Cunningsworth (1995) states that the purpose of an evaluation can be to achieve one of these things: adopt a new coursebook, or to identify good and bad things about an existing coursebook. However, it can also be to compare different course books utilized in a particular curriculum or programme. There is a need for a preparatory stage for any evaluation as in any other task (Nation and Macalister, 2010; Nichols, et al. 2006). This includes whether the whole evaluation is worth doing, is necessary or whether it is even possible to be conducted at this particular time. In the preparatory stage, the planner needs to get answers as to how long it would take, and how much it might cost. The willingness of the evaluator and the participants such as teachers to be part of it and also what kind of evidence the evaluation will aim to gather (Nation and Macalister, 2010) and some other questions also needs to be taken into account.

Who should be involved?

There are two types of participants, insiders and outsiders (Richards, 2001 p.296). Insiders are those who are involved directly in developing and implementing the course. These can be teachers, learners, and the curriculum officers. The insider participants or evaluators can work better with the formative type of evaluation, which will be discussed later. Outsiders are others who are not involved directly in developing or implementing the course. They can be consultants or administrators who help to identify the insiders' perceptions of the course and how it is working inside the classroom. There is a need to involve both insiders and outsiders in the evaluation depending on its purpose. However, in order to identify whether it is necessary to involve anyone in lcurriculum evaluation, there is a need to answer these four questions for each of the participants:

1.   What kind of information the teacher/learner/parent/officer/others might supply?
2.   How useful is this information?
3.   How could this information be elicited/gathered?
4.   How can this information be organised and recalled?

Course evaluation looks at both strengths and weaknesses, but it is naturally the weaknesses that cause concern. This stresses that people involved in it need to be involved in the process, in the planning stage and carrying out the evaluation (Nation and Macalister, 2010: 128). For this reason, some organisations do consider trying to involve an outside evaluator who develops an easier interaction and agreement on how to do the evaluation. If the evaluator fails to gain corporation and interest of the staff by meeting them and showing the need and the purpose of the evaluation, the evaluation cannot be successful. This can involve learners, teachers.

senior teachers, the school principal, the school supervisor, Ministry officers, parents, consultants and others. Some of these can be part of evaluation but this will depend on the focus and the purpose of the evaluation as mentioned above. Looking through the literature on types of curriculum evaluation, it seems that there are various types. Some call them types and others call them dimensions. In the following section, different dimensions of evaluation are presented.

DIMENSIONS/TYPES OF EVALUATION

In order to understand curriculum evaluation, the literature shows different dimensions of it. These are related to how each writer views it. They involve Macro/Micro evaluation, Pre/In/Post use evaluation, and Formative/Summative evaluation.

Macro/Micro evaluation

Focusing on what is to be evaluated, there are 2 types of evaluation: macro and micro evaluation. As can be inferred from the title, macro –evaluation is where the focus is on general issues, the outlook of the course book and the approach used. This is more to looking in a curriculum entirety and more related to selecting a course by making a quick comparison of two or more courses. In the view of a number of writers, most published materials and publishers mainly focus on macro-evaluation (Rea-Dicins 1994; Alderson 1985; Donovan 1998; Cunningsworth 1984, 1996; Breen and Candlin 1987; Tribble, 1996; J.B. Brown 1997; Johnson and Johnson 1998 in Tomlinson, 2001). On the other hand, focusing on the lesson plan, steps and the set of methods and teaching materials used within a course is called micro-evaluation (McGrath, 2002; Ellis, 1997). Micro-evaluation usually focuses on one aspect of a course or a programme. This would help to establish whether this aspect can work with a specific level of learners, find out its weaknesses and look for ways to improve it (Ellis, 1997). An important thing which we need to remember is that this can be utilized only during the course.

Pre-use, In-use and Post-use Evaluation

Focusing on when to evaluate a curriculum, there are 3 types Pre, in and post –use evaluation. Cunningsworth (1995) considers pre-use evaluation as the most difficult type as there is no experience of using the coursebook. Therefore, we need to be careful when using this type and give the process enough time. Therefore, Tomlinson (2001) says that the main problem of using the pre-use evaluation instruments by the teacher or any other evaluator is that it takes lots of time and effort. Pre-use evaluation is a type of evaluation used mainly in the course selection stage. It is a stage which helps to establish possible suitability to the context and the expected target learners. In-use evaluation aims to check the decision of the course selection in the pre-use stage (Cunningsworth, 1995; McGrath, 2002). It also addresses what worked well and what was changed during teaching the course. This helps to gather information about all teaching stages; planning, implementation and also reconsideration of the whole course selection.

