

# Evaluation Approaches for Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) Preparation Programs<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Teacher education program evaluation is one of the most recent research areas under development. One of the main reasons for the interest in this issue is the need for accountability of these teacher preparation programs in order to show evidence of high-quality teacher preparation (Wilson, 2014). In fact, according to Karimnia and Kay (2015) and Martínez Agudo (2017) EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher education program studies have increased all around the world due to the importance and role of English in international communication. In this sense, the main purpose of this article is to address the lack of research in the topic of program evaluation approaches; specifically, the evaluation of teacher education programs in foreign language. This paper intends to provide a review of the current situation of teacher education and TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) preparation program evaluation. In addition, it offers some information about the main characteristics of program evaluation, the main approaches used to evaluate teacher education (TE) programs, and the challenges and limitations of assessing these programs. Finally, the features considered for a TEFL preparation program to be successful, as well as their weakness, and some suggestions for their improvement are discussed.

## Resumen

La evaluación de programas de formación docente es una de las áreas de investigación en crecimiento. Una de las principales razones del interés en este campo, es la importancia de la rendición de cuentas de los programas de preparación docente que deben mostrar evidencia de una alta calidad (Wilson, 2014). En efecto, según Karimnia y Kay (2015) y Martínez Agudo (2017) los estudios sobre los programas de formación docente de inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE) se han incrementado alrededor del mundo debido a la importancia y rol del inglés en la comunicación internacional. En este sentido, el propósito principal de este artículo es abordar la temática de la evaluación de programas; particularmente, la evaluación de programas de formación docente y de ILE. Además, este trabajo ofrece información acerca de las principales características de la evaluación de programas, los diferentes enfoques usados en la evaluación y los retos y limitaciones de la misma. Finalmente, se discuten las características de un programa exitoso de preparación docente en ILE, así como las principales debilidades y algunas sugerencias de mejora.

## Introduction

Program evaluation has recently become a popular area within many educational settings (Uzun, 2016). Unlike other programs that exist in education, teacher preparation programs play an important role in preparing future educators with the necessary knowledge, skills and experiences to succeed in “real” school environments. Taylor, Carthon and Brown (2014) state that one of the major causes that make future educators fail, is that their teacher preparation program did not provide careful support during teacher’s developmental stages.

In addition, Martínez Agudo (2017) mentions that due to the importance and role of English as the language for international communication, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher education programs are commonly being researched. However, there are always two basic questions without answers, how efficient are these educational programs and their content? Are these programs meeting the promised ends? Ping (2015) mentions that studies regarding English-teacher preparation programs have been conducted since the 90s and have mainly focused on areas related to the student-teachers’ knowledge, the program curriculum, the training for classroom teaching, and the language awareness development. As we can see, evaluating a program is not just a matter of considering a single element like quality or effectiveness; it goes beyond that since it has to include what the program offers to the future teachers’ development of skills and competences. This means, that a program cannot be considered successful if it does not meet the needs of those who are part of the program, be they students, teachers, administrators or future employers.

In the particular context of EFL, program evaluation plays an important role due to the apparent lack of quality in preparing future teachers, especially in college undergraduate programs in EFL teacher preparation programs. Some of the main criticisms regarding these programs have to do with the disconnection between what is taught in the school curriculum and what it is done at the school level (Hopper, Sanford, & Fu, 2016,

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p. 1014), and the vapid content and the rigid ideology (Wilson, 2014) set by university-based programs. This is why, it is important to address the problem of EFL teacher preparation program evaluation so that we can find better approaches to provide teachers with the necessary skills and tools that are needed to face the challenges of new educational contexts as well as to implement the correct assessment methods to improve these programs. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of EFL teacher preparation programs including issues such as: teacher preparation program characteristics, evaluation approaches, features of successful preparation programs as well as the most common weaknesses. The information presented in this article, besides closing a gap in the literature in this area, will be especially important for current EFL teacher preparation programs in the world that would like to implement an evaluation program to identify their strengths and weaknesses in order to improve their curriculum. Although little research has been done in the field of program evaluation (Mazur and Woodland, 2017) in EFL teacher preparation programs, there are some important studies done in different educational contexts such as in Hong Kong (Peacock, 2009), Turkey (Coskun & Daloglu, 2010; Salihoglu, 2012), in Spain (Martínez Agudo, 2017), and in China (Ping, 2015). Most of these studies have referenced Peacock's model of evaluation. They have adapted it to their own needs and combined it with other instruments to gather additional information on the programs.

