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A SPECIAL TALK WITH PROFESSOR RICHARD KIELY
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE PLYMOUTH, ST MARK AND ST JOHN, UK

In this issue, *PASAA* is very honoured to have an opportunity to interview Richard Kiely, Professor of Applied Linguistics and Language Education in the Centre for International Language Teacher Education (CILTE) at University College Plymouth, St Mark and St John, in the UK. Professor Kiely's research interests include language programme evaluation, language teaching and teacher training, and language learning explored from language socialisation and identity perspectives. Prior to joining CILTE, he worked at the University of Bristol, University College Chichester, and the University of West London. He has published in a wide range of journals, including the *TESOL Quarterly*, *Language Teacher Research*, the *Modern Language Journal*, the *ELT Journal*, the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, and *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*.

Drawing on his wealth of experience in engaging in different language teaching projects, Professor Kiely graciously shares with us his perspectives on language programme evaluation, an area that has gained increasing interest among language researchers and practitioners.

➤ **Can you provide us with an overview of language programme evaluation?**

Language programme evaluation is the study of language programmes in order to find out how good they are and how they can

be improved. My definition captures the situated and dynamic features of programme evaluation: it is

a set of strategies to document and understand the programme. It involves research activity (conventional studies or action research by which teachers learn about and transform aspects of their practice) and assessment data (conventional measures of outcomes). In addition to these, evaluation has to engage with the social, cultural and historical identity of the programme, as a product of the institution, as a phase in the biographies of participants, and as a context of personal investments of individual stakeholders.

Kiely (2009: 114)

This definition emphasises the bringing together of two data sets: assessment data which demonstrate how well students have learnt, and data on the experience of learning (and teaching) on the programme. These data bring the process and product aspects of the programme together so that there is a clear account of outcomes and potential explanations for these. For example, where the test results are strong, and the student feedback refers to the positive atmosphere of the classroom, the opportunities to use English, or the accessibility and usefulness of on-line resources, then we can begin to understand why the learning is effective. The second part of the definition focuses on the identity of the programme: its history, its values and culture, and its accumulated expertise. I will return to these aspects of programmes and programme evaluation below.

☉ In your opinion, what are the major roles of language programme evaluation?

There are two major roles or purposes: accountability and development. Accountability focuses on demonstrating to managers,

sponsors and policy makers that a programme is appropriate and relevant in terms of its overall aims and specific objectives. In the past, this purpose was seen as relevant in terms of identifying a superior method, or technique. However, such studies did not succeed in this task, and in the last two decades, the accountability purpose has, in many contexts, merged with quality assurance. Thus, each programme has to demonstrate that it is effective through reporting data such as entry profiles, assessment results and feedback from students.

The development purpose of programme evaluation refers to activity to improve programmes and extend the knowledge and skills of tutors (professional development). No programme is perfect; every programme can be improved. And this is best done by systematically documenting how the programme works, and from this description, devising, planning and implementing changes which are likely to lead to improvement. For example, if the performance in the writing part of a final test on a programme is generally weak, and students report in feedback forms that they are not satisfied with writing lessons, then the programme team should explore what might be problematic with the writing pedagogy, and devise strategies to improve it. These might include training for tutors in diverse writing techniques, revised materials, and wiki work as part of the blended learning activity. The key to successful attention to the development purpose of programme evaluation is a culture within the programme where all participants are thinking 'How can we improve?', and are prepared to work together to identify and implement strategies for improvement.

