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AUTHOR Leung, Peggy
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ABSTRACT

A study assessed the effectiveness of the standard report writing segment of two postsecondary courses in English as a Second Language one in accounting and one in secretarial communication, at a Hong Kong polytechnic. The 69 subjects were in 4 groups, one in each subject receiving instruction with a problem-solving approach and one in each subject using a traditional seminar format. Student report-writing before and after instruction were compared, and information was gathered through questionnaire, interviews, and classroom observation. Results indicate that on the whole, all groups achieved the instructional objectives, attributed in part to instruction and in part to students' previous education. Marked improvement in overall report organization was observed. Of the objectives poorly achieved, most were entirely absent in pre-course writing samples. The courses were well-received, and most course content was found useful. Questionnaire and interview responses suggest some changes in classroom technique. The problem-solving approach was also found to be beneficial to students. Recommended course improvements include adoption of a field experience in which students must identify real-world problems, carry out research, and make reports. Some changes in the course evaluation process are also suggested. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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AN EVALUATION STUDY OF A PROGRAMME TO TEACH STANDARD REPORT WRITING

Peggy Leung
Hong Kong Polytechnic

1. Introduction

Until the 1980s, evaluation was a relatively neglected area in the field of language teaching. Mackay suggests a reason for the apparent lack of evaluation studies:

> "What may have contributed to the timidity regarding program evaluation were the great comparative studies carried out in the U.S.A. and U.K. to compare the effectiveness of different approaches to the teaching of ESL....The manifest lack of success of these studies in determining the relative effectiveness of the outcomes of different programs appears to have had the effect of convincing applied linguists that they should stay clear of such complicated and difficult-to-control activities."
>
> (Mackay, 1981: 91)

However, in recent years, the importance of evaluation has been gradually acknowledged. Candlin, Kirkwood and Moore (1978) already include 'evaluation of students' and 'evaluation of course' in their model of course design. Stern (1984) includes evaluation as one of the 'curriculum processes'. Breen makes it the last level of his 'Process Syllabus', claiming that "on-going evaluation of the teaching-learning process in the classroom would be a crucial activity..." (Breen, 1984: 58). Allen states that curriculum decision-making "must be subject to some form of evaluation, in order to check that the results of our decisions are meeting their stated objectives, and so that knowledge about curriculum processes can accumulate in a systematic and responsible way" (Allen, 1984: 70). Nunan considers evaluation to be "a necessary component in any curriculum plan" and "particularly important in a needs-based, learner-centred program which is directed towards the achievement of specific goals and objectives" (Nunan, 1984: 46). Brown argues that "evaluation should be the part of a curriculum that includes, connects and gives meaning to all of the other elements in a program" (Brown, 1989: 241). Elley stresses the important role of evaluation in education, stating that "if the quality of our educational programmes is to be enhanced, and we are to avoid following the misleading bandwagons of the past, it (evaluation) is an essential part of the enterprise of education" (Elley, 1989: 285).

A lot of evaluation studies, especially the earlier ones, tend to be quantitative. This has aroused the concern of some practitioners in the field of language teaching. Lawton (1978) attributes the failure of past attempts to evaluate curriculum partly to the existence of an educational research climate that rewards accuracy of measurement and generality of theory. Paulston (1980) also argues that the quantitative paradigm, with its emphasis on objective, 'hard' and replicable data, is not sufficient by itself and needs to be supplemented by a more qualitative approach which would be process- rather than outcome-oriented. Other researchers would contend that quantitative and qualitative evaluation can co-exist. As Allen points out, it would be a mistake to think in terms of two clear-cut schools of curriculum evaluation:

> "I am basically in sympathy with the belief that quantitative and qualitative research methods are not mutually exclusive, and that they throw useful light on one another when they are used in the same study."
>
> (Allen,1984: 73)

