

BENCHMARKING IN TESOL: BENCHMARKS OF MANAGEMENT OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

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ABSTRACT: *Benchmarking is a very common real-life function and happens every moment unnoticed, this article, as a result of the research into TESOL (Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages), argues for benchmarking and auditing to help develop quality education/TESOL. In the research many benchmarks were drawn from a detailed comparative analysis and synthesis of extant literature, leading to the development and codification of quality characteristics and standards for an area. This provided TESOL Quality Audit framework that can be a prelude to improve staff, curriculum, and institutional development. As the approach was used in research in TESOL, the context of the research is provided, as is a worked example drawn from the extensive literature review on the management of TESOL in the classroom. Possible implications for staff development and curriculum improvement are identified.*

Keywords: TESOL, benchmarking, auditing, teaching and learning strategies, second language, foreign language

INTRODUCTION

The author has been involved for over 30 years in TESOL (Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages) and in the quality movement. In 1995-1999, this interest and experience crystallized into a comparative case study research project that entailed researching in and comparing across, eight primary schools. Four of the primary schools were in Birmingham, UK, each of which had very high proportions (over 90 percent) of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds whose first language was other than English. The schools in Birmingham were chosen for the author as ones that the Local Education Authority (LEA) considers are providing effective teaching of English for the ethnic minority pupils within their care. The other four primary schools were English language medium schools for elite Pakistani children in Lahore, Pakistan where TESOL provision was inadequate and needs attention and improvement. To solve the problem research finally evolved into an improvement model development through benchmarking and auditing.

As this approach to benchmarking was a novel one, the rest of this article explains the approach, before considering some of the staff and curriculum development implications that arise. To situate the approach within a conceptual framework, however, the researcher begins with the quality improvement emphasis of benchmarking before considering the development and validation of the TESOL benchmarks.

About the study

The research was an empirical study for a distinction award doctoral research, carried out in four primary schools in Birmingham, the U.K. where children from ethnic minorities (Mirpuri, Punjabi) made up the majority (90% and above) of the school population. The study looked at TESOL good practice in action in the above schools [1]. A total of four schools and twelve classes (one from Reception, Year One and Year Two) were researched. The above schools were identified by the Birmingham Local Education Authority (LEA).

An in-depth literature review was carried out to identify quality characteristics and quality standards that could be verified and/or adjusted and added to as a result of the fieldwork [also called the process of reconnaissance [2]. A “Thick Description” approach suggested by the researcher

[3] was also adopted where each “Thick Description” of a lesson was transcribed and then typed up. This is called the open coding process. The researcher then re-examined these moves under the coding process and defined them more clearly by relating the moves to the Quality Standards that had been previously derived from the literature.

Interviews (informal and formal) were also carried out where the teachers were interviewed to discuss their actions and intentions as well as learning and teaching strategies used. Content analysis of school documents was carried such as development plans, language policy, home-school liaison policy, schemes of work, assessment schemes and many related documents. This content analysis assisted in the process of triangulation-cross-checking and corroborating other data. As the researcher had a respectable concern for the validation of the audit, a routine of triangulation was followed to cross-check the validity of the research data. Consequently, the outcome of this study was TESOL Quality Audit Framework.

The concepts of performance indicators, benchmarking and process improvement

There are many routes to improvement for schools. One route that the researcher now favors is that of using benchmarking within a quality improvement perspective, especially where comparable data currently are not available. Researchers [4] definition of benchmarking is general in its approach, for they define benchmarking as:

The process of identifying and learning from best practices anywhere in the world ... in the quest for continuous improvement [4].

This definition is relevant because it locates benchmarking – the identification of desirable standards of provision and/or service – within a quality improvement perspective. The problem, however, was that suitable benchmarks were not available readily for TESOL without carrying out original research. That is the reason a “benchmarking” approach was utilized.

Benchmarking

Benchmarking is the term to describe the construction of quality standards from available literature rather than benchmarking based upon original comparative research of similar organizations. As the literature on TESOL is both extensive and varied, so the creation of benchmarks of good