Assessment of the "Teachers' Professional Growth" Experience as a Form of Self-Evaluation

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Abstract

Teachers' self-evaluation can be used as a diagnostic means by principals and coordinators in order to know where the teachers need help. This study presents a self-evaluation form designed to highlight the needs that English teachers teaching across all levels (preschool-12) at a school in Lebanon had. It was divided into two parts: the first part dealt with the teachers' accomplishments throughout the academic year 2005-2006, while the second part listed needs that teachers believe they need to work on throughout the following academic year. Teachers were asked to specify 3-5 needs they intend to work on during the academic year 2006-2007 and point out whether they can achieve their objectives on their own or they need professional help. The results highlighted teachers' writing skills, competence, self-confidence, in-depth analysis to evaluate their own work in addition to their character, professional growth, and maturity. This self-evaluation form can be used to support the supervisors' assessment of teachers.

Teacher evaluation, like student assessment, is an ongoing process. It begins during the screening of applications and ends with the renewal or termination of contracts. It involves both formative and summative evaluation and interaction with the teachers on different levels. Formative evaluation involves a daily follow up on teachers' lesson planning, classroom management, test-preparation, and interaction with students, parents, colleagues, and administrators. Summative evaluation, on the other hand, includes all what formative evaluation comprises, but gives a global view about the teachers' performance indicating whether the teachers have undergone professional growth over one whole academic year or not.

Like student assessment, teacher assessment involves measurable and non-measurable means of evaluation. Non-measurable means of teacher evaluation is the reputation that each teacher gains. Students, as we all know, are quite frequently the first to draw the principal's attention to teachers who are not performing their duties as they are expected to. Impressions that the personnel at any academic institution— be it a school, college or university — form of each other without necessarily having any solid proof to support their views are another example of non-measurable means.

Measurable means of evaluation, on the other hand, are in the form of reports written by principals, heads of departments and other colleagues who were asked to observe the teachers during their class sessions and evaluate their performance. Prearranged observations as well as occasional "walk-throughs" help the head of department or principal diagnose problem areas that a teacher may be suffering from. Thus, quite frequently, classroom observation should be preceded and followed by meetings whose aim is diagnostic and prescriptive (Larsen 2005) in order to bring about change.

Teachers are quite often evaluated based not only on principals' observation, but also on student evaluation, student performance, self-assessment, and written tests. Each of these techniques has its shortcomings. Allwright (1988) warned against category

analyses, which have failed to provide a "sufficiently illuminating account of the data." Breen (1985 cited in Gascoigne Lally and Veleba 2000) stated that many aspects of language learning situations might get neglected simply because they do not fit under the objective or quantitative techniques applied in research. Thus, despite the importance of teachers' "expectations, values, and beliefs," they cannot be measured through observation. Jacob and Lefgren 2006 clearly demonstrated that when principals assess the teachers in their schools "the best and the worst stand out". In fact, many principals have a difficulty giving an accurate assessment of those in the middle, especially if they are language teachers.

Gascoigne Lally and Veleba (2000) asked student teachers to keep diaries while doing their practicum. The advantages of this diary-keeping practice were mainly three. The first aim was to give the student teachers the opportunity to identify aspects of teaching and learning that they might research in the future. It also allowed them to reflect on what they had seen throughout the day in order to improve their teaching. Finally, it made them aware of the administrative work involved in teaching. Nevertheless, it had two disadvantages. It was a time-consuming activity that may not necessarily improve the teachers' teaching ability.

Barnet (2002), moreover, described how beginning teachers spent their first two years in their career completing their teaching portfolio in order to achieve Connecticut certification, which along with other highly structured requirements required teachers to demonstrate how they thought and acted on behalf of their students. Nonetheless, the Connecticut program proved to be time consuming and costly.

Teachers may quite frequently be asked to sit for written tests themselves to test their mandatory competencies of required skills, knowledge and attitude. On one hand, these tests are a must because according to Raths and Lyman (2003), the dangers of teachers' incompetence in its different forms are many. Some teachers may lack the knowledge of the subject matter, while others may fail to either build healthy relationships with students or engage them in high quality active learning. Incompetent teachers may lack not only conscientiousness as teachers but also quality of professional judgments, or they may simply fail to manage student behavior and classroom activities. As a result, they may end up giving plain lessons rendering them as "mediocre, uninspiring, and tedious" teachers. Despite the advantages of the written tests in reducing the number of incompetent teachers, and despite the fact that teachers receive comments on each competency within their overall performance, these tests may inhibit their creativity and reduce their risk taking teaching practices (Larsen 2005).

The debate of whether to include students' performance as a form of evaluating teachers' performance is described by Cochran-Smith (2005) as a "trap." She believes that teaching is not just "transmitting bits of information that can be tested, and learning is not just receiving information about a subject matter."

