Research Journal of Social Sciences
2016. 9(1): 10-14
ISSN: 1815-9125
EISSN: 2309-9631
Journal home page: http://www.aensiweb.com/RJSS/

RSEARCH ARTICLE

Evaluating the Standard and Performance of Online Learning in an English Language Teachers Programme

Hasreena Abdul Rahman and Jamil Ahmad

The National University of Malaysia, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy, Faculty of Education, 43600 UKM, Bangi Selangor, Malaysia

Address For Correspondence:
Hasreena Abdul Rahman, The National University of Malaysia, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy, Faculty of Education, 43600 UKM, Bangi Selangor, Malaysia
Tel: +60123712006; E-mail: hasreenarahman@yahoo.com

Received 1 January 2016; accepted 22 January 2016; published 28 January 2016

ABSTRACT

Before a professional development programme especially the online learning element is fully implemented, the objectives of the programme have to be defined in details to be used as the programme design. These objectives, known as the programme standard, will be compared to the programme installation that acts as the programme performance. The programme evaluated was The Professional Upskilling Of English Language Teachers (Pro-ELT) Programme. The objective of this study is to identify any discrepancies that might occur in online learning by comparing the programme design set by the Ministry of Education (MOE) Malaysia with the programme installation. The three elements evaluated were staff selection, training venue suitability and testing equipment adequacy. Twelve respondents were interviewed. The interview transcripts and official documents were collected and analysed. This study found that most discrepancies in online learning were identified in terms of the system requirement, as well as the equipment requirement for the test centres. As a conclusion, discrepancies identified were able to give information on which areas need to be amended to ensure the implementation of online learning in the programme is a success.

Key words: online learning, professional development programme, English teachers, programme evaluation, discrepancy evaluation model

INTRODUCTION

The reason why online learning or training becomes a more popular element in a professional development programme is because information technology offers new ways to overcome the shortcomings of a traditional programme in terms of expertise, time, pace, funds, accessibility, flexibility and coordination [9,17]. Putnam and Borko, as cited by [9] "…suggested that computer technology, such as multimedia presentation and web-based materials could serve as effective tools to facilitate teacher learning." When a professional development programme includes online learning or training element as a mean of delivering content knowledge, there is a critical need to ensure that technology and communications infrastructure is sufficient. Without having the right technology and communication infrastructure, it is impossible to ensure the success of online learning or training. The online learning or training element in the programme will be "…a doomed exercise… [and]

To Cite This Article: Hasreena Abdul Rahman and Jamil Ahmad., Evaluating the Standard and Performance of Online Learning in an English Language Teachers Programme. **Research Journal of Social Sciences**, 9(1): 10-14, 2016

pointless …" [7]. Therefore, a proper and detailed planning is vital before the execution of online learning or training especially on the readiness of the relevant infrastructure.

It is crucial to have a well-defined and clearly specified programme especially when the programme is conducted in multiple settings or sites with multiple facilitators [2]. Thus, the standards that are specified and well-defined are vital to ensure the effectiveness of a professional development programme.[10] and [8] also identified that "[t]he standards movement… has created a real need for teaching learning" that should be targeted and directly related to teachers' practice, should be site based and sustained over time, should be integrated into the regular practices of teachers, and should be curriculum-based to improve students' performance and understanding. Thus, certain standards need to be met in order for the programmes to be effective. These standards are set earlier before the implementation of the programme and thus early planning is essential and critical. To evaluate the success of a programme, one of the fundamental strategies is to ensure what is planned should ideally be interpreted accordingly by implementing the plan as what it should be (Fox, 2011). The "what is" is the standard set earlier before the implementation of a programme and the "what should be" is the reality of what is really happening in the programme. Therefore, before implementing any profesional development programmes, the planning must be done meticulously and in detail as to reduce any high-risk failures that may happen in the programmes. When planning is completed, the programme has to be implemented according to the plan. In short, whatever really happens during the programme implementation must be aligned to whatever that should happen based on the plan. Any differences between what really happen with what should happen can be identified and suggestions for improvement can be made from the information gauged on those differences. Hence, discrepancy evaluation model (DEM) by Malcolm Provus is the model that emphasises on the comparison between what should happen (or known as the programme standard) with what really happen (also known as the programme performance), and is able to identify any differences (or discrepancies) that can be used to improve the programme [5,15].

