

Curriculum Evaluation in Language Programs' Design and Development: A Critical Literature Review

Omar Abdullah Albukbak

English department, Faculty of Arts, Misurata University
o.albukbak@art.misuratau.edu.ly

Abstract:

This paper attempts to present a clear critical explanation on curriculum evaluation in syllabus design considering the related literature, journal articles, and books. It attempts to make the explicit of the importance of this topic in education generally and language teaching / learning in specific, especially in the field of syllabus design. In this regard, it traces a number of issues such as: definition of evaluation, the importance of curriculum evaluation, participants in curriculum evaluation, approaches and procedures to conduct evaluation and eventually classification and purposes of evaluation. All these topics are critically discussed in detail based on various viewpoints which are suggested by researchers and scholars in education. The findings of this critical literature review unfold the fact that evaluation plays a major role in syllabus design before initiating a new course /program. Furthermore, it is an effective means to determine the success of the development of the ongoing course/ program and its accomplishment of the outcome and goals set in advance.

Keywords: Curriculum evaluations, syllabus design, program accountability, program development.

تقييم المناهج عند تصميم البرامج اللغوية وتطويرها: دراسة أدبية نقدية

عمر عبدالله البكباك

قسم اللغة الانجليزية- كلية الآداب - جامعة مصراتة

الملخص:

تحاول هذه الورقة تقديم شرح نقدي واضح حول تقييم المناهج وذلك ضمن تصميم المناهج الدراسية آخذين بالاعتبار المقالات الأدبية ومقالات المجالات العلمية والكتب المتعلقة بهذا الشأن. هذه الورقة تحاول توضيح أهمية هذا الموضوع في التعليم بشكل عام وتعليم وتعلم اللغة بشكل خاص، لا سيما في مجال تصميم

المناهج الدراسية. في هذا الصدد، فإن الورقة البحثية توضح عددًا من القضايا مثل: تعريف ما هو التقييم، وأهمية تقييم المناهج الدراسية، والمشاركين في تقييم المناهج، والأساليب والإجراءات المتبعة لإجراء التقييم، وأخيرًا تصنيف وأغراض التقييم. تمت مناقشة كل هذه الموضوعات بشكل نقدي مفصل ومبني على وجهات نظر مختلفة قدمها الباحثون والعلماء في مجال التعليم. وقد كشفت نتائج هذه المراجعة الأدبية النقدية حقيقة أن التقييم يلعب دورًا رئيسيًا في تصميم المناهج وذلك قبل بداية أي برنامج جديد. علاوة على ذلك، فإن التقييم يعتبر وسيلة فعالة لتحديد مدى نجاح عملية تطوير البرنامج الدراسي المستمر وتحقيق النتائج والأهداف التي تم تحديدها سابقًا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تقييمات منهجية، تصميم مناهج، تطوير البرنامج، مساءلة البرنامج

1. Introduction

Recently a great attention has been paid to the issue of curriculum evaluation and syllabus design. Many researchers and scholars, such as Nunan (1991), Richards, (2001), Farooq (2014), Hall & Hewings (2013), Ünal, et al., (2017) Glatthorn et al., (2019) ... etc have studied and investigated this topic in depth due to the significant role it plays when designing and implementing a particular course or program or evaluating an ongoing one for the sake of its development. Furthermore, its importance stems from the fact that it provides educators, language teachers, course and program designers with feedback on the effectiveness of that course/ program in terms of classroom activities, teaching techniques, motivation, learning material contents and whether it meets the learners' current and future needs which is not provided by the traditional technique: results of learners' performance at the end of academic semester or year.

1.1. Rationale and Significance of the Study

This study is significant from different considerations. First of all, as I am lecturing the course of Syllabus Design and Curriculum Development at the postgraduate level, I believe that this paper could assist postgraduate students of applied linguistics understand the exact meaning of evaluation, recognize its different types, and know how to conduct evaluation in syllabus design, and may be in their Master's thesis as well. Second, it supports the knowledge of the stakeholders at English departments in the universities in order to revise and evaluate their courses' curricula with the aim of

developing their contents. Also, it contributes to the knowledge of the literature for advanced research studies.