Formative/summative (purpose of the information)

Summative evaluation, the most common type of evaluation, has the purpose of making a summary or judgment about the quality or adequacy of different aspects of the course. This might result in comparing it with other courses, or judging it as fulfilling certain criteria or not (Nation and Macalister, 2010; Richards, 2001; Brown, 1995). Formative evaluation has the purpose of forming or shaping the course to improve it in order to find out what is working well and what is not and what problem can be identified. Normally with this type, the information collected is used to address problems and ways to improve the delivery of the course (Nation and Macalister, 2010; Richards, 2001; Brown, 1995). After presenting different dimensions of evaluation and how they are looked at, the following section will highlight how to use these dimensions together. This will show how to choose from them according to the evaluator's needs. Categorizing the focus of evaluation into a number of dimensions helps planners to choose the right one from each dimension and then develop the right process (Brown, 1995). This would also support in choosing the appropriate methods for data collection. For example, carrying out small scale research by a teacher is mainly a formative, in-use evaluation and any other dimension which he/she can choose from. This would help him/her to be more focused and then to choose the right process and the methods of data collection.

GATHERING THE INFORMATION

There are different methods of gathering the information for the purposes of evaluation. Some of these are more related to some of the evaluation dimensions, and other methods are also more related to other dimensions. These methods include use of materials, interviews, questionnaires/self-report scales, observation and checklists, tests, diaries and journals, teachers' records, learners' feedback, case studies, audio-video recording and action research. All of these methods are commonly used. I will highlight in depth only action research as one of the methods of gathering data about curriculum evaluation.

Action research as a tool for curriculum evaluation:

Action research conducted by a teacher in his/her class with learners can also be a tool for curriculum evaluation. Action research is defined as explore a problem with the aim of finding a solution to the problem (Creswell, 2008). Tomlinson (2001) states that the idea of encouraging teachers to do action research about materials (Edge and Richards 1993; Jolly and Bolitho 1998) helps to develop some instruments to be used in pre-use, whilst use and post-use evaluation(R. Ellis 1998). This can be useful for the teacher and the data collection stage.

THE RESULT OF EVALUATION

The evaluation starts with the preparatory stage and needs analysis then specifies the purpose of it and involves the right evaluators and participants for it. This is followed by specifying the right dimension or a number of dimensions and choosing the appropriate methods of data collection and analyzing it. These results need to be presented. Some of these results need to be treated confidentially especially the names of the participants. These ethical issues need to be considered and treated

positively. There is no harm in saying for example that teachers commented on the curriculum design without specifying the names of these teachers as it will not add anything to the results. The results of evaluation might affect the curriculum, the teaching environment and may help with the professional development of teachers (Nation and Macalister, 2010). It might also help teachers to develop a sense of the ownership. Curriculum evaluation results need to be publicized. Some of these evaluations end up as written reports. In some cases there would be a number of reports which target different audiences. Usually they would be a report for the public which shows the general issues of the evaluation. Nation and Macalister, 2010 add that an oral report should be made along with a written one. This is to make sure that the written report is explained and to highlight some issues which cannot be covered in the written report. There is a need for these reports to sum up the main issues and show implications and ways to improve things. However, there is also a need for a follow-up stage to evaluate the evaluation and to follow-up the possibility for these evaluation recommendations. Moreover, these evaluations and data collected need to be stored in a systematic way by developing a good system of record keeping of data and also of the different types of evaluation conducted.