Peacock (2009) presented a procedure to conduct evaluation of EFL teacher training programs. The main purpose of his research was to test this procedure by evaluating an existing undergraduate degree in TEFL programs in Hong Kong to assess its value for use in other contexts. Through this study, the author sought to answer the question *what constitutes adequate training of a foreign-language teacher?* He believes that a systematic mechanism of program evaluation is necessary to increase program's accountability, to contribute to program improvement, and to obtain feedback from a variety of stakeholders (Peacock, 2009, p. 262). Through a mixed-methodology that triangulates information from students and teachers' interviews, a student Likert-scale questionnaire, student essays on the program philosophy, evaluation of course materials, and alumni questionnaires, he collected the main strengths and weakness of the program. He concluded that this procedure, although not valid for all contexts, can be adapted to collect information to provide some recommendations to apply the procedure successfully.

Like Peacock (2009), other researchers have wondered about the main strengths and weaknesses of EFL teacher preparation programs. In the Turkish context, Salihoglu (2012) explored the beliefs of English language pre-service teachers and their professors on the effectiveness of their educational program. The findings revealed that the effective components included the combination of theory and practice and the good linkage between courses, while the ineffective components were the overlapping of content, the lack of contextualization, and the students' training in language and teaching skills. This was also found in Coskun and Daloglu (2010) who aimed to identify the program components that need improvement. Unlike Salihoglu's (2012) study, these authors also collected data from a document analysis to draw conclusions about the balance among the linguistics, pedagogical and managerial competences. At the end, it was concluded the program mainly focused on teachers' pedagogic competence and neglected the linguistic competence which prevented students from being prepared enough for some advanced courses. Also, there was agreement in the lack of commitment of some mentors and administrators to offer teaching practice opportunities. In addition, Martínez Agudo (2017) conducted an exploratory-interpretative study in Spain and his findings showed that, although the program was evaluated as effective in terms of pedagogic competence, linguistics and managerial competences were not clearly covered. Therefore, the program needed improvement in certain areas, especially in providing more teaching practice as means of experiential learning, starting specialization earlier in the program, and including more English language preparation to increase students' language development.

Along the same line, Karimnia and Kay (2015) also assessed the quality of a TEFL undergraduate program in Iran based on Stufflebeam's CIPP (Context, Input, Process, and Product) model. By including the opinions of both students and professors, the results showed that the content and the materials of the program needed revision and they demanded more teaching of specific courses. Also, the professors believed that curriculum design needed revisions and that teaching practice is, in fact, usually neglected by the students themselves. Ping (2015) examined the impact and the effectiveness of four pre-service English education cohorts in a Chinese context using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The results suggested that even though most students increased their English language proficiency during the program, some of them believed that the pedagogic knowledge instruction was unsuccessful and all of them reported that the main weaknesses of the program were the lack of input on classroom management skills and the lack of opportunities for practice.

In conclusion, it can be stated that although these studies are context specific, a number of similarities were found regarding the programs' strengths and weaknesses. This is mainly because the content of most of these TEFL preparation programs is structured in similar ways giving more importance to pedagogical competence rather than to linguistic and managerial competence. In addition, there is evidence that all of the programs presented in this review promoted little teaching practice according to students' views, so there is a strong demand for more experiential learning not only at the end of the program, but through the whole program. Moreover, it is claimed that the linguistic competence is an important element for students, as they need to master the language they are teaching; more preparation in this area is needed. So, it is important to reconsider the way we are developing teacher preparation and consider that these systemic flaws "need to rethink how we design pre-service TE programs" (Hopper, Sanford, and Fu, 2016, p.1015). Although some recommendations are made, there are also some positive comments about most of the programs which include the exposure to different content material, the interaction between teachers and students, the linkage between courses, and the quality of teacher's expertise.

