

Examining the Effectiveness of TESOL Master's Programs to Prepare Graduate Students for
Their Current and Future Careers

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Abstract

Professional graduate program curricula are consistently evaluated for their efficacy as they relate students' needs and achievement. Particularly, teachers in the TESOL field are challenged to become effective in their profession by adapting and developing learning materials and designing successful curriculum that imparts all relevant concepts and knowledge that contributes to this field. Based on the aforementioned reasons, it is imperative to continually evaluate and reexamine the effectiveness of TESOL master's programs, as well as to investigate what information and skills this program promotes to prepare graduate students for their current and future careers.

Introduction

Professional graduate program curricula are consistently evaluated for their efficacy as they relate students' needs and achievement. Particularly, teachers in the TESOL field are challenged to become effective in their profession by adapting and developing learning materials, and planning and designing successful curriculum that imparts all relevant concepts and knowledge that contributes to the field. The responsibility for developing a successful program remains with teachers, professors, directors, and principals collectively. In fact, Carroll (2007) indicated that the intent of curriculum change or invention regards "improvements in the quality of language education and in opportunities for the students' fortunate enough to have been involved" (p. 9). In other words, successful curriculum development not only incorporates educators' contributions, but also involves students' active participation. For example, educators should have positive attitudes, should be willing to devote themselves to the program, and should also collaboratively solve any problems they may encounter while designing the program. In addition, students' enthusiastic participation, the government's financial support, and the

program's international interactions, such as establishing sister-programs and student/professor exchanges, are all important components taken into consideration when designing a successful graduate program. Based on the aforementioned reasons, it is important to continually evaluate and reexamine the effectiveness of TESOL master's programs, as well as to investigate what information and skills this program promotes to prepare graduate students for their current and future careers. Ideally, the researcher will discover constructive suggestions to refine the master's program in order to help these graduate students best accomplish their learning goals and advance their academic achievement.

Statement of the Problem

It is believed that learning *how to learn* and learning *what to learn* are both important in academic teaching contexts. Students not only play a key role in the development of the curriculum, but also they are the major participants in classrooms. Without the active participation of students, it might be difficult for teachers to produce a successful curriculum. Moreover, when students know what they want to learn, then this student-centered and student-generated curriculum will help them feel more engaged in their learning. This kind of curriculum produces the most ideal environment for students to obtain knowledge and also to grow from it. Richards (2001) mentioned that knowing students' needs is one of the basic foundations of developing an appropriate curriculum. Richards further stated that students' needs are defined by whom is asked about their "wants, desires, demands, expectations, motivations, lacks, constraints, and requirements" (p. 54). In other words, needs analysis is a crucial step for developing an appropriate program that accommodates students' diverse backgrounds. Additionally, in order to develop and implement a successful curriculum, particular preparatory

procedures need to be made. Such procedures include situation analysis, assessing students' goals and learning outcomes, syllabus design, teachers' training, textbook selection, adaptation of teaching materials, and appropriate evaluation of the curriculum. If a program design lacks or underestimates one of the aforementioned elements, it may elicit some potential problems.

Based on this phenomenon, the purpose of this study is: (1) to investigate graduate students' evaluation of their master's program, (2) to suggest ways to successfully enhance the effectiveness of the TESOL master's program, and (3) to better help TESOL program developers and curriculum designers refine their master's program to provide students with the most useful skills and information. With these meaningful suggestions, it is believed that students will benefit academically from this program with greater preparation to face challenges they may encounter in the real-world.

Literature Review

This chapter will review current literature related to graduate program evaluation and is divided into three parts: a) quality program components, b) effective curriculum design, and c) appropriate curricular innovation.

Quality Program Components

In order to provide TESOL graduate students with an effective master's program that equips them with relevant and applicable kinds of skills, Armstrong (2007) proposed three categories as quality program components which help teacher candidates develop their multiple skills in teaching. These three categories include instructional skill, curriculum-design skill, and professionalism, which will be briefly discussed below:

Instructional Ability

According to Armstrong (2007), developing teacher candidates' instructional ability is regarded as the first preparatory element for the beginning teacher. Since most of TESOL graduate students enroll in this program to improve their teaching skills, instructional techniques is undoubtedly considered an essential capability in an educational setting. In other words, an effective TESOL master's program should appropriately prepare their graduate students with professional instructional capability for future teaching. Darling-Hammond, Wise, and Kline (1999) indicated skillful instructional techniques as follows:

Teaching skills include the abilities to transform knowledge into actions needed for effective teaching- for example, abilities to evaluate student thinking and performance in order to plan appropriate learning opportunities; abilities to critique, modify, combine, and use instructional materials to accomplish teaching and learning goals; abilities to understand and use multiple learning and teaching strategies; abilities to explain concepts clearly and appropriately, given the developmental needs and social experiences of students; abilities to provide useful feedback to students in constructive and instructionally helpful ways. (p. 39)

In addition, classroom management skills, encouraging students' motivation and participation, incorporating technology into classroom teaching, and giving fair student assessments are also crucial sub-categories included in instructional capability.