There are five stages of evaluation in the DEM, which are programme design/definition, programme installation or the input stage, programme process, programme product or also known as the output stage, and cost-benefit analysis [15]. In Stage I, the information about the design of the programme is obtained to be used as the programme standard [1,15,20]. The first comparison between the standard set in Stage I with performance in terms of the programme operation happens in Stage II of DEM [15]. At this stage, evaluation is conducted to assess the implementation of the programme installation to be compared with the programme standard set out in Stage I and to identify any problems (otherwise known as the discrepancies) that arise. In the next stage (Stage III), the purpose of evaluation is to estimate the impact of process elements or treatment variables to the output element or dependent variable to ensure that the resources and techniques implemented are consistent with programme goals. In summary, Stage III evaluation is to assess whether the process can change the input to the output. For Stage IV, the objective of evaluation is to assess whether the programme implemented has achieved its objectives [1,15]. Stage V deals with a comparison between the financial allocation of the programme implemented with other programmes that have produced the same output in order to decide which programme has spent the allocation most effectively [15,20]. In short, Stage I is the programme standard, and Stages II, III, IV and V are the programme performance.

The most critical stages are Stage I (programme design) and Stage II (programme installation) where redefinition is done here when discrepancies occur [15,20]. Stage I is when the information on the programme design is gathered and then used as the standard of the programme. In ensuring the readiness of a professional development programme to be implemented, the objectives of the programme have to be defined in detail to be used as the programme design. These objectives, known as the programme standard, will then be compared to the programme installation that acts as the programme performance. This comparison is conducted in Stage II that deals with the input of the programme including the receptors, staff, and pre-requisite requirements [20].

One of the professional development programmes that went through the first two stages of evaluation was The Professional Upskilling Of English Language Teachers (Pro-ELT) Programme. The Pro-ELT Programme is one of the programmes under The Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013 – 2025). The programme was introduced under Shift 2 with the initiative to ensure students are proficient in English language by enhancing the level of English proficiency and pedagogical competence of teachers [12]. The programme takes about one year to complete. A training consultant was appointed to implement The Pro-ELT Programme. This programme is conducted for 480 hours of blended learning mode that involves 240 hours of face-to-face training sessions with the staff/coaches and 240 hours of online training sessions with the e-Moderators. The face-to-face training sessions are conducted outside the school hours and during school holidays. The online training are conducted throughout the duration of the programme. Teaching and learning materials as well as modules were prepared by the appointed consultant [12].

1. Objective:

The focus of this paper is on the online training element of The Pro-ELT Programme. Hence, the objective of this study is to identify any discrepancies that occur by comparing the programme design with the

programme installation on online training in terms of programme staff and facilities. Three elements were evaluated that consist of staff selection, training venue suitability and testing equipment adequacy.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Twelve respondents were interviewed for this study consists of the programme consultants, the programme managers from the Ministry of Education Malaysia, and the officers from the state and district education offices in four states that were the first group to implement the programme. Official documents such as observation reports, programme blueprints and minutes of meetings were obtained for the comparison of the standard and installation of The Pro-ELT Programme. Interview protocol and document checklist were used to gather information on the standard set and the installation performance of the programme. The interview transcripts and documents were collected and analysed. The information was compared to identify any discrepancies that existed.

2. Results:

The first element of online training involved the process of selecting the staff who would be the e-Moderators in The Pro-ELT Programme. A general list of required qualifications and experiences was indicated such as the first and second degree of the trainer applicants have to be related to English language, have at least seven years of experience in teaching English language, and have experience in conducting courses or writing materials in English language (English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC), 2012). An additional requirement was included for the e-Moderators which indicated that the applicants should have experience in online teaching and training. The comparison made showed that the selection of the e-Moderators was implemented according to the programme standard, thus no discrepancies were found.

The next element to be evaluated was the training venue suitability. The preferred training venues for The Pro-ELT Programme are the government buildings with other listed criteria such as the facilities in the room in terms of the location, information technology (IT) equipment, and furniture. Based on the analysis and the comparison between the standard and the performance on the training venue suitability, all interviewed respondents indicated that the training venues fulfilled the minimum requirement.