Since document analysis can be used as a valuable instrument to collect data in order to carry out research studies, so this study is considered significant in terms of its methodology as it implies a document research method. Ahmed (2010), mentioned that this kind of method has had little attention compared to other methods and often marginalized or even used. Similarly, Bowen (2009), stated that this type of research, which is document analysis, has not always been used effectively in the research process. Therefore, methodologically, this paper will add insights to the literature of research methods in social and educational research, in addition to its valuable information regarding the topic of curriculum evaluation of course.

1.2. Objectives and Research Questions

The overall objectives of this research paper are to clarify the different concerns related to the curriculum evaluation in syllabus design. It aims to describe the literature of the topic and to explain its details from definition to implementation. Thus, this paper attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What is meant by curriculum evaluation and what is its significance in syllabus design?
2. What are the purposes of curriculum evaluation?
3. Who may participate in curriculum evaluation procedure, and how to conduct it?

2. Methodology

This integrative literature review research is descriptive in its type employing a qualitative research design by giving values to the analysis and revision of related documents such as books and journal articles. Christamals, et al., (2017) stated that the analysis of the previous carried out research studies can help reaching an objective critique and drawing conclusions about the issue investigated. This study is a narrative review of the related literature through selecting the most useful and related data from various journal articles and books in order to obtain selectively valuable information to be included to the paper.

3. Literature review

Education is an important component in each country. Educational organizations have often played a central role in the development of education sector in any community. It is a fact that each educational organization needs a curriculum designed by various educational experts to be delivered to students who are studying in different educational levels. Because there is no a desirable outcome can be achieved without continuous inspection, curriculum evaluation is one of the most vital and relevant components of curriculum development inside educational organizations. Evaluation is a process that occurs before, during, and after the creation, design, and execution of a program. As a result, the assessment component plays a pivotal but collaborative role with other components and planning phases (Seyedi & Aghahosini, 2017). Therefore, educationists, administrators, instructors, teachers, and students need to be more aware of the significance of evaluation process of any successful educational program.

Once a second language curriculum has been in place, there are some important queries need to be declared and addressed. We may ask if the curriculum achieves its goals and objectives; what is happening in classrooms where it is being implemented, also, we need to know whether people who are affected by the curriculum as teachers and students are satisfied with it or not. Therefore, a curriculum should contain all parts related to the teaching / learning process. Regarding this matter, Sanders (1992), explained that curriculum evaluation may focus on many different aspects of a language program such as: curriculum design, program content, classroom process, materials of instruction, teachers' performance and training, students' participation and progress, the institution's facilities and learning environment, and learners' motivation and staff development.

3.1. Definition of Curriculum Evaluation

With regards to the concept of evaluation in syllabus design, Ünal, et al. (2017), described evaluation process as distinguishing values and standardized principles which are applied by utilizing different procedures to reach a constructive conclusion. Evaluation may focus on many different aspects such as: curriculum design and syllabus content, classroom process, materials of instruction, teacher training, students' progress and motivation, the institution, and learning environment.

With more focus on the utilization and procedures of program evaluation, McCloskey et al., (2011), defined program evaluation as “the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs, for use by people to reduce uncertainties, improve effectiveness, and make decisions”. (p. 39). He stated that the process of evaluation is not only a process of obtaining information but also a decision-making process. Equally, Nunan (1991) ascertained that evaluation ‘...is a wider term, and it includes processes which are designed to assist us in interpreting and acting on the results of our assessment’ (p.118).

According to Hall, D., & Hewings (2013), curriculum evaluation has become of increasing interest to educators and curriculum planners, and this has created the need for understanding of the nature of curriculum evaluation. Therefore, the scope of evaluation has moved from a concern with test results to the need to collect information and make judgments about all aspects of the curriculum, from planning to implementation. Therefore, emphasizing on test results as a traditional perception of curriculum evaluation has been changed. Recently, there has been more focus on collecting data and make decisions about all the curriculum aspects to develop any educational program. (Hall, D., &Hewings2013).

