

BENCHMARKING IN TESOL: BENCHMARKS OF MANAGEMENT OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

¹Arif Jawaid, ²Parveen Kaur

¹Lahore Garrison University, Lahore, Pakistan

²Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities University Malaysia Sarawak,
94300 Kota Samarahan Sarawak, Malaysia .

E.Mail: ¹arifjawaid54@yahoo.com, ²spkaur@unimas.my

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 out 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

practice from that literature was both a lengthy and a painstaking exercise. It was a matter not only of reading the literature and constructing standards statements but also of cross-referencing, a process known as triangulation. Technically, in research, triangulation "refers to the use of a combination of methods to explore one set of research questions" [5]. This definition was extended to include combinations of literature sources, so when an item or standard is proposed in three or more articles and books, it was taken to indicate a significant requirement that should be developed and exhibited within good TESOL provision. We thus were concerned to identify "industry-wide practice" rather than the view of a particular author. The specific benchmarking identification process adopted in the research was as follows:

1. (1) an initial definition of quality standards in TESOL through a review of the literature and the codification of that literature into an initial quality audit instrument;
2. (2) the further validation, modification and extension of the TESOL audit instrument through research conducted in classrooms in schools defined by the LEA as "good" TESOL schools; and
3. (3) Finally, validation and enhancement of the audit instrument based upon a content analysis of school documents (including OfSTED reports where available), and interviews with teachers and headteachers concerning school language policy, planning and good TESOL classroom practice. Only then was the audit instrument affected and applied in Lahore, Pakistan, to test the extent of compliance (or not) with the quality standards.

The concepts of good practice, quality, quality characteristics and standards in benchmarking

The concept of 'good practice'

It is worth defining 'good practice'. According to Researchers [6] "good practice, then is intrinsically educative as well as operationally effective. Effectiveness as a criterion existing on its own is meaningless".

'Good practice' in this context refers to high standards of learning and teaching provision worthy of emulation by other schools, (e.g. Pakistan). The researcher preferred 'good practice' over the term 'best practice', to take heed of a statement from the researcher [7]. He cautions, "the idea of a universally beneficial set of best practices proved to be unsound". Hence the term 'good practice' was adopted in this case study.

The concept of quality

The concept of quality systems and standards has moved from the military into the industrial and commercial sectors [8]. In the 1990s the quality movement further began to make a substantial impact in education, especially at college and university levels [9]. Quality concepts subsequently have traveled down the education system into the nursery, primary and secondary schools to become a major contextual and operating factor [10,11,12].

Unsurprisingly, quality has been defined in a number of ways [13;14.15.16.17]. Quality (Quality Characteristics and Quality Standards) implies that the good or service provided meets the needs of the clients/customers and stakeholders and hence is experienced and defined as 'good practice' by those stakeholders (e.g. learners, teachers, student teachers, teacher trainers, parents, governors, LEA

(Local Education Authority), OFSTED, and central government). It remains the case, however, that the concept of quality and the significant implementation of it in education lacks systematic evidence to-date. It is time for the educational sector to adapt business-world quality management strategies in all areas of endeavour [19].

The above clearly suggests that quality is expected these days in all the aspects of life including education and TESOL. A good practice (irrespective of its origin) that can add value and enhance the performance of learners and teachers needs consideration to be adapted /adopted. The quality movement made a substantial impact in education in 1990, especially at further and higher education levels [9]. Concepts of quality to have traveled rapidly into the nursery, primary and secondary schools [10,11,12]. Indeed, all sectors of the education system in the U.K. are now quality conscious. Quality management strategies cover aspects of input, process, and output of a system, in this context TESOL system. It is a state of output or product that demands continuous improvement.

The idea of TESOL quality is at an early stage in schools, especially at the primary level [4]. The 1988 Education Reform Act in the U.K. and subsequent legislation and government direction has placed considerable importance on the educational process assuring quality as measured by performance indicators through attainment targets and inspection criteria [10, 12]. The attainment targets and inspection criteria have been considered but followed due to their limitations because these are generic and do not focus on TESOL explicitly. Additionally, OFSTED has not made TESOL an issue to be dealt with separately, but one built into school structures and processes. The TESOL Quality Audit, therefore, because of its emphasis upon standards of provision, utilized a benchmarking and process improvement approach to TESOL.