As for the testing equipment adequacy, few system requirements need to be fulfilled in terms of hardware, software and bandwidth minimum requirements. Besides that, few equipment also need to be available such the headphone and the microphone for the listening and speaking sections. In contrast to the training venue suitability, some discrepancies in testing equipment adequacy were identified as these discrepancies were mentioned repeatedly by the respondents. One discrepancy identified was on the lack of computers that complied to the system requirement for information and communications technology (ICT) in schools [14]. Furthermore, the programme consultants and the programme managers from the MOE Malaysia mentioned that not all testing equipment was checked thoroughly even though the computers fulfilled the minimum requirement set. In some test centres, no prior checking and testing were conducted on the equipment like headphones and microphones, and on the system requirement such as the availability of the latest version of Adobe Flash Player. Hence this contributed to massive technical problems, and also delay on the day of the test implementation. On the other hand, when the officers from the state and district education offices were asked, they implied that initially the ICT minimum requirement was not detailed enough as the programme consultants stated that the test could be conducted offline. However, it was discovered later that the internet access was vital in implementing the test [4]. This had given the officers just a short period of time to find other alternative test centres with good internet access and also fulfilled the ICT minimum requirement. Another discrepancy identified was that even though good computer labs had good computers and internet access, some of the computer labs had multiple-synched computers [4]. This means one central processing unit (CPU) connects to many personal computers (PCs). It was identified that for the test implementation, the PCs need to be able to stand alone in order for the PCs to be able to save the test answers given by the teachers. These results can be summarised in Table 1 below:

Table 1: A Comparison Between Programme Standard and Performance.

Elements	Standard	Performance
Staff/Trainers	Required Qualifications And Experiences - First and second degree related to English language - At least seven years' experience in teaching English language - Conduct courses or write materials in English language - Experience in online teaching and training	Implemented according to the programme standard set
Training Venue Suitability	Requirements Government buildings, location, IT equipment, furniture	Fulfilled the minimum requirement
Testing Equipment Adequacy	System Requirements Hardware, software and bandwidth Equipment Headphones, microphones etc	Computers - Lack of computers that complied to the system requirement for ICT in schools Checkings On Equipment - Not all testing equipment was checked thoroughly - In some test centres, no prior checking and testing were conducted Details On ICT Requirement - ICT minimum requirement was not detailed enough Multiple-synched Computers - The PCs need to be able to stand alone in order for the PCs to be able to save the test answers given by the teachers.

Discussions:

By identifying discrepancies, programme managers are able to make amendments, re-evaluations, or rational decisions about the programme [3,11,15,18]. The solutions to solving the identified discrepancies are either to redefine or reframe the unrealistic programme standards or performance, or to impose or improve control on the process or the implementation of the programme, or to terminate the programme if there are no other viable solutions available [15,20].

The first discrepancy occurred during the test implementation. Some of the test results could not be generated because the answers given by the teachers were not saved in the CPU or went 'missing' because of the computer virus attack. This had caused some of the teachers not having their test results. The test results is crucial because the test results are used as the pre-test results to be compared to their post-test results after the completion of the programme. The pre-and-post test results are the indicators to show improvement of the teachers. To solve this discrepancy, the programme managers need to improve control on the process of thorough checking on the CPU prior to the test.

Most of the discrepancies identified involved programme facilities, particularly the testing equipment adequacy. The first one deals with the insufficient number of computers that complied to the minimum system requirement set. Most of the school computers were outdated. It was decided at that time to find other computer labs such as from the state or district education offices, district teacher activity centres, and state education resource centres as these other centres were equipped with more latest and updated computers. As a result, some of the tests were implemented in these centres. This shows that redefining the programme standard has helped in improvising the programme installation. Even when the computers had passed all the minimum requirement, the problem arose in terms of prior checking and testing of the equipment and computer system. Some of the checking and testing were done in the morning of the test implementation day which had caused delays. This discrepancy could be solved by enforcing more control on conducting checking and testing before the test day. Subsequently, the next discrepancy on the ICT requirement could be rectified by redefining the standard through fine tuning the list of requirement [15,20]. Similarly, the last discrepancy that involved multiple-synched computers could also be solved the same way as discrepancy of the ICT requirement.