Curriculum-design Ability

Secondly, developing the proper ability to design curriculum is an integral part of learning how to teach. It is important that TESOL graduate students are provided with ample opportunities to practice curriculum design. Likewise, Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden

(2005) suggested that a good teacher should: a) understand different views of curriculum, b) drawing out curricular plans that are consistent and c) make sound decisions should curricular obstacles arise. Such curriculum-design skills not only help train TESOL graduate students evaluate and integrate teaching materials into classroom instruction, but also prepare them to design appropriate teaching materials to fit students' diverse needs. Along the same line, Armstrong (2007) added that curriculum-design ability includes additional components, such as design, content, pedagogy and field based experiences.

Professionalism

Armstrong (2007) deems professionalism as the ultimate skill which is one disposition that a teacher must possess in order to successfully manage classroom teaching. It requires 1) the capability of working collaboratively with others, 2) acquiring continuing education and applying what is learned, assessing the results, and adjusting teaching methodology, and 3) identifying and incorporating useful resources into classroom teaching to promote students' academic learning. Darling-Hammond, Wise, and Klein (1999) also described teaching professionalism as follows:

Teaching dispositions are the orientations teachers develop to think and behave in professionally responsible ways- for example, to reflect on their teaching and its effectiveness and to strive for continual improvement; to respect and value the needs, experiences, and abilities of all learners and to strive to develop the talents of each to the greatest extent possible; to engage with learners in joint problem solving and exploration of ideas; to establish cooperative relationships with students, parents, and other teachers to keep abreast of professional ideas, and to engage in broader professional responsibilities.

(p. 39)

The aforementioned skills, namely instructional, curriculum-design, and professionalism, are all imperative capabilities for directing TESOL master's students to become effective and successful teachers. Acquiring these professional skills not only helps them more smoothly acclimate to a new teaching setting, but also helps them grow and advance their teaching skills in meaningful way.

Effective Curriculum Design

Another decisive element of a stellar master's program is related to effective curriculum development. An effective curriculum should at least enable students to become a) successful learners who enjoy learning and making progress; b) confident individuals who are able to use all skills they have learned from the course; and c) responsible citizens who are able to make a positive contribution to local, national, and even international communities or society (National Curriculum, 2008). In other words, education is supposed to provide our students with an environment appropriate for developing their knowledge, skills, potentials, motivations, and diligent attitudes to achieve self-fulfillment during their ongoing learning process.

Generally speaking, an effective curriculum helps students become lifelong learners, which should be the goal of every school. In order to help students learn, think, solve problems, and make appropriate decisions in learning contexts, at work, and in educational settings, it is essential to incorporate multiple curriculum components that include spirituality, morality, cultural awareness, mental, and physical development into the program design. Such an amalgamation of components better helps students access, evaluate, organize, and use all their knowledge and skills, and provides them with opportunities to link their needs with society's requirements and real-world situations. Further, Brown (2007) pointed out that physical arrangements, such as, "securing housing, confirming transportation, issuing contracts to

teachers, reserving classroom space, and ascertaining that immigration regulations were being made” are also crucial to consider while creating an effective curriculum.

To sum up, a well-organized curriculum should incorporate learner-centered instruction into teaching; take students’ linguistic/non-linguistic needs into primary consideration; provide students with different kinds of useful resources, such as educational/technological hardware and software equipment; and consider multicultural perspectives throughout development. Through such procedures and considerations, the quality of a master’s program shall be enhanced, resulting in greater achieved student skills.

Appropriate Curricular Innovation

Appropriate innovation also plays an important role when designing an effective master’s program. Nam (2005) indicated that curricular innovation has begun to be implemented within various levels of schooling. Furthermore, the ultimate aim of all educational innovation is to refine classroom practice and enhance students’ learning. Therefore, appropriate and flexible innovation not only helps shift traditional curricula to incorporate modern skills, but also matches students’ diverse backgrounds to advance and prepare them for the challenges in the 21st century. Similarly, Markee (1997) defined curricular innovation as “a managed process of development whose principal products are teaching (and/or testing) materials, methodological skills, and pedagogical values that are perceived as new by potential adopters” (p. 46).

Because the implementation of curriculum innovation involves the way people behave and think about certain issues, such as their beliefs, values, thoughts and philosophies, it is not without difficulties (Rubdy, 2008). Generally speaking, innovative procedures often bring a “long, complex, anxiety and conflict-ridden operation with many unforeseeable obstacles and problems” (Fullan, 1982, as cited in Rubdy, 2008). In fact, variables arise when educators cannot

achieve the common consensus and when policy makers fail to use foresight. In other words, educational reform may be more successful upon educators becoming simultaneously and seamlessly inquiry oriented, skilled, reflective, and collaborative. Such characteristics are the keys to bringing about meaningful effective reform.