The instruments used for evaluation need not therefore be confined to pre- and post-tests. Questionnaires, interviews and classroom observation can be employed to complement purely quantitative measures, though pre- and post-tests "should be an essential part of evaluation of all courses" (McGinley, 1983: 91). The approach to curriculum evaluation thus moves from a purely product-oriented one to one that includes processes. Different stages of a curriculum are looked into. Such a shift from a product-oriented approach to a process-oriented one has been obvious in recent years. Various models have been developed to evaluate the different stages of a curriculum. Mackay (1981) proposes one which involves thirteen categories. This is a process-oriented approach which "avoids the pitfall into which evaluation studies frequently fall, namely, to focus exclusively on student product" (Mackay,1981:110). McGinley (1983) proposes a package which bears certain similarities to Mackay's paradigm but on a reduced scale. It involves the use of various kinds of evaluative instruments. The Phi Delta Kappa National Study Committee on Evaluation develops the CIPP (acronym for Context-Input-Process-Product) evaluation model which places equal emphasis on process and product. Breen (1989) also devises an evaluation cycle for the different phases of language learning tasks -- task-as-workplan, task-in-process and task outcomes -- and this model is evidently process-oriented.

A model which enables us to evaluate the different levels of a programme is proposed by Johnson who points out that "Knowledge of products and in particular global products such as scores on proficiency tests, has limited value for decision-making unless evaluators know the learning processes by which the outcomes were achieved' (Johnson, 1989: 21). The four levels in Johnson's model are curriculum planning, ends/means specification, programme implementation and classroom implementation. The first level, curriculum planning, "consists of all those decisions taken before the development and implementation of the programme begins" (Johnson, 1989: 2). It is the policy-making level and determines the overall aims of the curriculum. The second level, ends/means specification, is "the process by which policy, and the means by which it is to be implemented, are operationally defined. Ends specifications should provide an exact characterisation of the target proficiency. Means specification should prescribe the method by which the target proficiency should be achieved" (Johnson, 1989: 4). This level is, in other words, concerned with syllabus writing -- ends specification relates to objectives, and means specification to method. The third level, programme implementation, relates to "the development of teaching and learning resources, and the preparation of teachers to ensure that the resources are used effectively" (Johnson, 1989: 7). The fourth level, classroom implementation, relates to teaching and learning acts in the classroom.

This paper will report on evaluation studies of two courses taught by the writer at the Hong Kong Polytechnic in 1989 (Fuller details of the methodology and results can be found in Leung (1990), unpublished M. Ed. dissertation). They were the Accountancy Year 1 (AC 1) and Company Secretaryship Year 1 (CS 1) English courses. The two sets of students followed the same English programme. Their ability level was comparable as both AC and CS courses were run by the Department of Accountancy and shared the same admission requirements. In fact, in 1990, the CS course was phased out and the Year 1 CS students, some of whom were subjects of this study, became Accountancy students when they were promoted to Year 2. Students on the course were taught how to write management reports of different formats - letter reports, memo reports, etc.; my research focused on standard report writing. The entire English programme was to be covered in 30 hours, of which 14 hours were devoted to standard report writing. The duration of the whole programme was 10 weeks, and standard report writing was taught in the last 5 weeks. A seminar

mode of teaching was adopted but I tried out an alternative problem-solving approach in one AC group and one CS group with a view to stimulating the thinking of the students.

Before proceeding to the aim of my evaluation study, I would like to clarify the meanings of 'standard report writing' and 'problem-solving approach' since the former rarely appears in the literature of report writing and the latter is open to many interpretations, but refers here to a methodology which was tried out at the level of classroom implementation.

1.1 Standard Report Writing

The familiar terms, long and short reports, seem to me to be a little confusing as "length is a relative term, and no specific page length can be agreed on as the breaking point between long and short reports" (Lewis and Baker, 1983: 203). Moreover, "short reports written in the traditional format tend to have more of the characteristics of long reports" (Lewis and Baker, 1983: 205). Some short reports "may run up to ten pages" (Brown, 1973: 42), or even "thirty pages" (Lewis and Baker, 1983: 203). Thus, I decide to use the term 'standard report' instead to refer to the format of 'introduction - findings - conclusions - recommendations.'

