

Evaluating the Evaluator: The Need for an Accurate Evaluation System for ELT Professionals in Private Universities

Shaheen Ara *

Abstract: In private universities in Bangladesh, it is very common for talented English language teachers to move on to other academic institutions, other countries or even leave the profession altogether, simply because they were undervalued. This qualitative research examines how inaccurate teacher evaluations are in many ways responsible for the high turnover rate among ELT professionals teaching in private universities in the country. It also focuses on current evaluation practices, as well as their limitations and makes some recommendations on how evaluation techniques for English language teachers could be improved.

With an ever increasing number of private universities, a growing demand for trained ELT specialists, and English language proficiency among students at an all-time low, if we do not wish to lose effective teachers to other countries or even other professions, it is imperative that English language teachers are recognized for the quality of their efforts, whether this takes the form of financial appreciation or otherwise, may be up to the respective universities. However, without a fair, transparent teacher evaluation system that motivates and provides incentives to effective teachers, while at the same time helping less experienced teachers develop their teaching techniques, the turnover rate will continue to rise and have a decidedly negative effect on the standard of education in general.

Which of course raises the obvious questions: how do we distinguish an effective teacher from an ineffective one? Do universities in Bangladesh have accurate teacher evaluation policies? Do the university authorities even want them? Are the key features of teacher effectiveness different for ELT professionals, and should those unique features lead to additional or different content on observation protocols? When rating ELT professionals, what special training, if any, do evaluators need? To find the answers to these extremely critical questions this paper will explore and analyze current trends and practices regarding Teacher and/or Course Evaluations in Bangladeshi private universities.

The question of how to evaluate teaching is critical for institutions of higher education for several reasons. The individual teacher, in order to work on improving her or his teaching, must have some way of knowing whether this way of teaching is better or worse than "that way." The institution, if it wants to encourage, recognize and reward excellence in teaching, must have some reliable means of distinguishing between more effective and less effective teachers (Dee Fink, 2013). This is not something that we can afford to ignore since faculty members are a key resource behind the success of academic institutions (Fairweather, 1996, 2002; Marsh & Hattie, 2002).

Yet, despite the importance of this question, most universities in Bangladesh have struggled without much success to find a satisfying system of evaluating teaching, let alone ESL or EFL teaching. Most colleges and universities evaluate faculty

* Assistant Professor, Department of English and Humanities, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh

performance annually. The "evaluator," usually the chairperson or some executive committee, must discern how well each faculty member taught that year compared with others in the academic unit. In private universities in Bangladesh, administrators annually make general judgments about a faculty member's teaching. This occurs on decisions about salary, promotion, and teaching awards. In these cases the evaluators must answer the question: during the applicable period of time, was the faculty member's teaching sufficient to warrant an increase in salary, a promotion, or a teaching award?

Many tools are available to help assess student learning and teacher effectiveness, of which the end-of-term course evaluation is only one. The most common in Bangladesh, Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) can also be a measure of an instructor's achievements in teaching, but it is effective as one form of measurement among many. Just as students should be assessed in different ways over the course of a semester, teachers should also be assessed in a variety of ways, including peer evaluation and faculty portfolios as well as student feedback. Quality teaching comes in many different forms. More accurately, good or great teaching comes from a small constellation of a few performance factors very well done (e.g., communication skills, insights, materials, interpersonal skills, experiences, subject matter expertise, persistence, hard work) that vary in combinations with each teacher. In all cases these instructional strengths meet the demonstrated needs and priorities of students, using ethical practices. It should not be surprising that there are many different indicators of teacher effectiveness, and that the important evidence will vary by individual teacher (Peterson, 2006).