☉ **Have you seen any changing trends or shifts in language programme evaluation as inspired by evolving learning theories?**

The major change in recent decades is that programme evaluation has become more local (Kiely & Rea-Dickins, 2005). This means that the focus is not on universal, theory-led judgements, but

on situated knowledge-building: what Stake (1995) notes as a shift from *generalisations* to *particularisations*. This shift has meant a greater attention to individual participation in programmes. So we focus on not just *How does this programme work?* But on questions like *How well does this programme work for specific people in specific classrooms?*

There has also been a shift from student achievement, to student participation. This has led to not only focussing of test results, but also accounts of how students participated in the programme. Particularly important here is the extent to which students take responsibility for and invest in their learning. This aspect of the programme - how students participate - has had implications for the evaluation design and methods. In contexts where tutors have limited time and resources, there is often a reliance on accounts of students in questionnaires, feedback surveys, and focus groups. Where there are greater resources to support programme evaluation, classroom observation and e-learning logs and wikis can be used to understand more deeply how students actually participate in the programme.

The focus on quality assurance has also led to changes in design and method. Rather than evaluations as research type studies, we have reviews, which assemble accounts from various sources, and reports in meetings and other forums within institutions. Thus, evaluation reports may look more like minutes or summaries of meetings rather than research reports. This focus on programme evaluation as ongoing or periodic programme review has been driven by increasing regulation and compliance with frameworks within institutions and policy areas.

☉ **To evaluate a given language programme, what are key issues that should be explored?**

Following on from the points above, I would list four aspects to focus on in programme evaluation:

- i) Learning achievements, as evidenced in test results, etc.;
- ii) The experience of learning on the programmes, as evidenced by feedback from students (and tutors) in questionnaire surveys, focus groups, etc.;
- iii) Student investment in learning, as evidenced by the ways students engage and develop learning opportunities in the classroom and other learning environments;
- iv) Tutor investment in the programme, as evidenced by exploratory and innovative approaches to teaching.

Exploring these issues, in terms of gathering the right evidence and analysing it in a way that is valid in research terms, but also helpful in improving the programme is an enduring challenge. And this is just the first stage: from analysis of these issues, further lines of enquiry may emerge: there may be issues to examine in relation to programme design, materials, assessment formats, etc., and specific engagement with these issues may be necessary before appropriate improvement strategies can be developed.

☞ **You have mentioned ‘the identity of the programme.’ It seems to me that the issue of identity has been less explored in language programme evaluation research. Can you explain a bit more why it is important to scrutinise ‘identity’?**

Yes, I think identity is very important in language programme evaluation. And the reason for this claim is that identity is central to learning and learning success.

Most accounts of identity now follow a relational or interactional view: our identity is embedded in what we do, in our performance and our approach to our performance. This in turn draws from what we want to be, or become. So we act in ways which influence how others see us. For example, we act kindly to students because we value the idea of being a caring teacher. We struggle to write and publish because we want to be recognised as an academic.

When we act like this for these effects, we are learning, extending our knowledge and skills, so that our actions fit the identity we imagine.

This view of identity differs in three significant ways from more traditional views. First, it posits identity as coming from our future rather than our past. We act in particular ways because of what we want to be rather than which community we belong to. Thus, we can have an image of Asian or Thai learner, but many students do not fit the stereotype. They have in their imagination, a sense of how they might be, and this imagined self leads the identity development. Second, identity is not fixed, but constantly changing, adapting to contexts and circumstances. For example, a student in one class may be very active, dynamic, and self-directed, and in another, passive and uninterested. Thus, characteristics of a language programme, such as the strategy of the teacher, or the opportunities for real communication, may shape the identity of student participants. Third, identity development is a bumpy road, where success and failure are likely to be encountered. The imagined self has to be prepared to struggle.

This characterisation of identity and learning draws largely on the work of Etienne Wenger's *Communities of Practice* (1998), which in turn is developed from a sociocultural view of learning. This perspective on learning is relatively new to language programme evaluation: it is an ongoing challenge to use this perspective to understand how programmes work, and what specifically makes them effective.