1.2 Problem-Solving Approach

The term is often interpreted in different senses. In some literature, it takes on a relatively informal sense, while in others it is defined much more technically with explicitly stated strategies. "Some people define all thinking as problem-solving" (Brown, 1973). Fisher (1987) defines problem-solving as 'higher order' thinking, calling for skills such as inference, deduction, analysis and evaluation. According to Fisher, problem-solving involves both the critical and creative aspects of thinking. "The critical or analytical approach involves seeing the different parts of a problem and the ways in which they are related...the creative side is concerned with how to generate a variety of possible solutions, and the ways in which the problem might be tackled" (Fisher, 1987: 11). Treece (1985) lists various steps of problem solving including determining and defining the problem, collecting data, organizing data, evaluating and interpreting data and selecting a solution. Margerison (1974) gives a condensed version of these steps which he calls the PSA cycle: Problem diagnosis - solution development - action implementation.

In two of my four groups, I tried out a problem-solving approach as a special methodology that gave prominence to some major activities and techniques. Brainstorming is one such technique that is often employed to increase the flow of ideas. The technique of questioning is important in the discussion stage (Fisher, 1987) and the skill of negotiating with others in groups is essential to the success of the problem-solving approach (Margerison, 1974). While implementing the problem-solving approach the teacher needs to be "gaining and keeping the pupils' attention, controlling the group, sticking to the point, and ensuring balanced participation" (Fisher, 1987: 37). It is also useful to get the students to report back to the class and share findings with other groups.

2. Aims of Study

The principal aim was to evaluate the effectiveness of the two English courses mentioned above. A further goal was to compare two forms of classroom implementation. A dual approach -- quantitative and product-oriented studies together with qualitative and process-oriented methods -- was employed. The students' pre- and post-teaching reports were compared. The coherence of each course was looked into by adopting Johnson's model of the four levels of evaluation described above. I hoped that my evaluation study would yield useful insights into the course design and teaching of standard report writing at tertiary level.

3. Methods

3.1 Subjects

Four groups of students helped me with my study -- the AC 1 special methodology group (ACm), AC 1 normal teaching group (ACn), CS 1 special methodology group (CSm) and CS 1 normal teaching group (CSn). ACm and ACn each consisted of 15 students. CSm consisted of 19 and CSn 20. While special methodology refers to the problem-solving approach, normal teaching means the seminar mode.

3.2 Procedure

Information was gathered by means of pre- and post-tests, a questionnaire, interviews and classroom observation.

3.2.1 *Pre- and Post-Tests*

A pre-test was administered before the teaching of the standard report writing component, and a post-test at the end of the course. The tests were mainly concerned with the ends level (Johnson, 1989) and with the learning outcome of the students. In each test, the students were required to write a standard report within a time limit of 90 minutes. A test checklist based on the objectives of the course and to be completed by the teacher was devised to help determine the achievement of the objectives for standard report writing.

A two-sample T-test was used to compare the mean improvement between ACm and ACn, and between CSm and CSn. The hypothesis was that the special methodology groups would make greater progress than the normal teaching groups. The mean improvement of ACm and CSm was also compared to find out if students of the two methodological groups made the same degree of progress. The expectation was that their degree of progress would be similar despite possible differences at their starting level.

3.2.2 *Questionnaire*

A questionnaire was administered at the end of the course to solicit the students' attitudes towards the standard report writing component of the course. The special methodology groups were requested to give their opinions of the problem-solving approach.

3.2.3 *Interviews*

Guided Interviews were conducted with the course coordinator of the parent department and with two students of the special methodology groups. Specific questions were prepared and asked in a fixed order.

3.2.4 *Classroom Observation*

Two lessons adopting the problem-solving approach (one ACm and the other CSm) were observed by a research assistant. Both lessons were conducted by the author and were on the same topic, using the same materials. An observation record form which provided an outline of what to observe was used by the observer.