Farooq (2014), specified that evaluation is a complicated and broad issue in the development of a curriculum. It can be viewed as an endless analysis process to help refining ideas in the program and make it more effective and efficient. Any curriculum evaluation is employed to determine the value of the curriculum and attempt to answer questions, such as, is the curriculum suitable to a particular group of learners? For whom it was designed? Is the course content selected appropriately? Are the instructional materials recommended adequate and best available for the intended purpose? Additionally, Richards, (2001) stated that evaluation focuses on collecting information about different aspects of language program in order to understand how the program works, and how successfully it works, enabling different kinds of decisions to be made about it. These decisions should guarantee whether the program responds to learner's' needs, whether further teaching training is required for teachers, or whether students are learning successfully from it.

According to Ünal, et al., (2017), it was ascertained that providing data about a particular program is one of the goals of any program evaluation in order to offer accountability to stakeholders, whereas developments in the

program evaluation have greatly influenced the evaluation studies in the language education as well. McCloskey et al., (2011), illustrated these influences with emphasizing on classroom process, measurement of results, and the development of teachers' skills in formative evaluation. In addition, he added that stakeholders frequently utilize the outcomes of evaluation to develop capacity of the program. Besides, administrators can distinguish program needs, what establishes success and the information sources that may serve to address inquiries around the suitability, conceivable contribution levels, and short- and long-term effect of suggested programs.

Because it is a component of the feedback and progression cycle, Baranovskaya & Shaforostova (2017), proposed that evaluation is an integral element of an aligned curriculum and an overall teaching and learning strategy which it should be a part of any responsive and up-to-date teaching and learning strategy or plan. The process of a curriculum evaluation is never-ending process; once a curriculum has finished, a great number of questions still need to be taken into account. Therefore, during the process of evaluation, students can interact with the lecturers about their experiences and views of the course materials and the pedagogical strategies employed in the teaching and learning process. Broadly speaking, curriculum evaluation is an attempt to shed light on two issues; first, finding out whether the planned courses, programs, activities, and learning opportunities as developed and organized actually produce desired results, and second, how the curriculum offerings can be optimally improved. (Baranovskaya & Shaforostova 2017).

3.2. The Importance of Curriculum Evaluation

As the syllabus design has continuously developed, the evaluation process can be executed rapidly and then reported the outcomes. According to Glatthorn et al., (2019), two considerations should be taken into account in the evaluating process of designing and reporting the results. The implementation process should be adaptable to meet the needs of a specific situation. If new information comes to light or if the design needs to be revised, it should be updated as part of the implementation process. Moreover, the evaluation results should be reported and published to be understood and read by several groups of audiences. For example, public understands a report written in a plain language, meanwhile, a detailed technical report is written for the educational community, as well as an action report is specifically addressed to school administrations(Norris, 2016).

Davis et al., (2018), clarified that curriculum evaluation is a fundamental and basic element of the entire curriculum development process. It is a persistent action and not a "tail-end-process". Curriculum evaluation and design are complementary processes. Therefore, there is no doubt that practicing evaluation and assessment in language education has become a main concern among applied linguistics researchers as well as language teachers and administrators. Assessment and evaluation can be used for informing and reforming their education practice. Moreover, evaluation may provide experimental new knowledge, raise awareness, and change the educational, economic and social characteristics of individuals and communities. (Davis et al., 2018).

