

## ***A Context-Restrictive Model for Program Evaluation?***

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Brian Lynch offers a clearly articulated “context-adaptive” model for language program evaluation, which he well illustrates through the case of the Reading English for Science and Technology (REST) Project at the University of Guadalajara, Mexico. Lynch concludes his paper with the following observations

This iterative framework leads program evaluators through a set of considerations that can adapt the evaluation to a variety of specific program settings. The use of this model in future evaluations will lead to further refinement and increased usefulness for ESL and other language-teaching program contexts. (p. 39)

The reader will note that the confidence level underlying these concluding remarks is quite high; in particular, Lynch claims that his model, while needing further refinement, is sufficiently developed to be ready for wider use. While it is clear that Lynch deserves considerable credit for his attempt to construct an adaptable evaluation instrument—as antidote to the *craft* of evaluating language programs on a case-by-case basis—the model (at least as presented and exemplified in Lynch's article) seems to be oddly, and perhaps dangerously, self-limiting. I will argue, therefore, that further refinement of the model would be advisable *before* further use.

As a matter of practice, ESL program evaluation is a well-established ongoing activity in our profession, most typically orchestrated through curriculum committees, retreats, or self-study task forces. While formal external evaluations of ESL programs may be less common than with many other kinds of academic units on U.S. campuses, they certainly occur. Elsewhere, organizations like the British Council have well-established policies for periodic external evaluation of ESL projects and programs. The perceived rationale for all this expensive activity is that it provides objective, reliable and expert judgments on particular programs as well as offering reasoned recommendations for possible changes in objectives, activities, and/or personnel. It is of course true that this rationale is idealistic both in terms of its assumption of reduced bias (Beretta, 1986) and in terms of its expectation that cogent recommendations will actually be implemented. On the other hand, it is equally the case that evaluators are typically chosen because they are supposed to bring into the evaluation a sufficiently broad

base of knowledge and experience to be able to access a particular program in the light of comparable program settings elsewhere.

Given this institutional view of external evaluation, Lynch's model as exemplified through the REST case study seems curiously internal; the project is examined entirely in terms of itself without any insights from comparable programs in comparable settings. The imposed limitation is particularly worrisome in the REST context because of the wealth of actual comparable information available. After all, for many years Latin American universities have been operating REST-type programs, and the considerable scholarly literature on such programs goes back as far as Ewer and Latorre (1967). Important work in Mexico itself was carried out by the Research and Development Unit at the National Autonomous University of Mexico in the mid-1970s (see, for example, Mackay, 1978). Several of the issues which Lynch identifies as being relevant to the thematic framework (p. 37) have already been discussed in Latin American REST-type contexts, for example, team teaching by de Escorcia (1984). Brazil has for a number of years produced a journal, *The ESPecialist*, precisely targeted on unifying national efforts to upgrade REST-type operations. And so on.

A less context-restrictive approach to evaluation would build such *relevant* external data into the model. This would be advantageous for at least three reasons. First, it would strengthen the chances of program-fair evaluation (Beretta, 1986) by providing a knowledge-base for comparing like with like. Second, it would establish a platform whereby the audiences of the evaluation report could perceive the comparative strengths and weaknesses of their own program; and third, it would open the program to outside work so that economies associated with not reinventing the wheel can be (albeit belatedly) put into place.

Other restrictive aspects of the Lynch model can be dealt with more expeditiously. Steps 2 and 3 of the model do not seem to easily permit the emergence of possible alternative uses of instructional resources. We might envision, for example, that the REST project would work better with, say, third-year students rather than first-year students. Swales (1989) offers the concept of *opportunity cost* as a way of structuring more radical programming decisions: In effect, opportunity cost asks ESL programs to reflect on what they cannot "afford" not to do through to what they cannot "afford" to do. Whatever the mechanism, a context-adaptive model needs to allow for substitution by replacement.

Finally, there is the issue of proactive effects of the evaluation process itself. Lynch in fact is obviously aware of the importance of assessing the audience of the final report and in so doing of assessing

important social and political sensitivities. However, he only views these considerations as constraints on the evaluator. Evaluations can also operate as important opportunities for educating authorities and for influencing the views of others (students, subject instructors, etc.) via discussion, data-collection and other processes. Just as needs analysis benefits from recognizing changing institutional dynamics (Coleman, 1988), so does evaluation.

Lynch is to be congratulated on his bold attempt to construct a generalizable model for guiding and rationalizing the case-by-case character of ESL program evaluations. Yet Yin (1984) notes that case studies are particularly valuable "when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 23). My sense of Lynch's paper is that he has so far set the boundaries between phenomena and contexts too narrowly and that the model evaluation of the REST program at Guadalajara suffers somewhat from this constriction.



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