RECORD KEEPING

The need to establish a record-keeping system is vital. In most organizations and at different stages of evaluation it seems that the information collected is not organised. The information tends to be subjective, random and unfocused, is mainly as a result of unplanned data collection and not having a clear system of who, when and how to collect the information. The more documents available, the easier to lead to a decision about the curriculum (Richards, 2001). The documents might include the course statistics such as how many learners have joined this course if it's an elective course, the course book, the course work such as tests, and samples of learners' work. Other documents could be written comments about the course, and also course reviews about the course too by teachers who taught the course. Other documents can be students' self-assessment tasks which can be used too. Some of the data collected by teachers in a school for example is usually followed by a meeting with other teachers or with a coordinator to combine the information and form a complete set of evaluation information. The observations and the sheets used also need to be planned too. In general, all data collected within the evaluation process or even in regular teaching needs to be recorded and saved for any evaluation. Traditionally evaluation takes place through the use of checklists or questionnaires to determine their suitability for use in a particular teaching context (Ellis, 1997). This is what happens in many places such as Oman. R. Ellis (1998a); Littlejohn (1998) in Tomlinson (2001) add that the second move was by setting certain objectives on which evaluators evaluate in order to provide more reliable information about each curriculum. Later on some attention was given to principles and procedures for developing criteria for specific situations in which the framework used must be determined by the reasons, objectives and circumstances of the evaluation (Tomlinson 1999 in Tomlinson (2001). Different writers have developed some guidelines for curriculum evaluation, but without developing a

framework for curriculum evaluation or even systematic ways of record keeping. This issue will be highlighted in depth in the next section.

FRAMEWORK FOR CURRICULUM EVALUATION

By searching different data searching engines, it seems that the topic of developing framework standards is somewhat new for the field of education; however, in fields like health and business and higher education this issue is more common. In Oman, when someone enters a health centre for example, there can easily be seen a poster of stated standards for the whole health centre. This includes their vision, mission, objectives and other issues. These standards might be used and considered when planning training for any specific job title within the centre. For example, for nurses they consider ways to help them to do their best and ensure a good quality performance. It was not easy to find common guidelines for curriculum evaluation; and it was difficult to find a suggested framework for curriculum evaluation. This could be only found as a section in the general Curriculum Framework. However, for my context and some other places where curriculum evaluation is treated as a dependent department, a need for separate curriculum evaluation is essential. As Marsh (2004: 19) defined curriculum framework as a group of related subjects put together in a certain criteria to cover a specific area of study, a framework for curriculum evaluation can be more related to it. A framework for curriculum evaluation can be a set of guidelines of needs analysis, aims, focuses, purposes, types, methods, etc. of curriculum evaluation which can be used in a certain context in order to evaluate the effectiveness of a curriculum with the purpose of developing, changing or keeping the existing materials. This can also include the contributions of all departments including curriculum, curriculum evaluation, other Ministry departments, school-level, and the society too. In the literature as mentioned above, only some examples of curriculum framework have been observed. These normally consist of a rationale or platform, scope and sequence, aims, goals and purpose of subjects, guidelines for course design, teaching and learning principles, guidelines for evaluation of subjects, criteria for accreditation and certification of subjects and future developments for the area (Marsh, 2004: 21). Therefore, it is seen that curriculum evaluation as noticed is only a section of these frameworks. However, some of these elements can also be included in the curriculum evaluation framework such as rationale of the framework, scope and sequence of the curriculum, aims, and goals, purposes of each subjects and future development of the area of curriculum evaluation. Other things which can be added are a vision and mission of the curriculum evaluation task and guidelines of curriculum evaluation theory and practices. Some of the key issues when developing a framework are that a clear link needs to be developed between theory and practice, so it would be easy to try out things. Another thing is that the content needs to be up-to-date and contain relevant information about the area. In general it should include pedagogy, learning and resources (Marsh, 2004) which helps to enrich teachers and whom interested to know about curriculum evaluation in that context. There are a number of advantages and disadvantages which using a framework might have. Marsh (2004) stated some of the advantages.

   1) The curriculum will be more coherent and orderly.

2) High-quality curriculum development is likely to occur because planning criteria and standards apply consistently across all curriculum frameworks.
3) New content and skills can easily accommodated in curriculum framework including various multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary variations
4) Curriculum frameworks developed at a national level; have the potential to become accepted as national frameworks
5) Better chances to add up some extra activities such problem-solving, higher-order thinking skills and others.
6) Here he also suggests some disadvantages of using curriculum frameworks
7) If they are too detailed they become very directive for teachers
8) They can become as instrument of compliance and used as a mean of control by central education authorities without considering each context differences.