The Iowa State University Center of Excellence on their webpage (www.celt.iastate.edu) on *Peer Evaluation of Teaching* states that effective teaching displays the following characteristics; the list is divided into five categories, each of which represents one aspect of a teacher's responsibilities:

- Person as teacher
 - Is skilled at communicating
 - Has a positive attitude towards students
 - Exhibits respect for all students
- Expert on content knowledge
 - Is capable of using relevant information from specialist literature in his or her own teaching
 - Has thorough knowledge of his or her subject
 - Has knowledge of new developments in his or her subject
- Facilitator of learning processes
 - Places the student at the center when designing educational material
 - Is capable of designing activating educational materials
 - Is capable of building education in such a way that students gradually learn to learn in a self-directed manner
 - Is capable of giving feedback
 - Places the student at the center of his or her teaching
 - Is capable of activating students

- Is capable of assessing students' learning results
- Is capable of re-adjusting his or her practice on the basis of evaluations
- Is capable of designing tests that are appropriate for the desired learning results
- Organizer
 - Is capable of cooperating with colleagues
 - Is communicative when cooperating with colleagues
 - Is capable of contributing to the curriculum
- Scholar/lifelong learner
 - Is capable of reflecting on his or her teaching performance
 - Is capable of drawing conclusions from reflection on his or her teaching performance
 - Is open to innovation

Teaching evaluations are implemented in one of two ways, either summative or formative. Summative evaluation occurs at the end of a semester, usually a week before the last day of class. The evaluation is completed by the current students of the class. Students have the option to reflect on the teachers' instruction without fear of punishment because course evaluations are completely confidential and anonymous. In private universities in Bangladesh, this is typically done using a paper based format, where the paper form is distributed by an administrative staff while the teacher is out of the room. It is then sealed in an envelope and the teacher does not see it until after final grades are submitted. Ideally, this feedback is to be used by teachers to improve the quality of their instruction. The information can also be used to evaluate the overall effectiveness of a teacher, particularly for promotion and increment decisions.

Formative evaluation typically occurs when changes can take place during the current semester. Typically this form of evaluation is performed by peer consultation. Other experienced teachers will review one of their peer's instructions. The purpose of this evaluation is for the teacher to receive constructive criticism on teaching. Generally, peer teachers will sit in on a few lessons given by the teacher and take notes on their methods. Later on, the team of peer teachers will meet with the said teacher and provide useful, non-threatening feedback on their lessons. The peer team will offer suggestions on improvement which they said teacher can choose to implement. Formative evaluations are rarely to be found in private universities in Bangladesh.

According to Scriven (1967), summative evaluations are judgments about the results a teacher achieves while a formative evaluation provides advice on how a teacher can improve. Formative evaluations generally occur in the context of a relationship with a mentor, or with an independent expert. Summative evaluations, in contrast, are usually performed for use in personnel decisions such as contract renewals, promotions, and the granting of teaching awards. For summative evaluations the evaluators are assumed to be colleagues of equal or greater rank in the same or similar departments and disciplines. Summative evaluations add a comparative dimension, placing the individual teacher's performance in explicit relation to the performance of his or her colleagues (Chism, 2007).

However, for an evaluation system to be effective, it must be understood, credible, and valued. Much of the resistance to using evaluation results to make personnel and compensation decisions surfaces when judgments are based on a single score or data source (Blanton *et al.*, 2006). In addition, the American Educational Research Association, ETS, and others have indicated that making high-stakes decisions based on a single measure is not sound. Research suggests that multiple sources are required to gain a full, fair, and accurate picture of a teacher's performance (Blanton *et al.*, 2006).

Although one universal evaluation system for all teachers has the virtues of simplicity and implementation ease, the different teacher roles and responsibilities necessitates an evaluation system with the capacity to differentiate. The primary purpose of teacher evaluation should be to improve teaching and learning. How teacher effectiveness should be evaluated is the source of considerable discussion and debate. Under the assumption that teacher effectiveness represents, in part, a teacher's contribution to student achievement, teacher evaluation should consider evidence of student learning growth that can be reasonably attributed to the teacher. When direct evidence is difficult to evaluate or incomplete, as is often the case, collecting evidence on specific teacher practices that are known to improve outcomes for English Language Learners may be essential. Evaluation systems that recognize and account for the extensive training and education that ELT specialists bring to the classrooms will be better able to identify practices that contribute to improved learning and allow administrators to make sound hiring and performance decisions. If evaluators lack an understanding of specific practices that contribute to improved student outcomes, then the assessment of the teacher's effectiveness may be less precise, since there are certain elements of a teacher's performance that only colleagues in the same or closely-related disciplines can accurately assess. According to Cohen and McKeachie (1980) there are ten elements of teaching that colleagues are particularly suited to judge. Courtneya (2008) paraphrased them as: mastery of course content; course organization; appropriateness of course objectives; appropriateness of instructional materials [?]; appropriateness of evaluative devices (i.e. exams, written assignments); appropriateness of methodology used to teach specific content areas; commitment to teaching and concern for student learning; student achievement based on performance on exams and projects; and support of departmental instructional efforts. She goes on to say that, in all these cases, student evaluations alone are an insufficient indicator of effectiveness; only the informed judgment of disciplinary colleagues can complete the picture.