Quality characteristics and standards

The research applied the concepts of quality characteristics and quality standards. Following the definitions of [9,20], a quality characteristic can be defined as an aspect, section or component of provision necessary for the achievement of overall quality. Typically, any quality provision has a number of quality characteristics that contribute to it. An early decision thus had to be made about the framework of quality characteristics to be used in the research. The initial framework or set of quality characteristics chosen was that developed by the researcher [21], who sees all education as containing, to varying degrees of explicitness, a theory of:

1. (1) aims, objectives, and outcomes;
2. (2) teaching and the teacher's role;
3. (3) learning and the learner's role;
4. (4) knowledge, its content and structure;
5. (5) assessment that learning has taken place;
6. (6) resources appropriate for learning;
7. (7) the organization of learning situations; and
8. (8) the location of learning.

Meighan used "theory" as shorthand for the commonsense view about something rather than in its scientific sense [21]. In our research, each of these "theories" in effect became a quality characteristic.

In the case study phase of the research, the initial eight quality characteristics framework of Meighan was condensed into six cyclic quality characteristics. The

quality characteristics finally used in the TESOL quality audit were:

1. (1) planning of provision (including aims, objectives, knowledge and content, organization, processes, and outcomes from Meighan);
2. (2) management of learning and teaching;
3. (3) use of learner-centered approaches;
4. (4) use of a variety of resources;
5. (5) assessment of learning; and
6. (6) monitoring and evaluation.

Within each of these quality characteristics, we sought to derive from the literature appropriate quality standards.

Quality standards within quality characteristics

The concept of quality standards too has been defined variously by researchers [16, 20, 22, 23]. All the definitions suggest that a quality standard is:

The level or extent of a provision that can be achieved in any quality characteristic.

From this definition of quality standards, it can be seen that standards are levels of provision or performance (or both), that pertain to each quality characteristic. Thus, in this study, each of the six quality characteristics (e.g. Management of learning and teaching preceded by the planning of TESOL) was defined further in terms of attributes or components that exemplified and concretized the characteristic in observable terms. Throughout, the main focal point of the research was upon the activities of the teacher who, as classroom manager, is primarily responsible for developing and implementing in a practical manner the quality standards encompassed within each quality characteristic. The whole process was designed to: ... identify an external point of reference, or standard, by which that activity can be measured or judged [24].

Benchmarking and process improvement

Providing suitable standards for TESOL in this study has involved the use of a benchmarking approach. The term benchmarking has also entered into education through industry [25]. Benchmarking has been defined in similar ways by many authors [4, 26,27]. The above account suggests that benchmarking is a process of establishing a standard against which to measure the present performance of an institution in order to identify and possibly achieve improvement in provision.

That is the reason benchmarking in this study sees benchmarking as,

A process of comparing TESOL performance of selected school (s) against TESOL good practice derived from literature and research codified in quality characteristics and quality standards. The application of such is designed to support the improvement of the English language learning of students whose first language is not English.

The benchmarking used in this research is functional as it involves making comparisons with typically comparative but non-competitive organizations. Moreover, the creation and validation of benchmarks allow comparisons to be made between parts of the same school (year levels and between classes in the same year) and between similar schools. That being so, the benchmarking program requires a clear strategy and criteria by which to identify good practice [18]. The identification of Quality Characteristics and Quality Standard warranted documentation and this finally, led to the codification process.

Audit and auditing

The TESOL audit as the codification of the 'good practice'

The concept of audit

Again, like quality and benchmarking, a range of authors have been consulted [16, 20, 28, 29, 30, 31,32].

In the development of the TESOL Quality Audit, the research has been particularly influenced by the audit approach adopted by Moreland and Horsburgh's (1992:30) study of an engineering department in a college of Further Education (F.E). The concept of an educational audit as a tool for improvement used there was directly applied to the present research. The adapted definition of an audit for this research is as follows:

"An audit is means to an end, the end being the improvement of TESOL through identification and codification of "TESOL good practice" designed to meet the needs of stakeholders (e.g. pupils, teachers, student teachers, teacher trainers, parents, governors, headteachers, LEA, DFEE (Department For Education And Employment and OFSTED)".