#### Characteristics of program evaluation

Program evaluation is not something new. Uzun (2016) mentions that this area of research was particularly intended for the management of the business sector. However, since the 1960s the practice of evaluating teaching programs has existed in the United States (Karimnia & Kay, 2015). Nowadays, with the increase of accountability practices in education, particularly in the field of teacher education "the importance of systematic evaluation of teacher education programs has been stressed by many researchers" (Dollar, Tolu, and Doyran, 2014, p. 1). Peacock (2009) points out the importance of regular internal evaluation of teacher-training programs and explains program evaluation. He uses Robinson's (2003) definition which states that the main aims of program evaluation are "providing information on perceptions of a program's value, measuring how far they meet their objectives, and giving feedback to course providers on necessary improvements" (in Peacock, 2009, p.261). In addition, Dollar, Tolu, and Doyran (2014) agree that program evaluation should be a systematic process of data collection that would allow evaluation of the program's effectiveness based on the findings, conclusions, and developments made during the evaluation process. Thus, the evaluation of TEFL preparation program should be a regular and systematic process that includes information about all the stakeholders involved in the program either directly or indirectly so that the institutions can make the appropriate changes to increase the quality and effectiveness of the teacher-training program.

Regarding systematic process evaluation, Ping (2015) provides a variety of strategies that could be used to evaluate teacher education programs. He summarizes these strategies taken from other authors as follows: The first is the use of portfolios and reflective journals to provide evidence of the program's effectiveness based on students' or teachers' performance. Also, it is suggested that through the combination of hybrid evaluation approaches and well-designed field-experiences through action research and performance assessment, university staff could have more opportunities to identify the weaknesses and strengths of the program, as well as to ensure its quality. Finally, collecting information about teachers' opinions regarding the methodology and the practice component of the program can help reveal which are the components that are successful, and which are not, so that the necessary changes in the curricula can be made.

To sum up, program evaluation is a systematic process which aims to provide adequate measures to evaluate the effectiveness of program by using a variety of data collection strategies. However, this process may not be easy, as many other factors are involved in the process. One of them is deciding which approach should be used when evaluating the program.

#### Approaches to evaluating teacher education programs

Nowadays, many countries around the world are facing a new culture of evaluation in their educational settings in order to guarantee the quality of the services they are offering, focusing mainly on four areas: students, school programs, teachers, and institutions (Casas Medina & Olivas, 2011). However, this process is not as simple as it may seem. It involves a variety of approaches with different focuses, that make it difficult for institutions in the process of evaluation to fulfill the extensive requirements for each of the aspects being evaluated in all the four areas mentioned previously. In this regard, in the context of teacher preparation programs, educational critics have raised their voices about the "crazy quilt" of program evaluation (Crowe, 2010, as cited in Wilson, 2014). This metaphoric figure of programs as crazy quilts suggests that even though the unit of design is not predetermined, it must take into consideration the evaluation approach that corresponds to the intended purposed and desired function of each of the programs. However, due to the great differences in the accountability systems of teacher preparation

programs around the world, it sometimes may be difficult to say what the perfect program is. Therefore, it is important to consider a variety of accountability measures that help us get a better perspective of the program.

Wilson (2014) mentions three main accountability measures used by the educational system to evaluate the effectiveness of TE programs. First, the program revision by state, national or international accreditation organizations whose processes involve the collection of heavy documentation to demonstrate the program standards, campus visits, and periodic reviews. The second procedure is the use of assessments of new teachers' practice. This requires systematic observation through standardized protocols. The third measure is the unification of standards in all TE programs based on the standards set by the accrediting organizations such as the National Council for Accreditation in Teacher Education and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council.

Brabeck, et al. (2016) describe in more detail three of the most common methods for assessing teacher education programs: (a) value-added assessments of student achievement gains; (b) standardized observation protocols of teacher behavior; and (c) surveys of graduates', principals', and students' views of teacher performance.

- Value-added assessment (VAA): It consists of assessing changes in students learning over a period of time with the objective of gaining information about how pupils' achievement can be linked to the effectiveness of the teacher preparation program (Henry, et al., 2013). However, this type of approach is limited because VVA only accepts standardized assessment psychometrically related across years and aligned to instruction. Additionally, VVA only provides a limited sample of data collected from teachers who are in public schools teaching positions, in the states where they were trained and in the tested grades and subjects.
- Standardized observation protocols: This method is used to identify the effective classroom practices and programs' success in preparing teachers. It captures teachers' behaviors consistent across time and content areas. Although it is supposed to provide reliable data in large-scale observations, most of the time observations do not use standardized instruments or the people who direct the observation are not trained in the protocol (Ingresoll & Kralik, 2004).
- Surveys: There are three kinds of surveys used to evaluate teacher education programs: a) surveys of teachers' satisfaction in the program, b) surveys of employers, c) surveys of students regarding their teachers' performance (Darling-Hammond, Eiler, & Marcus, 2002). Surveys can provide useful information, particularly for formative evaluation regarding the areas needed to improve in the program, or in the teachers' performance. In addition, surveys from graduates and principals can be used to give feedback about how prepared they were in their own practice and how the program is producing the expected outcomes for both students and employers. Nevertheless, it is important that survey instruments be as reliable as possible, so instruments developed in-house and lack of training for respondents as well as the time of the application may interfere with the survey's reliability.

