

Utilization Focused Evaluation of an ELT Prep Program: A Longitudinal Approach

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the current study is to evaluate a preparatory program of a foreign language teaching department longitudinally via Patton's Utilization Focused Program Evaluation. More specifically, the study scrutinizes the pros, cons and aspects to be improved in the program, and whether the program contributes to overall English proficiency in two subsequent years. As for the aims of the study 77 students (38 in the first and 39 in the second year) and five instructors were recruited. Data were collected via interviews, English Proficiency tests (i.e., CAE) as pre and posttests in each year and lastly Nominal Group Technique. At the end of the study, both students and instructors confirmed that the program contributed to students' overall English proficiency, which was also supported by the statistically significant difference in comparison of İÖYS results in two years. Moreover, it was found out that some aspects need modifications such as teaching four skills in an isolated way, lacking individualized learning, and technical inadequacies. Some agreed remedies for the program as follow: process evaluation instead of İÖYS exams, up-to-date and content relevant teaching materials and a fully equipped listening lab. All in all, in addition to many other positive aspects, the study reveals that evaluation that was carried out in the first year involving both students and instructors contributed to students' overall gain in the program in the second year.

Keywords: program evaluation, English Language Teaching, utilization focused evaluation

1. INTRODUCTION

It is essential to evaluate the effectiveness of educational plans and programs of all grades and units in educational institutions in order to observe and manage the final output. However, such evaluations are scarce in "English Preparatory Units" of higher education institutes due to the workload or accountability issues. With this respect, a longitudinal evaluation of these programs is of importance in terms of the development of educational policies in the forthcoming years. The scope of present studies in this field ranges in methods, instruments, participants, and evaluation criteria. Especially, exhaustive evaluations which incorporate all stakeholders into the analyses and conduct follow-up evaluations do not exist in such contexts. For this reason, this research aimed to investigate efficiency of the education program of an English Language Preparatory Class of an English Language Teaching Department at a state university in Turkey through Utilization Focused Evaluation (Patton, 2009) which has been employed in different fields. The 2-year study included students', instructors', and program coordinator's views. Moreover, the development of the students throughout the year was tracked.

There are program evaluation studies in foreign language education units. For instance, in Chan (2001)'s research at Hong Kong Polytechnical University, the needs and expectations of students, instructors and program coordinators were compared. The study found that according to all participants, the program improved listening and speaking skills, academic vocabulary, and it increased motivation. In Peacock (2009)'s

program evaluation of an English as a Foreign Language program, there are views on the content of the curriculum and the integration of technology in classes. These studies are of importance as both of them included all stakeholders to the evaluation processes. On the other hand, the evaluation studies are limited to foreign language preparatory schools in higher education institutions in Turkey. Gereide (2005) compared the old and new curriculum of Anadolu University Intensive English Program in terms of their adequacy in meeting students' needs and suggested some solutions to the development of the program. Topçu (2005), Şahin (2006) and Muşlu (2007) determined the strengths and weaknesses of preparatory schools in various universities through interviews and questionnaires. They concluded that although there is a conflict between the students' and instructors' perspectives, such evaluations are essential for the enrichment of such

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programs. The evaluation of the preparatory program of English Language Teaching Department by Efeoğlu, İlerter and Başı (2018) has been the first example to Utilization Focused Evaluation in Turkish context. However, this study falls short of addressing the views of instructors and program coordinators.

Although there is an abundance of education program evaluations, examples to Utilization Focused Evaluation (UFE) in which all stakeholders actively participate in each stage, determine data collections tools and methods with the evaluator, disseminate the findings and implement to the program are scarce (Norris, 2004; Yang, 2009). UFE consists of seven stages. In the first stage, the aims and objectives of the program are clearly specified. In the second stage, the beneficiaries of the program are identified. Then the stakeholders and researchers decide on the focus of the evaluation and develop relevant research questions. In the fourth step, the researchers develop instruments and collect data in order to answer the research questions. In the following steps, the findings are interpreted and disseminated to the stakeholders. Finally, the whole evaluation process in revised and the implementation of the evaluation output within the program is maintained.

2. METHOD

This part consists of three sections. Respectively, the research design and research questions, participants of the study and data collection instruments are mentioned.

2.1 Research Design and Research Questions

The longitudinal study aims to investigate the efficiency of the language preparatory program of an English Language Teaching Department at a state university in Istanbul. It was also aimed to make recommendations for a new teaching model based on the findings. The research continued for two subsequent years. The following research questions were addressed in order to evaluate the program:

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the ELT preparatory program in 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 academic years?
2. What modifications should be made in order to develop the ELT preparatory program?
3. Does the ELT preparatory program contribute to the language skills (grammar, reading, writing, listening, speaking) of the students?
4. Is there a difference between the student achievements in the 1st and 2nd year of evaluations?
5. What modifications were made in the courses where significant improvements were observed within the two evaluation years?