According to Glatthorn et al., (2019), deciding any program outcomes is one of the main purposes of curriculum evaluation. It is of significance in deciding whether to continue with the same program or rejecting and replacing it with another, or adding several modifications in the course content. This can help in the process of constant improvement of the curriculum materials and instructional procedures. However, the results of the evaluation process of a program should be presented according to some ethical considerations such as, issues related to confidentiality and feelings of others. Therefore, people who participate in the evaluation should be informed that the information they provide will remain confidential, particularly, when a sort of weaknesses is discovered. Litz (2011) indicated that a detailed evaluation would enable the administrative and teaching staff of a specific institution or organization to discriminate between all of the available textbooks on the market. Moreover, it would provide for a sense of familiarity with a book's content thus assisting educators in identifying the particular strengths and weaknesses in textbooks already in use. Therefore, the process can support educators and instructors with the ability of recognizing the most appropriate and effective use of textbook contents.

3.3. Participants in Curriculum Evaluation

Richards, (2001) stated that there are two types of participants who are typically involved in curriculum evaluation – insiders and outsiders. Insiders refer to teachers, students, and anyone else closely involved in the development and implementation of the program. It is important in a successful program evaluation the involvement of these key insiders in the process of designing and carrying out of the evaluation, because as a consequence, they will have a greater degree of commitment to acting on its results. Outsiders are others who are not involved in the program and who

may be asked to give an objective view of aspects of the program. They might be consultants, inspectors, or administrators whose job it is to supplement the teachers' perceptions of what happened in a course with independent observation and opinion.

According to Kridel (2010), evaluation can be internal which involves instructors' and students' judgment, or externals where outside reviewers are asked to evaluate the different elements of the curriculum. Zohrabi (2017), added that the curriculum evaluator should gather the necessary information from several stakeholders with interest in the results of curriculum evaluation, including parents, instructors, the community, administrators, curriculum designers, curriculum publishers, and staff members, in order to examine a given curriculum in depth and then the right decision can be made concerning the program and curriculum under investigation. Macalister & Nation (2009), stated that learners, teachers, director of administrations, or even owners of private educational organizations might be concerned with conducting evaluation of a curriculum, educational programs or courses under question. Each of these stakeholders might have their own unique perspectives on what constitutes a good curriculum is and justifications of their choice of evaluation approaches and implementation process.

However, Kridel (2010), ascertained that the question, which determines people who should participate in the process of curriculum evaluation, might be misleading as it suggested that some should be and others should not. More concern should be paid and be added on how they will be chosen as participants in the process of curriculum evaluation. Thus, working should be more towards evaluation, more public (in contrast to private), and more sensitive to differences in data needs at differing levels of decision making inherent in differing groups. Therefore, identifying the nature, purpose and approach to curriculum evaluation process is as essential as identifying groups who should participate in conducting this process.

3.4. Approaches and Procedures to Conduct Evaluation

In general, curriculum evaluator can choose an approach between qualitative and quantitative data when gathering information about a particular educational program or a course, however, the type of evaluation is determined by its purpose. According to Dobakhti & Zohrabi (2017), it is emphasized that for any evaluation to be rich and have convincing evidence,

it is preferable that both types of data to be collected and used. In this regard, Darin (2017), confirmed that there are two types of evaluation approaches can be identified, depending on the type of data collected, scientific and humanistic evaluation approaches. Drain clarified that the scientific approach to curriculum evaluation focuses on using quantitative data collected by the learners which allows for statistical analysis, and the results are compared in order to determine the level of success. This comparison is at the heart of decision-making when this approach is employed. Quantitative measuring usually seeks to collect information from a large number of people and analyze the data objectively. Whereas humanistic evaluators need to comprehend the complexities of the environment they are assessing. As Goodyear et al., (2014) explained that qualitative evaluation depends mainly on means used to generate qualitative data, such as focus groups, unstructured interviewing, and field observation to analyze and interpret those data by non-statistical methods. The major concern with this approach is the smaller sample size that is required. Moreover, there are several questions about the objectivity of the results obtained from humanistic evaluation. Since qualitative data is processed by the researcher, their own perspective can filter what they report when they share the perspective of the respondents. In this regard, Alderson (1980), said that the data can be gathered from tests, checklists, surveys and be counted in terms of frequency, ranking, or percentages. However, there might be quite several challenges that might arise when a strong emphasis is put on numerical data. Checklists or Likert scale analysis cannot usually provide the same depth of information as data collected by unstructured-interviews. Here, Darin (2017) concluded that it should be emphasized that rather than discussing the advantages of scientific over humanistic approaches and vice versa, it is better to focus on the curriculum evaluation purpose and needs of the context to be evaluated and then determine the most appropriate approach.