Each of these approaches can be used to evaluate an existing program; nevertheless, it is important to consider that either used in isolation or combined, they need to include the elements of validity and reliability so that they can show accurate results. These include the training of the personnel who will apply the instrument, the time and frequency of the application, the standardization of the instruments, and the number of the participants. Brabeck, et al (2016) conclude that the combination of these evaluation methods will "derive the most valid, fair, and useful profiles of programs effectiveness" (p. 165).

Moreover, regarding TEFL teacher preparation programs and considering the lack of research and the few detailed descriptions of how to conduct an overall evaluation of FLT (Foreign Language Teaching) education programs, Peacock (2009, p.262) proposes the following model to collect appropriate data to assess programs. The procedure is as follows:

- Review the literature and produce a set of questions.
- Establish appropriate sources of data in your setting.
- Choose and design data collection methods and instruments.
- Collect and analyze each set of data against your questions.
- Construct an account by relating each interpretation to the others

On the other hand, Karimnia and Kay (2015) mention some types and elements of program evaluation. First, they describe McNamara's (2002) three major types of program evaluation, goals-based, process-

based, and outcome-based and later they make reference to Rossi et al.'s (2004) five dimensions of program evaluation which include: needs assessment, program theory, process analysis, the impact of evaluation, and cost-benefit analysis.

Moreover, Peacock (2009) suggests that one of the mechanisms for obtaining information of FLT programs should include the feedback on the whole program, not by individual courses but from students, teacher, and others. Additionally, McNamara (2002, in Karimnia & Kay, 2015) mentions that this should be "a careful process of collection of information about some aspects of the program to make the necessary decisions" (p. 84). But which stakeholders are the ones who will provide us with this information? Dollar, Tolu and Doyran (2014) state that "language programs or language teacher education programs should be evaluated on regular basis identifying student's language needs, feelings and attitudes towards preparatory or undergraduate programs" (p.2). Therefore, it is important to take into account students' perceptions regarding the programs so that researchers can know if the program is efficient or not. In this regard, D'Aniello (2008) explains that information gained from graduate (or undergraduate) students "is critical for university preparation programs" (p.309) and that their recommendations must be included as a component of the accreditation process to evaluate and modify these programs. To conclude, it would be much better to make changes in the way current programs are being evaluated from the prescriptive understanding of what we think teachers should know and how they should go about their learning instead of what their real needs are.

#### Features of a successful teacher preparation program

Grossman, et al. (2009) state that most TE programs are structured "between foundations courses and methods courses" (in Hopper, Sanford & Fu, 2016, p. 1014), which provide future teachers knowledge of learners and learning and purposes of schools as well as teaching practice respectively. However, according to Wilson (2014) one of the main problems of TE programs is precisely an overload of academic knowledge and a lack of knowledge application in students' teaching practice. Therefore, this author emphasizes the need for innovation in this educational field by involving social entrepreneurs, building tight relationships with the P-12 schools, supporting clinical experience and involving expert practitioners.

Some of the general features summarized by the American Federation of Teachers (2012, in Wilson, 2014) include the following criteria:

*extensive field-based experiences (including a minimum of one year-long experience); participation in collegial learning communities with peers and mentors; opportunities for sustained work with expert practitioners as mentors; and documentation by the program of graduates' hiring, success, retention rates, and job satisfaction over time (p. 187).*

On the other hand, Hopper et. al (2016) provide a summary of basic characteristics of TE programs. This review is divided into five themes: (1) learner-centeredness which discards the "one-size fits-all" approach and advocates for a more adaptive pattern of teaching, (2) formative cycles among pedagogical components which stresses both the content and pedagogical knowledge and resources educators should develop, (3) learning and teaching are social encourages both learners and teachers to communicate during the knowledge construction process, (4) assessment for learning encourages to use more formative assessment to enhance learning, and (5) connectedness in learning and teaching which requires schools for connectedness between ideas, subjects, and learning organization as well as the creation of partnerships among these organizations.