Undoubtedly, appropriately updating the traditional curriculum allows TESOL program designers to promote a high quality master's program and to advance graduate students' professional skills. Moreover, in order to comprehensively compete with other universities, professional skills taught within must also accommodate society's requirements and satisfy students' needs. Appropriate curriculum change should be taken into consideration for successful stream-lining of program characteristics to better accommodate a variety of job markets.

Although many researchers have described factors that influence successful program development (Nam, 2005; Armstrong, 2007; Brown, 2007; Rubdy, 2008), there is little research that specifically investigates the factors that influence TESOL graduate program development. To address some of these unnoticed factors, the following research questions will be addressed for an in depth exploration of TESOL graduate students' perspectives about curriculum development in their master's program.

1. Does this program develop professional skills and provide useful information that you believe are applicable in the classroom?
2. Specifically, what kinds of skills or information do you believe would be useful to learn in the Master's program to fit your classroom teaching?
3. How did you identify whether or not your program provides you with the skills or information relevant to your current/future job?
4. How do you evaluate your TESOL master's program curriculum?

Methodology

This project will investigate and explore the perspectives of five graduate students in their TESOL master's program about evaluating the effectiveness of their program curriculum in influencing their current or future classroom practices. A qualitative descriptive approach will be designed to discover and interpret the intrinsic and extrinsic elements of class learning relative to the effectiveness of their master's program. This approach will also serve to illuminate such insights about the graduate students' perspectives on curriculum development in their master's program, not just to describe a superficial phenomenon about their academic learning processes. According to Merriam (1988), "research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education" (p. 3). Along the same line, Patton (1980) purports that "qualitative measures describe the experiences of people in depth. The data are open-ended in order to find out what people's lives, experiences, and instructions mean to them in their own terms and in their natural settings" (p. 22). In addition, because the main intention of this study is not to test a hypothesis or any theory, a qualitative descriptive approach will be more appropriate for the examination of the participants' perspectives.

To be more specific, Gay et al. (2008) defines some characteristics which are important components of qualitative research design:

- (1) Qualitative research often involves the simultaneous collection of a wealth of narrative and visual data over an extended period of time.
- (2) Data collection occurs in a naturalistic setting as much as possible in qualitative research.

(3) Qualitative research is the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual data to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest.

Based on the above components, a qualitative descriptive approach was chosen for this study in order to explore a profound and detailed paradigm. It is expected that the research questions can be best answered through this research method.

The Subjects and Instructional Setting

Five graduate students currently enrolled in a TESOL master's program from a southern California University will be chosen to participate in this study. The mean age of these five students is about 28 years (range=26-30). All of the participants are currently teachers from different educational settings. Two male participants have taught English grammar in a high school for about two years, and three females have taught within an ESL program in a college for three years. The rationale for selecting them to join this study is: (1) all participants have the similar educational backgrounds in that all of them have obtained their undergraduate degrees in America and are currently enrolling in the same TESOL master's program in southern California; (2) all participants are native English speakers and have completed at least three-semester courses in the TESOL graduate program; (3) all participants have strong interests in sharing their perspectives and identifying the profound factors that affect their curriculum evaluation in an American university; and (4) their learning experiences and learning outcomes will be useful for helping program developers and curriculum designers to better organize the master's TESOL program in the future.

The Instruments

In order to best answer the research questions, the main instruments in this study include a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A), an initial and follow-up interview (see Appendix B), and non-participatory observations.

The Procedures

According to Steinar (1996), a semi-structured interview “has a sequence of themes to be covered, as well as suggested questions, yet at the same time there is an openness to changes of sequences and forms of questions in order to follow up the answers given and the stories told by the subjects” (p. 124). Therefore, the qualitative in-depth interviews will be constructed according to a semi-structured design with open-ended questions to capture participants’ true feelings about master’s program evaluation relative to curriculum design. The interviews will be conducted with five master’s graduate students in English, as all participants are native English speakers. In addition, to motivate informants to explore their experiences and share their opinions naturally, a comfortable environment that encourages face to face communication, such as a round table, cozy chairs, and a quiet place to be interviewed, will be provided by the researcher for each formal and informal meeting. Each interview will last about 50 minutes, will be audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. By doing so, it is expected that the transcribed documents will be accurate and consistent. Transcribed interviews will be submitted to the informants for confirmation. Additionally, each informant will be given a pseudonym to assure their anonymity.