It is obvious that many of the procedures used in conducting curriculum evaluation are similar to those described elsewhere such as research methodology or needs analysis, though their purposes may be different. Hence, Richards (2001) considered the roles of some procedures in evaluation and their possible advantages and limitations:

Comparing tests with questionnaires, Richards stated that tests can be used to measure changes in learning at the end or at the intermediate stages of a course. Tests can provide a direct measure of achievement, particularly if they are based on student's performance. But it is not always to be sure of the

cause of the problem by using tests. It is not certain whether it was a direct result of teaching or other factors such as the teacher, the materials, the students, or the course itself. So, further investigation is normally needed here. Whereas questionnaires can be used to elicit teachers' and students' comments on a wide range of issues. Its advantages that they are easy to administer and information can be obtained from large numbers of respondents. But they need to be carefully designed, and information may be difficult to interpret.

Similarly, matching interviews with observations, Richards (2001) proposed that interviews can be used to get the views of teachers and students on any aspect of the course. Normally, structured interviews provide more useful information than unstructured interviews. They can obtain in-depth information on specific questions. But they are very time consuming and only a sample of teachers and students can be interviewed in depth. On the other hand, observations can be made by other teachers or a supervisor and it is more useful if it is structured in some way as by giving a specific task to the observer and by providing procedures of how to conduct the task. It can focus on any observable aspect of the lesson and can provide an objective eye, identifying things that may not be apparent to the teacher. But the observer's presence may be intrusive, as observation is a specialized skill and requires preparation and explicit guidance.

Finally, Richards (2001) contrasted between case study and audio or video recording. In case study a teacher can conduct a case study of a course or some aspect of a course. Case studies provide detailed information about aspects of a course, and over time the accumulated information from case studies can provide a rich picture of different dimensions of a course. But the information collected may not be typical or representative, and they are time consuming. While in audio or video recording, the lesson can be recorded to provide examples of different teaching styles and lesson format. The good thing that recording can provide a rich account of teaching in real time and record information that is difficult to document. But the presence of the recording instrument or person making the recording can be disruptive and can bias the data. Also, it might be quite difficult in some cases to collect data through recording or videoing due to ethical issues or that is socially not accepted.

3.5. Classification and Purposes of Evaluation

Gafoor (2013) explained that the different processes, products and persons subject to evaluation can determine the type of evaluation. These include student, curricula, schools, school systems, large populations, special programs or projects and personnel. However, he emphasized that the basic evaluation process is the same and the same general concepts and principles of measurement and evaluation are applicable. Therefore, different types of evaluation do not mean that there are a number of different evaluation processes. So, it is the same process regardless of what is being evaluated, how the evaluation process is applied, and the types of decisions made. Types of evaluation can be seen according to several perspectives: the types of data will be collected, criteria will be applied to the data, and types of decisions will be made. (Gafoor, 2013).

Weir and Roberts (1994) distinguished between two major purposes for language program evaluation, program accountability, and program development. Accountability refers to the extent to which those involved in a program are answerable for the quality for their work. Its evaluation examines the effect of a program at significant end point of an educational cycle and is conducted for the benefit of an external audience or decision maker. By contrast, program development evaluation is designed to improve the quality of a program as it is being implemented. However, Alhamlan (2013), stated that evolutionists, educationists and curriculum designers have varied in their attitudes regards the evaluation categorizations. They classified two types of evaluation: predictive and retrospective. Predictive evaluation is the assessment of the course before implementation while retrospective evaluation takes place after the course is implemented.