This shows that developing and using frameworks has more advantages and it is very easy to overcome its disadvantages. This can be by developing a simple and to the point document and should develop in way to guild and support different participants.

CURRICULUM EVALUATION QUALITY STANDARDS FRAMEWORK

As mentioned above, in many fields especially in health, business, and recently in higher education frameworks are mainly based on certain quality standards with which their frameworks are build and based on them they assess their work and performance. The need for this is also essential in the education filed and in the curriculum evaluation area too. Quality standards as defined by O'Brien, 2005 are statements of elements of a quality programme. In our case, it is statements of good curriculum evaluation practice. Based on them a clear and understandable curriculum evaluation framework is produced. They outline key elements of good practice for an area. For this study, these elements are about curriculum evaluation and issues related to them. These cover developing good practice, a clear plan of what should be done, clear theoretical issues, internal and external evaluation (O'Brien, 2005: 16), and directions for the future. Quality Standards seems to the key aspect of any organisation and that it leads the other parts of the work framework. For any organisation, stakeholders are encouraged to work towards continuous professional development by engaging all parties in the processes of planning and evaluation (O'Brien, 2005). Quality Standards document in O'Brien (2005: 17) framework consists of four sections: organizational management, Personnel and development, learning environment, and the programme. Some of these sections might work well when developing one for a curriculum evaluation quality standard framework. A need for most of these sections and some more others which can be worked out in the study is the core thing which needs to be addressed when developing the framework.

FUTURE RESEARCH ABOUT CURRICULUM EVALUATION

There is no curriculum evaluation framework for public in my context. On the other hand, reading through the literature, no complete curriculum evaluation framework

of any type could be also observed. There are only curriculum frameworks where evaluation is only a section. Few guidelines of curriculum evaluation could be only observed. This encouraged the researcher to develop a systematic approach for curriculum evaluation and also a curriculum evaluation framework. Developing a framework is expected to be beneficial for all parties. For example, in the English teaching context, having clear standards would help planners at a higher level, training, curriculum, supervision and assessment officers. This would also helps practitioners in the field such as teachers to know what they are expected to do and methods used to check what is being covered. It would also help the whole nation such as parents to know what has been covered and what kind of support they need to offer. This supports the need to have and develop a public curriculum evaluation framework. The need to develop this also for education and to develop certain quality standards in a written framework for the whole system is essential. However, to develop framework standards for curriculum evaluation is also needed. This might be generic studies as they could be used in different context. These studies need to end up by creating a curriculum evaluation framework; trying them out in a context and then producing a final version. This would add to the field of education in general and to curriculum evaluation in particular.

REFERENCES

Brown, J.D. (1995). The Elements of Language Curriculum. A Systematic Approach to Program Development. Heinle and Heinle Publishers: Boston

Creswell, J (2008) Educational Research. Planning, Conducting and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research (3rd Edition).Pearson International: Pearson Prentice Hall.

Cunningsworth, A (1995) 'chapter 2: Analysing and evaluating coursebook: a rationale and some Guidelines' in Choosing your Coursebook. pp. 8-24 Heinemann

Ellis, R (1997) 'The empirical evaluation of language teaching materials' ELT Journal Vol. 51/1 Oxford University Press

Marsh, C. (2004). Key Concepts for Understanding Curriculum. 3rd edition. RoutledgeFalmer: London and New York.

McGrath, I. (2002) Materials Evaluation and Design for Language Teaching. Edinburgh. Edinburgh University Press

Nation, I.S.P. and Macalister, J (2010) Language Curriculum Design. Routledge. Taylor & Francis: New York and London

Nichols, B, Shidaker, S, Johnson, G. and Singer, K (2006). Managing Curriculum and Assessment. A Practitioner's Guide. Linworth Books: Ohio

O'Brien, S (2005). Quality Standards. Quality Framework Initiative for Youthreach & Senior Traveller Training Centres.Quality Framework Initiative

Richards, J.C. (2001). Curriculum Development in Language Teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Tomlinson, B (2001) Materials development in Carter, R and Nunan, D. (2001) The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press