Finally, Wilson (2014) concludes that, unlike university TE programs, some educational entrepreneurs, who provide additional options for teacher preparation, tend to value "strong content knowledge, extensive school-based experiences, data- driven decision-making, and innovation" (p.186), which in turn, make them more attractive for those who did not have access to state or private university teacher preparation programs.

#### Weaknesses of TEFL preparation programs and suggestions for improvement

According to Dollar, Tolu and Doyran (2014), one of the main problems in teaching programs is the mismatch between the given instruction and the characteristics, needs and wants of the learners. In the same line, Martinez Agudo (2017) agrees that the main weakness of teacher education program is the lack of connection between theory and practice. This is mainly because most of the programs comprise "field knowledge (linguistic competence), teacher education (pedagogic competence), general knowledge, and teaching practices" (p.63). Thus, little teaching practice is provided limiting students' opportunities to develop practical professional skills in formal teaching settings. Because of this, Freeman and Johnson

(1998, in Dollar, Tolu & Doyran, 2014) recommend that programs should have a balance between teaching theoretical and teaching skills and that knowledge of the social context of learning should be included to have full comprehension of it.

Another issue has to do with the quality of professional preparation of L2 teacher education program. According to Richards (2008, in Martínez Agudo, 2017), this is a difficult question to answer. The main reason of this difficulty is because teacher preparation programs must “go through a process of constant adaptation to face the new demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Garrido & Alvarez, 2006, in Martínez Agudo, 2017, p. 64). One way to deal with this is to prepare candidates to be well equipped with complex professional competencies such as being flexible in using different teaching approaches and having the ability to use and adapt teacher materials (Wallace, 1991 cited in Peacock, 2009).

In addition, there is a problem of lack of reflection in many TEFL programs. In order to solve this problem, Wallace (1991, cited in Peacock, 2009) suggests that programs should incorporate trainee reflection based on observations they have by watching other teachers in the school as well as themselves, reflecting on their own experiences and achievements they have had during the program.

Finally, Musset (2004, cited in Martínez Agudo, 2017) claims that teaching is “a complex and demanding intellectual work, one that cannot be accomplished without adequate preparation” (p. 63). Therefore, it is important that programs promote long-term preparation which includes post-qualification for teacher growth and development (Stoyhoff, 1999 & Lo, 2005, cited in Peacock, 2009, p. 260).

### Conclusion

In today's world, accountability in education has increased dramatically in all educational levels. Particularly, in the area of TEFL preparation programs, this has become a necessity due to the demands for better and more effective programs that ensure teachers' quality and constant improvement. Considering the importance of systematic evaluation of teacher education programs and the lack of literature in this area, this article focused on the main areas of program evaluation. First of all, an overview of the context in which teacher education was framed. Then, some of the features of program evaluation as well as the most common approaches for teacher program evaluation were discussed. Moreover, the paper discussed the main characteristics of successful EFL teacher preparation program which include a balance between content and pedagogical knowledge, extensive classroom-based experiences, assessment procedures, innovation and reflection about learning.

The literature consulted in this paper showed some of the weaknesses of TEFL preparation programs in different contexts around the world. Although most offer linguistic, pedagogic and managerial content, the focus of each of these areas is not balanced and it causes limited student preparation. In addition, students struggle with teaching practice experiences and the lack of relationship between the theory covered in the courses and real-life experiences. Another weakness is related to the mismatch between the course content and the learners' expectations and needs. In order to solve these weaknesses and improve the quality of these programs, it would be important that institutions consider:

1. Providing more experiential learning in real teaching settings
2. Balancing theory and practice
3. Adapting the program to the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs
4. Incorporating trainee's reflection on practice
5. Promoting long-term preparation

In conclusion, it is important that all TEFL preparation programs go through a systematic process of evaluation in order to find out the main strengths and weaknesses of the program and apply the necessary changes to improve teacher education in EFL contexts. As Peacock (2009) states, “all L2 teacher-education program should be subject to critical review” (p. 62). Consequently, universities that offer TEFL preparation programs should look for better quality program that include appropriate content and practices that fulfill the needs of students as they become teachers in a more complex and changing society. These changes should include transfer and application of acquired theory, participation in communities of practice, and adaptation and transformation of teachers' professional knowledge. Finally, program evaluation must include a variety of assessing methods and incorporate a diversity of stakeholders in order to generate the most optimal recommendations.

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