4. Results

4.1 Pre- and Post-Tests

The post-test results showed that on the whole, the objectives of standard report writing were well achieved by all four groups. Scores on most areas were above 60%. Students achieved the best post-test results, with scores of over 80%, in the following areas:

- Purpose of report
- Selection of data
- Grouping and sequencing of data
- Precision with figures in describing data
- Noting attitudes, expressing personal opinions and supporting opinions with data
- Proposing immediate courses of action
- Actions related to purpose and conclusions
- Overall organization

The following were the most problematic areas, with scores of below 30%, in the post-test:

- When information was collected
- Using sub-headings
- Stating source and numbering of graphic aids
- Highlighting salient features in graphic aids
- Expressing different degrees of certainty

Students made marked improvement (increments of approximately 40%) in the following areas:

- Stating time in background information
- Terms of reference
- Use of instrument in gathering information
- Use of headings
- Selection, construction, captioning and labelling of graphic aids
- Noting relationship
- Summarizing findings
- Numbering conclusions
- Making recommendations
- Overall organization

Scores in both pre-test and post-test were poor, showing gains of only about 10%:

- When information was collected
- Use of sub-headings
- Stating source of graphic aids
- Highlighting salient features in aids

The progress made by the special methodology group and the normal teaching group was compared to find out if differences at the classroom implementation level would affect the learning

outcome of the students. Therefore the pre- and post-test scores obtained by the students of ACm were compared with those of Group ACn, and scores obtained by students of CSm were compared with CSn. I also compared the progress made by ACm and CSm and tried to find out if the starting levels of both groups were the same, and if not, whether different starting levels would affect the effectiveness of the problem-solving approach. The table below presents results for all subjects.

Table: Pre and Post-test results for all subjects in four groups

	ACm			ACn			CSm			CSn		
Sub	Pre	Post	Imp	Pre	Post	Imp	Pre	Post	Imp	Pre	Post	Imp
1	25	33	8	10	25	15	17	39	22	17	33	16
2	11	40	29	13	35	22	10	32	22	8	36	28
3	33	43	10	14	23	9	14	33	19	13	40	27
4	24	36	12	15	35	20	19	30	11	14	35	21
5	19	35	16	13	26	13	22	41	19	8	34	26
6	20	45	25	23	37	14	15	22	7	16	29	13
7	15	37	22	21	32	11	10	32	22	11	39	28
8	14	40	26	11	29	18	12	28	16	17	32	15
9	12	42	30	13	23	10	17	37	20	30	27	-3
10	13	37	24	19	24	5	19	40	21	17	33	16
11	10	28	18	13	28	15	8	40	32	17	40	23
12	26	40	14	11	22	11	11	18	7	15	24	9
13	18	40	22	16	34	18	11	39	28	20	30	10
14	27	37	10	16	20	4	16	47	31	13	33	20
15	7	30	23	16	28	12	23	45	22	14	15	1
16	/	/	/	/	/	/	16	40	24	21	32	11
17	/	/	/	/	/	/	12	46	34	14	29	15
18	/	/	/	/	/	/	16	49	33	15	30	15
19	/	/	/	/	/	/	24	35	11	11	30	19
20	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	15	29	14
mean imp	19.27			13.13			21.11			16.20		
S^2	52.21			26.27			67.88			69.43		

(Key: Sub = subject; Pre = Pre-test; Post = Post-test;
Imp = improvement)

All four groups made progress on the pre/post-test measure. Results of the two sample T-test confirmed that the special methodology groups made better progress than the normal teaching groups. It can be seen that the mean improvements of the two special methodology groups, ACm and CSm, were similar.

4.2 Questionnaire

In ACm, 13 questionnaires were returned out of 15 distributed; in ACn, 11 out of 15; in CSm, 16 out of 19 and in CSn, 18 out of 20. Below are the results of the questionnaire.

4.2.1 *Course content*

Responses from all four groups concerning 'usefulness' were highly positive. Most areas were rated useful or very useful. The best-rated areas were organization of data and discussing and interpreting findings. The least favourable areas, on which students felt too much time had been spent, were related to graphic representations.

The majority also wanted to see most areas maintained on the course. There was a substantial demand to extend the following:

- Discussing and interpreting findings
- Organisation of data
- Presenting judgements

The time spent on the standard report writing component of the course was rated just right by the majority of respondents.