According to Richards (2001), the different purposes for evaluation are: illuminative, formative, and summative evaluation. He described illuminative evaluation as the one which seeks to find out how different aspects of the program work or are being implemented. It seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the processes of teaching and learning that occur in the program, without necessarily seeking to change the course in any way as a result.

In formative evaluation, Mertens (2015), said that instruction designers sometimes name formative evaluation as rapid-prototype evaluation in which activities are evaluated to improve an intended program and enhance student learning. Therefore, this type of evaluation is undertaken

during program development and implementation. He clarified that formative evaluations are conducted during the operation of a program to provide data useful for improving the program. According to Ornstein and Hunkins (2018), formative evaluation provides evidence that guides decision-makers to consider how to revise a program while it is being implemented and developed. Richards (2001), added that formative evaluation is carried out as part of the process of program development in order to find out what is working well, and what is not, and what problems need to be addressed. It focuses on ongoing development and improvement of the program. It takes a place while the program is being implemented. It is often carried out by teachers who can monitor a course as it develops to check the extent to which it working, what difficulties are encountered, how effective the materials are, and what modifications would ensure the smooth running of the program.

On the other hand, Richards and Schmidt (2002) defined summative evaluation as the process of providing information to decision makers, after the program is completed, about whether or not the program was effective and successful. Summative evaluation is conducted at the end of a program to provide judgments about the program's worth or merit. (Mertens, 2015). Therefore, summative evaluation is a comprehensive evaluation of a program after it has been completed. It adds previous evaluative data to offer an overall decision of the value of program (Stufflebeam & Zhang, 2017). Richards, (2001), added that summative evaluation is the type of evaluation with which most teachers and program administrators are familiar and which seeks to make decisions about the worth or value of different aspects of the curriculum. Summative evaluation is concerned with determining the effectiveness of a program, its efficiency, and to some extent with its acceptability. It takes a place after a program has been implemented. Students are often key participants in the summative evaluation of the program, providing evidence of their gain in language proficiency and completing evaluations on the way the program was taught and the relevance of what they have learned to their needs.

According to Abdulkader (2016), while formative evaluation leads to decisions about program development such as modification and revision, summative evaluation leads to decisions concerning program continuation and termination or expansion. It should be highlighted that summative evaluation is not designed to support improvement of curriculum. This is a call for the need for instructors and curriculum designers to engage in an ongoing process of formative evaluation to identify what is needed for

curriculum development for a particular course with a particular group of students at a particular time. (Kealey, 2010).

Therefore, according to Long & Doughty (2009), when the evaluation process tends to be more formative, evolution designers are expected to employ qualitative research methods, such as diary studies, focus groups, intensive interviews, and ethnography because the main purpose here is to inform program users about how the program operates, and may indicate ways to make program processes more effective. Whereas, If summative requirements are required, evaluators may be more motivated to use different forms of quantitative designs, such as experimental and quasi-experimental designs. Moreover, Queensland School Curriculum Council (2000), confirmed that formative evaluation would focus mainly on aspects arising from the summative evaluation but which might require more detailed evaluative data and aspects which come up during the course implementation and development which might require evaluative data.

4. Conclusion

This paper introduced a review of literature on curriculum evaluation and syllabus design. It discussed critically different issues related to this topic and it presented the viewpoints of many educators, researchers and linguists who studied and explored this topic. The findings of this study revealed that evaluation is an essential in the process of language teaching and learning particularly when dealing with assessing an ongoing language program or designing and establishing a new one. Also, the study findings presented some evaluation techniques which postgraduate students, teachers, and course designers can use. Unlike the traditional ones, these new techniques can assist educators, teachers and syllabus designers with different types of data which can assist syllabus designers make decisions about whether the contents, goals, and activities to be included in a particular language program or not. Another finding is that curriculum evaluation is an ongoing process and not based only on a summative assessment of the learners' performance at the end of academic term or year, but it obviously contributes to the improvement of the educational process and raise the level of the institution's curricula.

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