After conducting the initial interview and obtaining the completed demographic questionnaire, several non-participatory observations will be undertaken to carefully record participants’ classroom performance in their master’s program. The five participants are taking

the same TESOL courses and, with the professors' permission, will be observed in the same classes for 8 consecutive weeks during the semester. Each individual's attendance, participation, and academic performance (i.e., presentations, demonstrations, and classroom behavior) will be observed in order to discover how many professional skills they have learned and how much useful information they have acquired from their master's program curriculum. Tatar (2003) indicates that the purpose of observations is "to get more familiar with the context of the courses and to compare the participants' perceptions with their actual behavior in the class" (p. 59). Tatar further emphasizes that "the body language and facial expressions, the turn taking behavior of students, and moment-to-moment incidents and interaction may be relevant in understanding the classroom dynamics" (p.59). The observations will be made several times to determine similarity and difference among behavior patterns and perspectives related to their current curriculum.

After conducting the initial interview, gathering demographics, and obtaining detailed observations, the participants will be informed that the follow-up interviews may be conducted several times to ensure complete data collection. Ultimately, each verbal and non-verbal report will be carefully analyzed chronologically in order to develop individual personal profiles. The collective data from all instruments is expected to be useful to interpret the complex factors that may affect their perceptions on evaluating the effectiveness of their master's program curriculum.

The Data Analysis

Interview and observation data will be transcribed carefully. Each individual informant will be contacted an in-person for the purpose of data confirmation regarding consistent and accurate content. After confirming the data, the transcription of each interview and the record of

each observation will be carefully analyzed in order to categorize the findings by prominent themes. Then, the links among themes will be identified for further organization of the results.

Validity and Reliability of the Research Design

According to Gay et al. (2008), triangulation is “a primary way that qualitative researchers ensure the trustworthiness [validity] of their data” (p. 408). Similarly, Ely et al. (1991) indicates “triangulation can be based on different reports about the same event by two or more researchers who are studying the same phenomenon” (p. 97). Further, Gay et al. also states that triangulation is “the process of using multiple methods, data collection strategies, and data sources to obtain a more complete picture of what is being studied and to cross-check information” (p. 377). In other words, triangulation is the predominant tool for conducting valid and reliable qualitative research. To this aim, the researcher will collect a demographic questionnaire, conduct interviews, and take field notes of observations for each participant in order to better achieve qualitative validity and reliability. Additionally, interview questions will be examined and revised by a TESOL professor for their validity and reliability.

Conclusion

In order to develop a successful and effective TESOL master's program, there are still many factors and variables that teachers, curriculum designers, directors, or even principals need to reconsider - sufficient time, realistic purpose, adequate provisions for teacher trainings, team cohesion, expert consultation, curriculum innovation, and global connection. Each of these factors is integral to, and greatly influences, curriculum development. If the program developer and curriculum designer underestimate any of these factors, it would be difficult for them to address important goals and objectives, to identify students' needs, and to develop an appropriate and valuable master's curriculum for graduate students. Generally speaking, TESOL faculty is grounded in different disciplines and, therefore, has different teaching philosophies. How they compromise, communicate, and negotiate with one another will pose a particular problem. Additionally, how to establish agreement about students' learning needs and link them with society's requirements will also be challenging for TESOL curriculum developers and program designers in 21st century. Hopefully, the proposed research is the first step to address TESOL graduate program development from students' perspectives as well as to illuminate particular needs of students and promote interactive program development through this meaningful and insightful qualitative research.

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Appendix A

Demographics

Please give information about **yourself** for each of the categories below.

1. Name: _____
2. Gender: Male () Female ()
3. Age: _____
4. Phone: _____
5. E-mail: _____
6. Native/Second Language: _____
7. Job Title: _____
8. Institution: _____
9. How long have you taught in total? _____year(s) _____month(s)

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Please briefly introduce yourself.
2. Have you had any teaching experiences?
3. Why did you want to apply for the master's program?
4. How long have you been enrolled in this program?
5. What are your leaning goals?
6. What do you expect to learn from the master's program?
7. Does this program provide you with professional skills and useful information that you believe would be applicable in the classroom?
8. What kinds of specific skills or information would be useful to learn from the master's program to fit real-world situations?
9. How do you evaluate the curriculum design of your master's program?
10. How do you evaluate teaching materials of your master's program?
11. How do you evaluate the professor's qualifications of your program?
12. How do you evaluate the facilities of your program?
13. How did you identify whether or not your program provides you with different kinds of skills or information that relates to your current/future job?
14. How much do you like your program? (rating from 1 to 5; 1 = least amount of like; 5 = greatest amount of like for studying in this program)
15. What advantages about your program should be maintained?
16. What disadvantages about your program need improvement?
17. What are your ideal criteria for a master's program? Please provide the criteria.
- 18. Does this program satisfy your learning needs? (Why or why not?)**