2.2 Participants

Preparatory program students and instructors constitute the participant groups of the study. In the first year, 38 students and in the second year, 39 preparatory program students participated in the evaluations. The students were not the same students in each year of evaluation, thus 77 students in total formed the student participants in the research. According to the regulations of the department, students who are admitted to the program are required to take an advanced level English proficiency test which includes all language skills – reading, writing, listening, speaking and grammar. 60 is the cutoff score for an exemption from the preparatory program. Students who get lower than 60 are required to continue to the prep program for an academic year. However, at the end of the first semester, the students can take a second proficiency exam which allows them to continue with the freshman class.

Five instructors participated in the evaluations. Reading and speaking courses were offered by foreign instructors. The instructor of the grammar course was a PhD candidate, the listening course was given by a doctor and the writing course was offered by an assistant professor and an associate professor. Each instructor shared their course- based and general views of the program.

2.3 Data Collection Tools

In the longitudinal study, the data were collected in two academic years (2017-2018, 2018-2019). In both academic years, grammar, reading, writing, listening, speaking tests were given to students at the beginning of the fall and at the end of the spring semesters as pre-tests and post-tests. These assessments were conducted through standardized Cambridge Advanced English (CAE) tests. In addition, at the end of the spring semester individual interviews were conducted and group evaluations were made through nominal group technique. The data were gathered and analyzed qualitatively.

3. FINDINGS

The findings obtained from data analyses were discussed in the with the research questions. The detailed discussion involving both instructors and students' responses was presented as a single answer to first two question of the current study.

1. What are the weaknesses and strengths of prep school in Foreign Languages Teaching Department at YTU according to evaluations carried out in 2017 - 2018 and 2018 - 2019?
2. What sorts of changes are needed to be made to develop prep school in Foreign Languages Teaching Department at YTU?

In order to identify strengths and weaknesses of the prep school questionnaires were administered and students were

interviewed in line with NGT. Besides, instructors' views on the program were collected and evaluated.

According to students' course-based evaluations for 2017 - 2018 academic year their views gathered via both questionnaires and group interviews were similar to one another. Taking the analyses of three data collection tools into consideration, it was observed that some themes were forefronted. Accordingly, the strength of all courses might be stated as their contribution to students' overall proficiency. Students noted that they made progress in their both reading and listening comprehension, lexical knowledge, speaking, academic writing and grammar. When weaknesses were analyzed, lack of proficiency exam practice and not having enough opportunities to get ready for the proficiency exam were stated predominantly. Other weaknesses could be listed as insufficient technological capacity (i.e., speaker problems, internet connection, access to computers), limited variety in terms of content, or its not meeting students' needs and expectations. In line with things mentioned as weaknesses, students' suggestions were as follow: practicing exercises that would be helpful in the proficiency exam, materials being at a reasonable price, variety in the topics, sparing some space for individualized learning, and reviewing assessment and evaluation methodologies.

At the end of 2017 - 2018 academic year students' evaluations were examined and in 2018 - 2019 academic year prep program were re-designed with newcomer students. Thus, it became possible to trace the effects of changes made by the instructors in the prep program.

When the program evaluation of 2018 - 2019 academic year was scrutinized closely, strengths were found as lectures' being conducted as student-centered and interactively, getting feedback for assignments, gaining knowledge on various topics, and development of the target language skill. On the other hand, weaknesses were found to be very similar to the ones highlighted in the previous year's evaluation. Getting feedback late, technological problems, topics that are not related to language teaching, having not enough opportunities to practice for the proficiency exam and inadequacies in assessment were emphasized. Suggested changes in the program were providing some more exercises for the proficiency exam, variability in resources or changing the course book and making lectures more fun.

3.1 Instructors' Views

In addition to prep students' evaluation of two academic years, instructors were also asked to comment on the strengths, weaknesses and aspects to be improved in the second year's program evaluation. Accordingly, instructors' views show some similarities to students' views. Both students and instructors agreed that the prep program contribute to students' foreign language proficiency and the courses were conducted in line

with students' levels. As of the weaknesses, the inadequacy of materials and assessment and non-availability of an individualized learning were emphasized by both students and instructors. In terms of aspects to be improved, both groups suggested that appropriate assessment methodologies should be developed, ELT-related content should be taught instead of non-area topics and individualized learning should be supported.

Different from the students, instructors also criticized the fact that there was no specified list of program outcomes, that there was no assessment branch due to the limited number of personnel, that the proficiency exam cannot be standardized, and lastly that each language skill was taught in an isolated way. In order for the program to be improved, removal of the proficiency exam due to difficulty in standardizing it or accepting process-based assessment to evaluate students' yearly performances, implementing democratic and individualized learning based on students' needs and lastly instructors' working in cooperation were underlined.