The following is a course evaluation report from a private university in Bangladesh (name withheld for confidentiality) through which students assess and rate instructors on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 = excellent, 4 = very good, 3 = good, 2 = fair, 1 = poor).

1. *The course instructor delivered a course outline that accurately described the course as delivered.*
2. *Always well prepared and presented the subject matter clearly.*
3. *Could stimulate an interest in the subject.*
4. *Encouraged board participation in the class.*
5. *Always punctual in starting and ending the class.*

6. *Returned with comments the assignments, project reports, quizzes, tests, exam scripts etc. on time.*
7. *Fair in evaluating and grading the students.*
8. *Available to the students for consultation as needed.*
9. *Always used English as medium of instruction in class.*
10. *Compared with other instructors I have had in this university, this instructor was...*

(It is also important to mention that students are usually not requested to write any comments or concerns in such evaluation reports.)

While most private universities in Bangladesh tend to use a similar form of teacher evaluation, it is obvious that such a generalized evaluation instruction is neither capable of accurately measuring a teacher's contribution towards student learning nor can it be used to improve instruction. In fact, apart from questions 2 and 3, none of the other 8 questions have anything to do with actual teaching skills. Moreover, question 10 is not only highly judgmental but also perceived by many teachers as highly objectionable since they are being compared not only to teachers of their own disciplines, regardless of the different courses they are teaching, but also to teachers of other disciplines as well. Current evaluation systems are not constructed in ways that enable them to be used for professional development purposes.

Yet, unfortunately, most promotions, performance appraisals and compensation decisions are based on the results of such questionable evaluation reports.

Teaching standards for teachers of ELLs should begin with standards for high-quality instruction that apply to all teachers, but should then be differentiated to include the special knowledge and skills that teachers of ELLs should exhibit in their practice (EFETELL, 2012). With around 70 approved private universities in Bangladesh, most of whom use English as the medium of instruction, the demand for trained ELT professionals is higher than ever before. However, while the demand is there, the number of ELT professionals is limited. It is for this very reason that private universities need to make the retention of qualified teachers a priority.

While having an MA is a basic requirement for all teachers of English in private universities, there has been very little emphasis on actual teaching credentials. In most developed countries, if one wishes to pursue a career in English language teaching, one may also require a teaching license or a TESOL/TESL/TEFL certificate like the Cambridge CELTA (Certificate of English language Teaching to Adults), Trinity TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). Simply having a university degree is not the only criteria for selection.

English language teachers have to undergo rigorous training and many hours of peer evaluation/observation in these programs to be certified by reputed institutions like Cambridge or Trinity College. On completion of these programs teachers are judged to be qualified to teach English language globally, maintaining internationally acceptable standards. While it is true that many universities also provide ELT programs of comparable standards, the same cannot be said of universities in Bangladesh, while limited opportunities exist for rigorous training in teacher preparation programs for teachers of English to speakers of other languages. Out of half a dozen universities which offer ELT programs, only one or two actually focus on teaching practice. The result is that we are churning out English language teachers with no experience of

actual ESL/EFL teaching. These teachers may have the necessary theoretical knowledge but lack the teaching skills that are mandatory for language teachers in other countries. In fact, English language learners are more likely than any other group of students to be taught by a teacher who lacks appropriate teaching credentials (Gandara, Maxwell-Jolly & Rumberger, 2008).