When asked what other aspects of standard report writing should be taught, some put down 'layout' or 'format of presentation'. Some put down 'language' and 'jargon for report writing'.

4.2.2 *Course Materials*

The majority thought that just the right amount of materials was given on most areas but there were indications that further material in the following areas would be welcome:

- Discussing and interpreting findings
- Description of findings
- Organization of findings

When asked on what other aspects of standard report writing they wanted more handouts, many wrote 'None'. A few put down 'real examples of reports' and 'Standard report samples on different subject matters'. When asked how to improve the handouts, some put down 'Not enough practice work' or 'More exercises', or 'More examples should be set'.

Responses to usefulness of handouts were highly positive. The area which was rated least useful was highlighting salient features in graphic aids.

Responses to the recommended reference books were least positive among all items in the questionnaire. Many left this section blank and a few even stated that they could not get hold of the books.

4.2.3 *Course Methodology*

Responses to the problem-solving approach from both ACm and CSm were favourable. Students found problem-solving strategies useful. More than 90% of ACm and almost 70% of CSm found that they were able to raise a lot of questions in their discussions. 85% of ACm and 75% of CSm found brainstorming a useful technique for generating ideas. Over 80% in both groups agreed that there was active exchange of ideas. All in ACm and 75% of CSm felt that they could generate

solutions. They had a sense of achievement when solutions were generated. 85% of ACm and 70% of CSm did not give up even when they encountered difficulties.

Regarding the advantages of the approach, the majority of both ACm and CSm noted that they could learn through active participation. 85% of ACm and over 90% of CSm found that the approach made possible more student involvement. However, they were rather divided on whether participation was balanced in their discussions. About half in each group thought that participation was balanced but the other half thought that discussion was often dominated by one or two active members of the group. The use of a chairperson to regulate participation in group discussion was found to be effective by CSm (86% being positive about appointing a chairperson) but 30% of ACm had some reservations.

Students agreed that they learnt through sharing with peers. All in ACm and over 90% of CSm thought they benefited from sharing. The students also found reporting back useful.

About 80% of ACm and 90% of CSm found a lot of interaction among group members. Almost 90% of CSm and all in ACm found more teacher-student interaction here than the usual seminar mode. Consultation with teacher was considered useful by all in ACm and almost 80% of CSm. Students also found that they could learn in a more relaxed atmosphere under the problem-solving approach. Almost all in both ACm and CSm enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere of learning.

The students also found the approach educationally useful. 85% of ACm and all in CSm thought that the approach could stimulate their thinking. In each group, over 80% thought that their faculty for critical thinking could be developed, and over 85% found the strategies helped their studies in general.

In their responses to the open-ended question concerning the application of the approach to report writing, most were positive about its value. When asked which area/areas of standard report writing they considered to be best taught through the approach, answers on almost all areas were received. Some put down 'All'. Most put down interpretation of findings, conclusions and recommendations. When asked which area/areas should not be taught through the approach, most wrote 'None'. A few put down 'Introduction'.

4.3 Interviews

Both course co-ordinator and students perceived the need to include report writing in the English course. They also found the objectives highly relevant.

For some objectives, the students had much previous knowledge. However, they found it helpful to consolidate their knowledge in this course. The teaching of use of graphic aids, in their opinions, should be the job of the parent department. They also thought that formal learning of report writing in the classroom was necessary.

Regarding course structure, both co-ordinator and students thought that standard report writing was rightly placed at the end of the English course, after note-taking and summarizing skills, and after relatively simple report formats like letter and memo reports. They also thought that ten weeks was the right duration for the course, and that three lessons per week was not at all intensive.

The handouts were found to be useful and sufficient on the whole. However, some areas were hardly touched on, e.g. highlighting salient features in graphic aids. Students were not totally satisfied with the design of some exercises which were too mechanical. They would like to see all five units developed on a central theme.

The students welcomed the problem-solving approach but they wanted to tackle real problems instead of doing artificial problem-solving exercises set in handouts.

As far as learning is concerned, the course co-ordinator found that the students of both courses had improved their skills in standard report writing on the whole. Their strongest area was selection of data and overall organization. Progress relating to language accuracy was also obvious. However, he still thought that some were unable to draw sound conclusions, and they also needed to be more audience-oriented in their writing.