Auditing as a process

Auditing as a methodology has been frequently utilized in the industry [16]. Following researcher [16] adapted definition of auditing for this research thus reads:

"Auditing is a process of applying an audit instrument (TESOL good practice criteria) either partially or wholly to a TESOL situation to identify strengths and weaknesses (conformances and non-conformances) in order to inform stakeholders and possible improvement strategies".

In this research, auditing was applied to the Pakistan Case Studies, which was based on the audit framework developed and validated in the Birmingham Case Studies.

To demonstrate show how the comparative interactive approach of the data analysis actually worked, an example is drawn from the QC2 'the management of learning and teaching' is now provided.

Benchmarking: a worked example

Benchmarking is the term for deriving quality standards statements from available literature rather than from case studies of competitors. It was, and is, an exercise in critical reading involving iterative analysis, comparison and synthesis of relevant literature. In order to provide an example, the researcher will deal with a few aspects of one of the quality characteristics, "Management of TESOL". In fact, it is a process that was carried out to identify all the quality characteristics and quality standards. In developing benchmarks, two types of literature were collated. The first type was the literature concerned with language learning and teaching in different TESOL contexts. Second, was focused upon TESOL in primary schools, the researcher also carried out similar critical reading processes of a mass of primary education literature. Comparing these two kinds of literature was instructive in two ways. First, the search and analysis revealed the extent to which there were precise similarities or differences between the TESOL literature and the primary education literature *per se*. The second outcome was to confirm definitively that quality primary TESOL is also a quality primary education.

To return to the literature on the quality characteristic of management of learning and teaching, first of all, the significance was checked, given to the management in the

literature. For example, some quotes from the relevant TESOL and primary literature are as follows:

Researchers [33] view the management of learning and teaching as follows:

By 'management' we mean the creation of a positive pedagogical environment which facilitates learning. Our focus, therefore, is less on the instructional issues of curriculum planning and methodology, and more on the professional decisions teachers must make to ensure that learning takes place effectively [33].

Researchers note that: If effective teaching and learning strategies are to be developed and implemented then the relationships between the micro-level of the classroom and the macro level of the school need to be explored [34].

The above quotes (literature) emphasized that it is the teachers' responsibility to manage to learn and teaching effectively (e.g. Moyles 1995, Hall 1996). Subsequently, this Quality Characteristic (QC) 'the management of learning and teaching' was both observed and confirmed in the schools by interviews (formal and informal) and document analysis. It was revealed that effective management of learning and teaching is carried out in the schools. These practices were found to be strong in all the schools and hence 'the management of learning and teaching' was designated as a QC with the levels and types of management being Quality Standards within this QC. In the same manner other QCs such as QC1 'planning', QC2 'management (above)', QC3 'learner-centered approaches', QC4 'resources', QC5 'assessment of learning' and QC6 'monitoring and evaluation' were identified.

As the QC2 "Management of learning and teaching" is still vague, and can cover a lot of educational processes, the researcher found it necessary and helpful to develop quality standards within the QC2. To identify the extent of Quality Standards in QC2, the research data were analyzed iteratively to discover the extent of Qs provision. Within the audit framework, the process of compilation which thus started with: QC2 "management of learning and teaching" was now added to by the quality standard: QC2.1 "Teaching strategies and teacher's roles". Given the depth and quality of the data, each QS was subdivided to itemize each concrete instance. For example, QS 2.1 was divided into QS 2.1a, 2.1b and 2.1c and so on (see table 1). The further subdivision was carried out as necessary. The Quality Standards within 2.1a i.e. 'the teacher changes roles to facilitate learning' are shown from QS 2.1a (i) to QS 2.1a (ix) (see below).

This process of comparative reading, analysis, synthesis and the development of quality standards was completed over and over again. Despite the lengthy audit, in the research, if occasionally came across a quality standard that was not found in the literature, but was clearly found in three or more schools (cf. triangulation). Where that was so, that quality standard was added to the audit framework. Moreover, if a Quality Standard derived from the literature was not found during the fieldwork, questions were framed

to be asked from the teachers to check if and why this was so. Formal interview schedules based upon perceived gaps in the QCs were prepared and carried out. The interview data were subsequently analyzed to confirm the presence (or otherwise) of the Quality Standards not observed.