Having said that, it is the responsibility of the academic institutions that employ them to provide training for new ELT faculty. Yet, without the existence of an effective evaluation system, university authorities cannot identify the type of training that is necessary. The nature of learning itself is changing and teaching needs to change as well. However, this will not be possible unless private universities actively work towards developing an effective evaluation system for ESL/EFL teachers. While it is true that new inexperienced teachers should not be evaluated based on standards that are beyond them, it is equally true that ELT professionals should not be evaluated using standards that apply to all teachers, regardless of what they teach.

When recruiting teachers for English language courses, the general consensus seems to be that if an applicant is fluent in English and has the necessary degree (whether in Language or Literature), that applicant will automatically be an effective teacher. Evaluations focus more on whether a teacher is fluent in English or not rather than whether students are actually learning from that teacher.

At the same time, current evaluation systems do not take into account what teaching looks like at different levels of proficiency. There is an inclination to rate English language teachers by the same standards at every level, irrespective of the levels they teach. For example, in a pre-intermediate level class, a trained English language teacher may focus on minimizing teacher talk time (TTT) as much as possible. However, to an untrained evaluator/observer, it may appear that the teacher is hardly talking in class, which may result in a poor evaluation.

While some evaluators may explicitly address teachers' attention to meeting the needs of "diverse" learners, they may not attend to the special skills and strategies that are required of ESL/EFL teachers. Most experienced ESL/EFL teachers will have a distinct pre-teaching and practice stage. They will ask concept questions, use time lines focused on eliciting, modeling and drilling, all the while trying to reduce teacher talk time. Yet to the untrained observer, none of the above will seem significant.

Teachers of ELLs are required to have certification and training to instruct students with limited English proficiency. This certification recognizes that these teachers must have specific knowledge and training to ensure that they can effectively teach students with special language needs. For example, researchers have found that certain ways of communicating language to ELLs are more effective. Long (1997) found that teaching grammar was most effective as part of meaningful communication accompanied by brief interventions to point out grammatical structures that may be causing trouble for ELLs. Norris and Ortega (2000) found that explicit types of instruction were more effective than implicit types for ELLs. Neuman and Koskinen (1992) found that context was imperative in helping ELLs to acquire and use new vocabulary.

Unless the observer in a classroom of ELLs understands appropriate instructional methods for teaching language to them, it is unlikely that the observer will be able to distinguish between effective and ineffective teaching. ESL/EFL teachers must have a working knowledge and understanding of language as a system and of the role of the components of language and speech, specifically sounds, grammar, meaning,

coherence, communicative strategies, and social conventions. Teachers must be able to draw explicit attention to the type of language and its use in classroom settings, which is essential to first and second language learning (Gass, 1997).

It is essential that teachers have a working knowledge of academic language and of the particular type of language used for instruction as well as for the cognitively demanding tasks typically found in textbooks, classrooms, assessments, and those necessary for engagement in discipline-specific areas. Recognizing the differences between conversational language and academic language is crucial in that conversational language proficiency is fundamentally different from academic language proficiency—a reality that poses cognitive and linguistic challenges. Extensive research has demonstrated that it takes ELLs longer than their non-ELL peers to become proficient in academic language (Cummins, 2000). Academic language is decontextualized, abstract, technical, and literary. It is difficult for native speakers and even more difficult for ELLs and not limited to one area of language and requires skills in multiple domains, including vocabulary, syntax/grammar, and phonology. Students must be exposed to sophisticated and varied vocabulary and grammatical structures and avoid slang and idioms. Opportunities and instruction on using academic language accurately in multiple contexts and texts is of critical importance for all English language learners.

Therefore, when evaluating ESL/EFL teachers, it is extremely necessary for evaluators to have not only a basic understanding of the linguistic demands of academic tasks and skills which address the role of academic language in students' instruction, but also to recognize if learners are developing oral language competences which enable them to better communicate their ideas, ask questions, listen effectively, interact with peers and teachers, thereby becoming more successful learners.