Finally, self-assessment, another form of performance-based evaluation, as well as an appraisal system developed by supervisors and subordinates includes more diverse views than a system developed solely by top management (Sawa 1995). Thus as Sanders (2000) stated, "No single data source, even well analyzed pupil achievement data, should be used by itself in the evaluation of teachers."

The purpose of this study is to show that if the teachers are asked to evaluate themselves and are guided into doing so, they may — directly or indirectly — tell their

supervisors as well as principals much more than the latter had ever hoped to know. More importantly, when teachers evaluate their own work, they will rationalize their actions and methodologies and will be more convinced of the need to improve or use their experiences to improve other teachers' performance. Thus, they will accept change and/ or professional development more readily than if it were imposed on them. Larsen (2005) stated that teachers were expected to develop career-entry plans, annual learning plans, or any form of self-report that included plans for improvement and that reflection was an integral part of self-assessment tools.

As a matter of fact, towards the end of the academic year, not only students but also teachers are worried about how they will be assessed. Coordinators, heads of departments and principals try their best to be objective and fair in their assessments. Schools in Lebanon have adopted different forms of evaluation, most of which are in the form of checklists where teachers are assessed on a scale of 5 with 1 being unacceptable, 3 being acceptable or efficient, and 5 being outstanding. The result, quite frequently, is a confrontation between teachers and their superiors, with one person's word against another although quite frequently, coordinators, heads, and principals are expected to write comments supporting their assessment. However, in many cases, teachers and administrators feel that it is unfair to apply a uniform means of evaluation to all teachers. Moreover, they feel that these checklists fail to propose a solution to a problem or they overlook specific areas of evaluation unique to different teachers.

In this study, I designed a self-assessment form (see appendix), which I gave to eighteen English teachers of a school in Lebanon to fill out. There were 4 preschool teachers, 2 Kindergarten teachers, 5 low elementary teachers, 3 upper elementary teachers, 2 intermediate and 2 secondary teachers.

A misconception about self-assessment is that teachers, as any other professionals, are going to praise themselves and their achievements. This may be true if they are asked to fill out a checklist where 5 stands for outstanding performance and they are not asked to support their assessment. However, once teachers are asked to provide examples, diagnose problem-areas, and specify where they may need help, their responses will tend to be quite accurate.

First, I chose "Teacher's Professional Growth" as a title and left out any reference to "self-assessment" intentionally so as to promote a positive feeling among the teachers. I divided the tool into two parts. In the first part, I asked questions related to the past academic year, and in the second, I asked the teachers to specify 3-5 needs and indicate whether they could work on them on their own or they needed professional help.

In the first question, "Briefly explain two ways in which you were innovative in your classes. What were the results?" some teachers who were not innovative at all specified activities or major changes suggested by their head. In other words, they had not come up with the innovative ideas but rather carried out what they were asked to do. Thus, as evaluators of teachers' performance, we can deduce who is innovative by evaluating the teachers' choice of events, which they considered to be innovative. Putting up a new poster on the bulletin board in a classroom, for example, is not an innovative act. Furthermore, we know whether the change suggested by the head was properly implemented or not. Through their brief explanations, teachers would tell whether they had fully assimilated the rationale and methodology adopted for carrying out the change.

Third, we can develop a clear idea about who is willing to change, who is reluctant to change, and who changes blindly, without having fully grasped the need for change.

The teachers' responses to the sub-question "What were the results?" reflected their observation and assessment skills. The general remark "excellent results" indicated that the teacher(s) choosing this as a response cared very little about the results. Those who explained where and how the results were successful were the more reliable and competent teachers.

In the second question, "How did you motivate your students (through activities, research, role-play…)? Explain." we form a clear idea about how a class is carried out, what potentials the teachers have, and how creative they are. Some teachers referred to activities they did on a daily basis; one teacher referred to an activity she did once this past year (in other words, she spent one class hour on); and other teachers gave me very general responses, such as "I engage students in activities they enjoy doing."

The purpose behind the third question was to tell the teachers to read and to update their knowledge. The answers to "What articles or books pertaining to your field and/or education in general did you read? How relevant and applicable were they to your current academic situation? (Please give full citation of the references.)" varied from listing eight references with full citation to indicating that they did a lot of research on the Internet. Some teachers were honest enough to say that they had not read anything pertaining to their field.

Some teachers twisted their responses to the fourth question "What teaching methodology(ies) did you have to modify in order to meet your students' needs? Explain and discuss results. (Give 1-2 examples.)" Some teachers referred to material development, syllabus modification, or choice of activities. Such responses attracted my attention to the fact that these teachers failed to tell the difference between methodology and instructional material and probably objectives. What they might have been doing in class was engaging the students in a number of activities rather than teaching them a curriculum. In other words, when asked to modify their methodology, they were modifying activities. Other teachers listed a number of methodologies, such as the grammar-translation method, the direct method, and the silent way, without specifying how they needed to modify them to meet students' needs. Once again, the teachers who gave me such responses may know the theoretical part, but they are certainly not applying it in their classes. Other teachers gave me answers with great insight. One teacher explained how she divided the writing assignments into different parts. Students had to work on one part of the writing assignment at a time after having practiced the skills required for each phase. She would collect the papers, correct them, and ask the students to either proceed to the following phase or repeat that phase. The results were improving students' skill at essay writing in addition to enhancing their desire to do additional writing assignments.