Besides the identified discrepancies, there are other aspects that can be looked into in the future. One aspect that may affect the implementation of online learning or training is the teachers themselves. Some of the issues involving them may include their readiness to embrace online learning environment, and their skills in technology. Hence, these issues that are not included in this programme evaluation may be investigated in future studies.

Conclusion:

It has been shown here that discrepancies identified in the programme were able to give information to programme managers on areas need to be amended. By identifying discrepancies earlier and making amendments afterwards can really help in improving the programme. As Provus (1969) has stated, one of the main purposes of evaluation is to gauge vital information (or discrepancies) on the programme so that amendments and improvement can be done in the early stages of planning and installation before more damages are done.

REFERENCES

1. Alter, K., 1998. Electrical Construction Management Specialization Program: A Formative Evaluation. *Journal of Construction Education*, *3*(2): 60–72.
2. Borko, H., 2004. Professional Development and Teacher Learning. *Educational Researcher*, *33*(8), 3–15. http://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x033008003
3. Cole, G.E., 1999. Advancing the Development and Application of Theory-based Evaluation in the Practice of Public Health. *American Journal of Evaluation*, *20*(3): 453–470. http://doi.org/10.1177/109821409902000305
4. Delivery Management Office (DMO), 2013. *DMO Status Update - 2nd January 2013*. Putrajaya.
5. Fitzpatrick, J.L., J.R. Sanders, B.R. Worthen, 2004. *Program Evaluation : Alternative Approaches and Practical Guidelines* (3rd Ed). Boston: Pearson Education Inc.
6. Fox, R.D., 2011. Revisiting " Discrepancy Analysis in Continuing Medical Education : A Conceptual Model ." *Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions*, *31*(1): 71–76. http://doi.org/10.1002/chp
7. Ghaoui, C., 2003. *Usability Evaluation of Online Learning Programs*. London: Information Science Publishing. http://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-59140-105-6
8. Gwynne-Atwater, A., 2011. *An Evaluation of a Special Education Preschool Program Serving Children With Autism or Autistic-Like Behaviors*. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

9. Huai, N., J.P. Braden, J.L. White, S.N. Elliott, 2006. Effect of an Internet-Based Professional Development Program on Teachers' Assessment Literacy for All Students. *Teacher Education and Special Education: The Journal of the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children*, *29*(4): 244–260. http://doi.org/10.1177/088840640602900405
10. Klentschy, M.P., 2005. Designing Professional Development Opportunities for Teachers that Foster Collaboration, Capacity Building and Reflective Practice. *Science Educator*, *14*(1): 1–8.
11. Marrs, L.W., D.I. Helge, 1978. The Role of Needs Assessment in Program Planning and Evaluation. *The Journal of Special Education*, *12*(2): 143–151. http://doi.org/10.1177/002246697801200207
12. Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012. Slaid Program Professional Up-skilling of English Language Teachers (Pro-ELT). Putrajaya: Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia.
13. Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013. *Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan Malaysia 2013 - 2025 (Pendidikan Prasekolah hingga Lepas Menengah)*. Putrajaya.
14. Performance and Delivery Management Unit (PEMANDU), 2012. *English Lab Report*.
15. Provus, M.M., 1969. *The Discrepancy Evaluation Model: An Approach to Local Program Improvement and Development*. Pittsburgh: U.S. Department of Health, Education & Welfare Office of Education.
16. Provus, M.M., 1971. *Discrepancy Evaluation For Educational Program and Assessment*. California: McCutchan Publishing Corporation.
17. Schumaker, J.B., J.B. Fisher, L.D. Walsh, 2010. The Effects of a Computerized Professional Development Program on Teachers and Students with and without Disabilities in Secondary General Education Classes. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, *33:* 111–131. http://doi.org/10.1177/073194871003300204
18. Singh, M., 2013. Training Evaluation : Various Approaches and Applications. *IUP Journal of Soft Skills*, *7*(1): 27–35.
19. Steinmetz, A., 1989. The Discrepancy Evaluation Model. In G. F. Madaus, M. S. Scriven, & D. L. Stufflebeam (Eds.), *Evaluation Models: Viewpoints on Educational and Human Services Evaluation* (pp: 79–99). Boston: Kluwer-Nijhoff Publishing.
20. Yavorsky, D.K., 1984. *Discrepancy Evaluation: A Practitioner's Guide*. Virginia: University of Virginia.