The students thought that they learnt a great deal about the overall organization of a report, what to include in each section, how to write convincing conclusions, etc. Former Arts students benefited more in analysis of data than former Science students. The students would also like to write 'bigger reports' at the end of the course instead of one within a time limit of 90 minutes.

4.4 Classroom Observation

The time spent on various stages of the lesson was similar in both ACm and CSm lessons.

In group discussion, students in CSm seemed to have more balanced participation. Many questions were raised and ideas generated. Members did not accept possible solutions readily; instead they tried to evaluate solutions and explore possibilities. The chairperson gave each member opportunities to express himself. The members were also able to apply certain strategies when they encountered problems -- seeking help from the teacher, consulting reference books, etc. On the whole, they were actively involved in their discussions.

In ACm, discussion tended to be dominated by two active members of the groups. The chairperson did not even give each member the opportunity to voice his opinions, nor did he attempt to sum up the ideas of the group. Viewpoints were sometimes given without elaboration. Nevertheless many questions were raised and ideas generated.

Students of both ACm and CSm appeared to be quite independent in their discussion. They only sought help from the teacher occasionally. The teacher moved from group to group and offered help when she detected difficulties arising.

Owing to time constraints, each group could not report back their discussion to the class thoroughly. Most groups just gave the answers to each exercise. Moreover, there was a great deal of overlapping when each group reported back on all the tasks they had completed. Generally speaking, the students seemed to find reporting back useful.

Also because of limited time, the teacher could not give thorough feedback. She went over the answers of each exercise with the class and briefly commented on the differences of opinions. The teacher finally summed up the main points of the lesson.

5. Discussion

5.1 Pre- and Post-tests

The fact that the vast majority of the objectives were well-achieved demonstrates that the course was generally effective. Of the objectives achieved, most were due to teaching although for some, such as noting attitudes, grouping and sequencing of data, the students had much previous

knowledge from secondary schooling. Of the four sections of a standard report, the objectives pertaining to recommendations were best achieved and the importance of this phase in a report appears to be widely recognized by students. Marked improvement was seen in the overall organization of their reports. In the pre-test, many of their reports contained just one section: discussion of findings. After the course, they learnt to present their ideas more systematically by dividing their reports into different sections and using appropriate headings for each section.

Of the objectives that were not satisfactorily achieved, most were completely neglected by the students in the pre-test. However, their awareness of these objectives was not enhanced through teaching. Areas relating to graphic aids formed the majority of these poorly achieved objectives. The students were unable to select appropriate graphic aids to represent data visually; they were still rather ignorant of the rules for constructing these graphics, particularly pie charts. They still failed to give captions and sources of the aids and number them. In their discussion of these aids, they also failed to highlight salient features. Re-teaching of the poorly-achieved objectives was necessary, and re-examination of the materials used and time spent on such areas would be helpful.

The result of the two-sample T-test also shows that differences at classroom implementation level affect the learning outcome of the students. Coherence of the first three levels, in my opinion, may not bring about the desired results if they are not echoed by the last level of the decision-making framework.

The results also indicate that the problem-solving approach may be a more effective methodology for teaching standard report writing than the seminar mode. Problem-solving strategies like questioning, brainstorming and evaluating solutions are likely to stimulate more active thinking on the part of the students.

The fact that there is no significant difference between the progress of ACm and CSm confirms my belief that the problem-solving approach works despite differences in the starting levels of the students. ACm students proved to have more previous knowledge of standard report writing than CSm students, as reflected by their pre-test scores. However, both these groups made more or less the same degree of progress on the course.

5.2 Questionnaire

The positive ratings on course content and methodology show that the course was generally well-received. Most of the course content was found to be useful. The least favourable areas were those relating to graphic aids, which received low ratings on usefulness and suggestions that they be cut back. 'Methods and source of information' was another area which received a significant demand for curtailment. The reason is, I think, different from that for graphic aids as reflected by ratings on usefulness. The students found this area useful but they wanted to have it cut down, probably because it was too simple and straightforward to be worth the amount of time spent on it.