Elise Wile (2012) in her article "How to Evaluate an ESL Teacher" points out that because ESL teachers are responsible for teaching students who are studying ESL and helping them to develop their language skills, an ideal ESL classroom will be one in which students feel comfortable and are engaged in a variety of effective and stimulating activities. She states that ESL/EFL teachers should be notified of teaching expectations well before an evaluation. The teacher should have a clear idea of what is expected. At the same time, expectations should be tailored to meet the specific needs of language learners. For example, an ESL teacher should encourage oral language skills, provide a variety of activities to stimulate oral and written English, and make reading materials available at the students' level of English proficiency. ELLs also require direct teaching of new words along with opportunities to learn new words in context through hearing, seeing, and saying them as well as during indirect encounters with authentic and motivating texts. The effectiveness of the materials that the ESL teacher uses to support his/her lesson should also be evaluated. Materials should be relevant to the ESL students' needs. Materials also should be engaging and specifically designed for ESL students. It is important to note whether or not students are engaged in the lesson. Since language learning is limited when students are forced to be passive learners, the ESL teacher should use a variety of techniques.

Incorporating teacher self-evaluation into the evaluation process is also something that could be considered. In many cases, teachers videotape themselves teaching a class, and afterward, view the tape to see if their voice is clear and the language is comprehensible to students, as comprehensible input should be used at all times.

Teachers also can use a videotape to observe the behavior of students, which is affected by the teacher's performance. While some of these guidelines may not always be practical in a typical Bangladeshi university ESL classroom, it is the author's personal experience that there has been little effort so far in focusing on the points suggested above.

According to Khan, Ahmed and Sarker (2010), discrimination in rewards and recognition, dissatisfaction with the promotion and performance appraisal process, poor research and publications facilities, and lack of administrative and technical support are some of the major reasons behind the inability to retain faculty members in private universities. In fact, in a recent study by Mannan, Haque and Rajeb (2012), it was found that around 50% of the faculty members in Bangladesh are somewhat demotivated while only 15 % seemed to be highly motivated. This is especially true for ESL/EFL teachers as many of them are increasingly concerned about being held accountable for their students' progress as measured by standardized evaluations. Even in the United States of America, according to Tollefson, Lee, and Webber (2001), "as progressively higher stakes are attached to evaluation results, teachers are beginning to question the validity and reliability of instruments used by evaluators who, in their opinion, lack the qualifications and/or experience to make legitimate judgments about their effectiveness.

It is evident that if we are to improve teaching, it is essential that we develop models of effective evaluation rather than ineffective ones that mis-measure and demotivate teachers, offer no useful feedback on how to improve teaching practice, and risk driving some of the best educators out of the profession. If a university believes that teaching is indeed complex and that it is important to recognize truly high quality teachers, then it must take into account much more of the complexity of teaching than mere reliance on teaching factors. Clearly, our universities need to develop and implement a teacher evaluation system that will improve instruction and increase student learning. Current evaluation systems are not constructed in ways that enable them to be used for professional development purposes. It is extremely important to build evaluation systems that can be linked to professional development. It is obvious that if done well, performance evaluations can become an effective form of teacher professional development.

University authorities must accept that no single questionnaire or method is suitable to every department or institution. Different kinds of questionnaires can be useful in assessing different kinds of courses and subject matters. It is also imperative that they realize that, to be reliable and valid, an evaluation of teaching should draw on multiple sources of information and that they should be used to help faculty members improve and enhance their teaching skills. It is essential that our universities ensure that the unique skills and knowledge of ELT/ESL/EFL specialists are considered and addressed when they are evaluated, establish evaluator training that includes explicit training on the specific disciplines, and establish a model in which peer-to-peer observations or evaluators are matched to a specific discipline. A successful institution recognizes the talents, dedication, and contributions of the university's workforce in a way that supports the university's mission, values and priorities (Fisher 2000). In order to have a sustainable competitive advantage, universities must provide not only suitable rewards and recognition consistently, but also establish and maintain written policies and procedures that ensure a sound basis for individual judgments fairly applied to all.

There is still much to learn about the evaluation of teaching and though there is already a considerable body of knowledge about teaching evaluation, the growing number of private universities in Bangladesh clearly indicates that our academic community urgently needs to add to that knowledge, since it will not be possible to recognize and reward teaching adequately until a more efficient system for evaluating teachers is introduced.

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