Two more examples of Qs (2.1a(1) to 2.1a(ix) and 2.2c(i) to 2.2c(ix) respectively are shown below to show the process of validation and development of the extent for some of the quality standards as a model.

The literature informed that in any one session the teacher (among others) takes on multifaceted roles of observer, learner, supervisor, demonstrator, manager, questioner, instructor/director and model [35, 36].

To confirm the above observation (Field Notes, FNB) informed that the majority of the teachers adopted the above roles (see QS2.1a(i) - (ix)). The main role adopted by all the teachers was of the questioner and the other most common roles were of instructor and demonstrator.

Similarly, literature emphasized that the teacher manages both process and product-oriented learning environment by using many strategies [21, 37, 38, 39].

Field notes confirmed to varying degrees the teachers managed a process and product-oriented learning environment (see QS2.2c). The pupils remained involved through the use of such learning strategies. The teachers, for instance, asked questions, gave verbal and nonverbal clues, provided cues and contexts, made use of guessing, surprise, success and encourage creativity (see QS2.2c(i) to QS2.2(ix)).

To validate further the audit instrument in practice, the research in Birmingham considered published documents including inspection reports by the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED), the evidence allowed to confirm the quality characteristics and standards. Park Drive School (false names are used to protect the identity of the schools), for example, was commended on its curriculum planning and management by the OfSTED:

Strength is the careful planning undertaken to ensure that the three classes in each year group receive an equal share of good resourcing and the good teaching ideas in each subject. ... Teachers' individual lessons and weekly planning ensure that a variety of activities take place in every lesson ... [40].

Similarly, school teachers and headteachers were interviewed informally and formally to gather the evidence, in order to validate the audit framework produced. Finally, due to the complexity of the data, all the QCs along with their Quality Standards were displayed on a spread-sheet to facilitate the sorting out of any overlaps and repetitions of QS. A standardized format was developed. Column One on every sheet of the audit states the QC to which the sheet refers (e.g. the management in this case). In Column Two one or two of the relevant literature and research references are given to show their origins in the literature. Columns 3 and 4 respectively show the presence or absence of a QS.

. Table 1: An extract of TESOL Quality Audit Framework for ‘management of learning and teaching’

2. MANAGEMENT OF LEARNING AND TEACHING	References from Literature and Field Notes	Presence	Absence
Extent of Quality Standards			
2.1 TEACHING STRATEGIES AND TEACHER'S ROLES	Meighan [21]		
2.1a The teacher changes her roles to facilitate learning of the pupils as by becoming:	Meighan [21]; [45]; Cohen, Manion & Morrison [46]		
2.1a(i) monitor	Edwards & Knight [47]		
2.1a(ii) learner	Fisher [35]		
2.1a(iii) supervisor	Shamim [48]		
2.1a(iv) questioner	Whitaker [49]		
2.1a(v) instructor	Ellis [38]		
2.1a(vi) model	Cummins [50]		
2.1a(vii) demonstrator	Johnson [51]		
2.1a(viii) actor	Whitehead [52]		
2.1a(ix) innovator	Wortman & Matlin [53]		
2.1a(x) mother/parent	Brown [54]		
2.1b The teacher co-ordinates with other teachers (team teaching)	Wortman & Matlin [53]; Edwards & Knight [47]; Menter et al. [55];		
2.1c The teacher involves pupils in a variety of interdependent tasks and activities in a lesson or during a day.	Nunan [37]; Gibbons [56]; Edwards & Knight [47]; Wortman & Matlin [57]; Fisher [38]		
2.1d The teacher simplifies/modifies her style and reduces her rate of speech	Richards and Lockhart (1994:184); Ellis [38]; Nunan [58]; Whitehead [52]		
2.2 LEARNING STRATEGIES AND LEARNER'S ROLES	Meighan [59]		
2.2a The whole school i.e. headteacher, coordinator, teachers and external agencies participate to manage to learn.	Dowling [53]; [60]; Edwards & Knight [47]; Whitaker [61]		
2.2b The school ensures that all the teachers are well aware of the learning and teaching policy at all levels.	Moyles [63]; Wortman & Matlin [53]		
2.2c The teacher manages process and product-oriented learning environment by:	Nunan [37]; Ellis [38]; Brown [54]; Meighan [59]		
2.2c(i) asking questions	Entwistle [60]		
2.2c(ii) giving clues (phonics)	Baker [64]		
2.2c(iii) use of nonverbal clues	Baker [64]		
2.2c(iv) use of cues	Cummins [50]		
2.2c(v) use of guess	Krashen [65]		
2.2c(vi) use of surprise	Latham & Miles [67]		
2.2c(vii) use of context	Krashen [65]		
2.2c(viii) use of success	Tann [69]		
2.2c(ix) creative work	BSAS [68]		
2.2d			
2.2e			