The result also shows that the present allocation of time to the standard report writing component (14 hours out of 30 hours) should be maintained. As for other areas which should be added to this component, the students' view of including more work specifically on points of language should be taken into consideration. In fact, language was taught throughout the course although it was not a specific objective of this component. Given more time, language could also be included in the syllabus. Besides language, they also put down 'layout' or 'format'. I interpret this as referring to the prefatory and appended parts and the physical presentation of the report. Again, these areas could be addressed if more time was given.

The students found the handouts generally adequate and sufficient. Perhaps more examples of reports ought to be included in the handouts as requested by some students. They also indicated that measures should be taken to ensure easy access to the recommended reference books.

Responses from both ACm and CSm to the problem-solving approach were highly favourable but the results show that ACm students seemed to be able to exploit the problem-solving strategies better. The majority also understood the advantages of the approach. However, something should be done to ensure more balanced participation in group discussions. In fact, anticipating problems in this area, I appointed a chairperson to regulate participation. The different responses to this tactic from ACm and CSm, in my opinion, show that its effectiveness depends on the personality and capability of the chairperson.

5.3 Interviews

The existence of the course was well justified as both course co-ordinator and students recognized the need to teach accountancy students standard report writing. Accountants need to verify their inspection of a firm's financial records in the form of a report. They need to interpret and present information linguistically. The students also thought that mastery of the report writing skills was more effective through formal learning than through reading references. The course was also coherent at ends-means specification level as the objectives were considered to be highly relevant and the course structure appropriate by both course co-ordinator and student. The students' opinion that the parent department should teach the use of graphic aids is, I think, justifiable since it is not primarily a question of language. The present course structure of three lessons a week spreading over ten weeks helped to establish better teacher-student rapport than a course, spreading over thirty weeks, with only one lesson per week.

The interviews reflect that the handouts ought to be slightly revised as some exercises like sentence transformations were too mechanical. A thematic approach to the five units of the handouts (overall organization, introduction, findings, conclusions and recommendations) would be desirable.

The interviews also reveal a shortcoming of the problem-solving approach implemented in this programme, as students were simply asked to deal with artificial problem-solving situations set in the handouts.

The students' preference for writing 'bigger reports' instead of one completed within ninety minutes should be given serious thought. 'Bigger reports' are likely to be more challenging to the students and perceived as more authentic.

5.4 Classroom Observation

The teacher's explanation of the lesson objectives helped to make the students' learning more purposeful, as the students could be more aware of what they were expected to achieve in the lesson. Clear instructions for the completion of the various tasks were also useful.

The students obviously benefited a great deal from the problem-solving approach. Both the critical and creative aspects of their thinking could be stimulated. They were able to pool together ideas and critique them, generate solutions to problems, evaluate solutions and explore alternatives.

6. Conclusions

The standard report writing component of the course was found to be effective and coherent on the whole.

6.1 Course Effectiveness

The vast majority of the objectives were well achieved with the exception of those relating to graphic aids. Re-teaching of these poorly-achieved objectives was definitely necessary.

The effectiveness of the course was also reflected by the students' progress. A comparison between the pre and post-test shows that the students had benefited from the course. The two-sample T-test also shows that the special methodology groups had made better progress than the normal teaching groups, while the two special methodology groups did not show much difference between their progress. Hence, I can conclude that differences at classroom implementation level do affect the learning outcomes of the students, and that the problem-solving approach may be an appropriate methodology to teach standard report writing. The problem-solving approach works equally well for students with different starting levels.

6.2 Coherence

The standard report writing component of the AC and CS course demonstrated a high degree of coherence, despite a slight mismatch at certain points of the decision-making framework (Johnson, 1989).

The policy decision at curriculum planning level to include standard report writing in this course is correct, as it caters to the needs of society. The social needs for report writing are obvious, and increasing in today's business world as an effective means of communication. The inclusion of report writing in this course also caters to the needs of the students who followed the old Use of English syllabus in the Matriculation course. They had very little, if any, previous knowledge in report writing.