☞ **What is your advice for researchers who find it difficult to write their research reports for publication when they find that the findings reveal certain problematic aspects of the programme? Would the published findings possibly cause certain adverse effects on their organisation's image?**

I think this is a key issue and requires us to understand the similarities and differences between evaluation and research. To take

the latter first: research is defined by being in the public domain. A report of a study becomes 'research' when it is peer reviewed and published. There are of course exceptions to this view, but in the main, governments and institutions tend to define research in these terms. Programme evaluation studies may meet these requirements of research, but very often they do not, for three reasons. First, programme evaluation reports may be routine, iterated reports with little of value to wider audiences. Second, programme evaluations are local and not referenced to theoretical concepts or the wider empirical literature. Thus, they may be meaningful and helpful for improving the programme, but of limited value to wider audiences. Third, such reports may be written as internal reviews, not for wider dissemination. In this case, there may be some negative views of the programme, and the appropriate action would be immediate improvement rather than publication.

In education, and increasingly in Applied Linguistics, a focus on practices in professional contexts is an important recent direction. This also draws on Lave and Wenger's *Situated Practice* (1991) and Wenger's *Communities of Practice* (1998). Thus, what happens within programmes, what teachers and students do, is a legitimate way to further our understanding of learning processes, and the factors which shape learning achievements. So, practitioners doing programme evaluations are in a unique position to undertake such enquiry. The challenge is to describe what happens, theorise the performance of teachers and students in ways which link to existing research findings, and publish the outcomes. What is published then is not focussed on the programme of a specific institution, but rather on phenomena of language learning and teaching.

One additional point: context is very important in both programme evaluation and educational research. As noted above, all programme evaluations have to take into account the specific social and historical identity of the programme and participants. This requirement however should not be about identifying specific institutions or classrooms. Rather, it is about linking the key features

of the language learning environment to established professional and social factors. Thus, class size, teacher background, teacher collaboration, examination format, etc., are all factors which need to be described, and inform the analysis of data and conclusions.

☞ **In addition to disseminating the research findings through publications, do you have any suggestions to encourage researchers and other programme stakeholders on how to use the findings to create a cycle of enquiry and dialogue among them for ongoing improvement of existing programmes and for their professional development?**

I think a culture and context of teachers discussing their own work is very valuable. Such talk inspires and also can assist analysis of what works well and what is difficult. It can be difficult to get started however: in many contexts, teachers work in very isolated ways, never sharing with colleagues what their teaching is like or what their deepest concerns are. They may comment on students' commitment or motivation, but not what their deep uncertainties are. The following are some suggestions for teachers to develop the practice of talking about their work:

- Arrange small planning meetings, where teachers plan courses, specific classes and assessment together.
- Arrange programme team meetings, either to discuss the design of course evaluation forms, or the feedback that students have provided.
- Organise a reading group, where the focus on the text (a book chapter or article) can be a context for talking about one's work. The distance from actual teaching that the focus on a reading provides, may allow teachers to talk about their own work, in responding to issues in the text.

Such discussions have the potential to lead to better programme evaluation, and increased effectiveness through teacher collaboration. I think these starting points are also helpful in

supporting teachers new to evaluating their practice and programmes: talk always helps sharpen the focus of a research or evaluation study, and it is through talk that we learn from the more experienced member of our community.

☞ **In your opinion, what issues or topics related to language programme evaluation are challenging and have been less explored particularly by teacher researchers teaching English for Specific Purposes in an EFL context?**

Programme evaluation is particularly important in ESP for this reason: it is very difficult to design the ‘specific purpose’ into an English programme, and the best way to achieve the right focus, and best way to support learning is through gradual improvement, informed by the full range of stakeholders. For example, if the specific purpose is ‘banking’, then we need a focus on the texts which represent practices, in terms of listening, reading, speaking and writing in this field. Very often, students and teachers have never worked in an English speaking bank. They may be relying on a course book which is old, or focuses only on vocabulary and texts such as letters. Through programme evaluation is it possible to include the perspective of bankers (especially if the students have opportunities to learn as interns), and the development of materials which correspond to uses on English in international banking.

Through the lens of learning as participation in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), Professor Kiely has addressed the major issues in language programme evaluation. We therefore hope that our readers have gained both theoretical and practical ideas in implementing language programme evaluation to meet the needs of their own institutional context.

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