The fifth and last question pertaining to the teachers' work in the past academic year was also very diagnostic of teachers' performance. Teachers were asked to "Specify two problems you encountered in any of your classes and explain how you dealt with them." Some teachers gave me very general responses, while others denied that they had faced any problems. Other teachers suggested solutions to common problem areas that had been earlier discussed with the head of the department and a general policy had been adopted. Many teachers referred to discipline or behavioral problems and one teacher

stated that her problems were fewer than those she had last year, but she did not specify what her problems were.

As an overall evaluation of the first part of the tool, a number of conclusions may be drawn. First, since none of the teachers teaching English was a native speaker, this was a good chance to evaluate the teachers' writing skills. As expected, teachers' weaknesses showed very clearly. Teachers who had problems spotting students' errors made themselves some spelling and grammatical errors. Second, teachers who were competent and self-confident were very honest. They discussed problems they faced with methodology or with their students and gave a detailed explanation. The evaluation forms differentiated between the diligent and the "less diligent" teachers who just did their work. They also reflected the in-depth analysis that teachers may be able to put to evaluate their own work. The teachers' character, professional growth, and maturity were also reflected.

In Part B of the self-evaluation form were 18 needs listed. These needs were chosen based upon the author's interaction with the teachers and informal assessment of their work. They included factors related to teachers' fluency in the English language, knowledge about the skills they teach, methodology, creativity, critical thinking, questioning skills, background knowledge of topics taught in class, developing and evaluating source material, as well as knowledge about learning theories and language acquisition. It is interesting to note that all skills specified, with the exception of spelling and writing, were checked by the teachers. This may be due to the fact that those teachers do not feel the need to write and produce their own material since they depend a lot on supplementary material provided in the teachers' manuals of different books. Consequently, they may either be unaware of their needs, or they may not consider them as a priority. It is also interesting to note that the following areas were those that needed the most imminent work with 4-5 teachers ticking each.

a. integrate activities, songs, and discussions into their classes,
b. be creative in presenting their classes,
c. use appropriate methods to motivate their students,
d. develop their own material,
e. familiarize themselves with the major learning theories, and
f. facilitate children's language acquisition.

In conclusion, I recommend that this self-evaluation form be tested out with different subjects and different schools. It may certainly be adjusted to meet the objectives required for different subjects. However, I strongly believe that the data collected from these reports can be used very efficiently to improve the quality of teaching across all levels and to support the supervisors' assessment of teachers.

Appendix
Teachers' Professional Growth

All the questions in Part A are related to your teaching experience in 2005-2006 only.

Part A

1. Briefly explain two ways in which you were innovative in your classes. What were the results?

2. How did you motivate your students (through activities, research, role-play…)? Explain.

3. What articles or books pertaining to your field and/or education in general did you read? How relevant and applicable were they to your current academic situation? (Please give full citation of the references.)

4. What teaching methodology(ies) did you have to modify in order to meet your students' needs? Explain and discuss results. (Give 1-2 examples.)

5. Specify two problems you encountered in any of your classes and explain how you dealt with them.

Part B

As you know, in order for us to excel in our jobs as professionals and maintain a healthy academic school environment, we have to work on improving our basic teaching skills, questioning skills, general knowledge, and subject specific pedagogic knowledge (how to teach our subjects). His will ensure not only a prosperous future for the school but also our continuity as members of this small community.

Please tick 3-5 areas you will be working on over the coming academic year. Specify whether you can improve on your own or you need any help.

I need to improve my	on my own	need help
□ pronunciation	_____	_____
□ oral communication skills	_____	_____
□ writing skills	_____	_____
□ spelling	_____	_____
□ grammar	_____	_____
□ ability to spot errors in students' papers	_____	_____
□ questioning skills	_____	_____
□ critical thinking	_____	_____
□ background information on issues discussed in texts read in class	_____	_____
□ ability to integrate activities, songs, and discussions into class	_____	_____
□ knowledge of content areas (what the rules are)	_____	_____
□ methodology (how to explain these rules)	_____	_____
□ creativity in presenting a class	_____	_____
□ methods of motivating students	_____	_____
□ ability to develop my own material	_____	_____
□ ability to evaluate source material	_____	_____
□ knowledge of learning theories	_____	_____
□ ability to facilitate children's language acquisition	_____	_____

If you have any other needs not listed above, please specify them below:

_____

_____

Teacher's Name: _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

Head of Department's Comments: _____

_____

_____

_____

Head of Department's Signature: _____Date: _____

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