The objectives of the standard report writing component were also clearly spelt out and found to be useful. They were well achieved by the students of both AC and CS courses. The course content was received favourably. The course structure was also found to be an appropriate means to achieve the ends. So there was coherence within the ends/means specification level.

Coherence between the curriculum planning level and ends/means specifications level was to a large extent achieved as the social needs were spelt out clearly at the ends level, and the course structure was able to achieve the ends and meet the needs specified at the planning level. However, the needs of society and students would be best answered if the syllabus could be rewritten to include real problems and the course structure modified so as to allow the students more time to tackle these problems.

Regarding programme implementation, the materials used on the course were found to be largely relevant to the objectives. Only a few relating to graphic aids were neglected. However, some exercises were not intellectually challenging enough for tertiary students. Hence, there was some mismatch between this level and the curriculum planning level as policy makers intend the course to produce students who could think critically.

At classroom implementation level, the problem-solving approach was found to be an appropriate approach for teaching report writing. It was also consistent with course specifications at the curriculum planning level as it catered to the society's demand for people who could think and tackle problems. The students could apply the problem-solving strategies to daily-life situations. Coherence was also achieved between ends/means specification and classroom implementation to a large extent. The explanation of the lesson objectives at the beginning of the lesson served to establish a link between the two levels. The content taught in each lesson was closely related to the course objectives.

Only slight mismatch was detected between classroom implementation and programme implementation level. The teachers were not guided on how to use the materials. Lesson plans were not given to promote uniformity at classroom implementation level.

7. Recommendations

7.1 Recommendations for Standard Report Writing Programmes

To design an effective standard report writing programme, I think the first consideration is to respond to the needs of society and of students. As society is constantly undergoing changes, its needs are also changing all the time. Besides, the students' needs are constantly changing too. Students entering Hong Kong tertiary institutions before the academic year 1988/89 may have had a greater need to learn how to write reports. However, with the implementation in 1989 of a new Use of English syllabus which includes practical skills like memo and report writing, students may have less need to learn report writing. Thus I suggest that the needs of society and students should be constantly reviewed.

To make report writing more purposeful, I recommend that an industrial placement be incorporated into a standard report writing programme during which they can have an opportunity to identify real problems in their working environment, carry out primary research and collect relevant data. Such an arrangement would allow for more thorough application of the problem-solving strategies and be likely to offer more challenges to the students.

To ensure that the materials contribute to the achievement of the objectives, the syllabus writer should help to develop the materials. He need not be the only person responsible for materials development. In fact, a team can be formed to develop, review and revise the materials. To help the teachers exploit the materials effectively, tutors' notes would be helpful.

At classroom implementation level, I would recommend approaches which are likely to stimulate active thinking, generate more student involvement, encourage sharing of ideas and more interaction with peers and teacher. The problem-solving approach is one such approach, and I think it is particularly useful for teaching such areas in report writing as interpretation of data, drawing conclusions and making recommendations.

7.2 Recommendations for Other Evaluation Studies

For future evaluation studies, I would recommend that a detailed checklist be devised for classroom observation. In fact, observation checklists are often used in evaluation studies but in my own study I deliberately experimented with a classroom observation form which outlined the different stages of a lesson. I expected such an observation record form to be able to provide the observer

with more flexibility in writing their comments. However, this may only be useful to an experienced observer; it is not likely to be of great help to an inexperienced one such as the observer of my lessons, who is a research assistant. Even with an experienced observer, prejudice may come in when such a brief observation form is used. Thus, to ensure objectivity, I would prefer the use of a detailed checklist.

I have also found it useful to combine the product and process-oriented approach in course evaluation. We should not only be concerned with the final outcome of the course but also with every level of decision-making. Adopting a process-oriented approach, we can identify mismatches within each level and between the various levels, and then attempt to rectify them.

Finally, I would like to reiterate the importance of incorporating evaluation in any curriculum design. I am convinced that all courses should be evaluated, as fully as time and human resources permit, and I also hope more evaluation models will be proposed which make possible more valid evaluations.

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