The presentation of the audit document

In presenting the audit, we arrived at a format that listed the quality characteristic, the relevant standards and a small number of exemplifying references. An extract from the Quality TESOL Audit Framework for the quality characteristic “The management of learning and teaching” is provided in Table I, to show the framework development.

Benchmarking and concepts of “good practice”

It was our intention from the outset to establish critical analyses of the literature as a legitimate approach to the identification and construction of “benchmarks”. We are not suggesting that this type of benchmarking should replace other types of benchmarking indicated, but should form an addition to them. By developing generic benchmarks, one is likely to codify “good practice” that can

be used to evaluate current performance where direct benchmarks are not available.

The actual process of benchmarking in case studies involves an interplay between the availability and usability of benchmarks. We are very much at one with the researcher [41], who wrote:

If perfect performance measures are not available, then the alternative is not to abandon performance measures, but to use imperfect or uncertain performance measures in full awareness of their limitations. That means using the measures but not placing total reliance upon them, rather seeing them as one means of informing and judging. Benchmarking is very much a means of informing and judging.

Conclusion: benchmarking as an approach to quality improvement in TESOL/education

It is our belief that all educational institutions would benefit from developing and using benchmarks for institutional development and the improvement of quality. Generic benchmarking is a staff development tool as well as a quality development tool. As researchers [24] note, benchmarking, amongst other things, can assist in baseline comparisons; identifying gaps in performance; raising standards of delivery; identifying prime targets for improvement; establishing common practices and procedures; opening up communication channels, and generating a commitment to benchmarking/change.

Benchmarking can be of real assistance in all these processes. Generic benchmarking can be a key element of staff and curriculum improvement through activities such as emancipatory action research, defined by the researcher [42] as:

collaborative, critical and self-critical inquiry by practitioners (e.g. teachers, managers) into a major problem or issue or concern in their own practice. They own and feel responsible and accountable for solving it through a cyclical process of (1) strategic planning; (2) action, i.e. implementing the plan; (3) observation, evaluation and self-evaluation; (4) critical and self-critical reflection on the results of points 1-3 and making decisions for the next cycle of action research, i.e. revising the plan, followed by action, observation, and reflection, etc.

Teachers who wish to engage in such inquiry will find the processes of benchmarking recounted here an extremely useful sensitizing ground-clearing activity. It can be a prelude to improvement as well as an indicator of the areas where improvement is necessary. Generic benchmarking as a form of staff, curriculum, and institutional development is an organic approach to quality improvement [43], involving as it does the formalizing, auditing and valuing of the current status quo with a view to improving it. This approach brings teachers back into the improvement process [44]. Such a methodology starts from a staff commitment to do a good job and gives them a valuable tool to help them improve.

We have certainly found this to be so in our research, and hope that others will build upon this approach. Moreover, the audit framework structures the research data to provide a validated frame of reference to compare and contrast local as well as cross-national TESOL situations. The iterative marrying of theory and data makes it reliable and standardized. The audit collates a wide range of real data which can be analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. TESOL can be monitored by the application of the audit. Educationalists, linguists, researchers, teacher trainers, student teachers, governors and OFSTED can benefit from the approach and the framework

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