In terms of course based evaluations, instructors noted that students made progress in the language skills, that their lexical knowledge boosted in writing course, that they were familiarized with different accents in listening course, and that fluency was emphasized in the speaking course. Weaknesses on the course-based evaluations revealed similar results to that of students' evaluations. For instance, both instructors and students criticized the fact that grammar was taught in an isolated and boring way. Additionally, in writing course giving feedback late, in listening course technological problems, in speaking course focusing on accuracy as well as fluency were discussed. Instructors' responses as to how to improve their courses as follow: grammar should be integrated into teaching other skills, flipped learning should be preferred for writing course, language lab should be improved, and in speaking course both accuracy and fluency should be evaluated together.

3.2 Language Skills' Development and Effect of Longitudinal Evaluation

Other research questions of the current study were whether the prep program contributed to students' language skill development and whether the evaluations made in the previous year had any effects on the current year.

3. Does prep program in ELT Department at YTU contribute to students' language skills (i.e., grammar, reading, writing, listening, speaking)?
4. Is there any difference between the first- and second-year evaluations of the prep program in ELT Department at YTU?

In order to answer the question if students' language skills improved or not, CAE test was administered at both beginning and end of two academic years as 2017 - 2018 and

2018 – 2019. The results of the pre and post tests were scored out of 100.

Table 1L 2017 -18 and 2018-19 academic years CAE test results.

	2017 Fall	2018 Spring	2018 Fall	2019 Spring
Grammar	33	34	35	47
Reading	36	46	53	54
Writing	54	61	60	65
Listening	27	29	23	46
Speaking	65	69	74	71
Average	43	46	48	56

According to the table, students performed better in all courses in 2018 – 2019 academic year except for the speaking course. Paired samples t-test results indicated that the increasing scores in reading and writing in 2017 – 2018 academic year revealed a statistically significant difference (respectively $t(33)=-3.39$, $p .05$; $t(33)=-2.17$, $p .05$). In 2018 – 2019 academic year there was a statistically significant increase in their grammar and listening scores (subsequently $t(29)=-3.97$, $p<.01$; $t(29)=-7.1$, $p<.01$).

Two academic years' post-test comparisons were made through independent samples t-test. Accordingly, there is a statistically meaningful difference between the first ($M=40.36$, $SD=11.9$) and the second year ($M=45.19$, $SD=23.4$) ($t(38)=21.13$, $p<.05$). In line with this, it can be claimed that changes made by the instructors in the second year which had been based on the first year' evaluation had a positive impact on the development of the second year's program content.

5. What sort of changes were made in the course contents in line with the statistically significant difference observed in the comparison of two years' evaluations?

Since it was revealed as an answer to the fourth question, there was a meaningful increase in grammar and listening courses in the first year's evaluation. Hence, this increase may stem from the changes made in the course content by the instructors. Correspondingly, instructors mentioned that the time dedicated to the proficiency exam practice increased although the book and the course materials remained the same. It could be concluded that this had a positive impact on students' success. Similarly, in the listening course, the instructor involved online platforms (i.e., TedTalk, Castbox etc.) that would attract students' attention and gave extra credits for extra-curricular listening activities such as completing one course in Coursera.

4. DISCUSSION

This section should include the discussion of the findings. The current study aimed to evaluate prep program by taking both students' and instructors' evaluations into consideration in ELT Department at YTU within the context of Utilization

Focused Program Evaluation (Patton, 2018) in 2017 – 2018 and 2018 – 2019 academic years. Thus, individual and NGT interviews were carried out with students, instructors, and program coordinators. Besides, students' language skills were tested at both beginnings and ends of the semesters by standardized tests and the programs contribution to students' language skill development was investigated. Lastly, students' proficiency test scores were compared and contrasted to understand which changes made by the instructors in the program lead an increase in their scores.

The analyses of all data about the strengths, weaknesses, and aspects to be improved it was found out that all stakeholders agreed on that courses contributed to students' overall language proficiency. This finding was also confirmed by an increase in their scores in the final proficiency exam. In the first year' evaluation, meaning increase was evident in reading and writing while in the second year's evaluation it was available in grammar and listening courses. The weaknesses of the program agreed by all participants were listed as follow: incapability of setting a standardized assessment and evaluation tools, problems with the materials, technical problems, absence of individualized learning, and skills being taught in an isolated manner. In line with the weaknesses, suggestions to improve the program were setting program outcomes clearly, making course content more interesting, improving assessment tools, renovating the language lab, and making changes in the course materials.

Following suggesting could be made in order for the prep program to be improved:

1. Improving the assessment and evaluation methodology: As it was also suggested by all stakeholders, the proficiency exam that is administered at the end of the year should be set on a process-based approach and it should be used to determine whether students will pass or fail. It is obvious that the proficiency exam puts extra pressure on students, and this causes students to focus on being successful in the exam instead of improving their foreign language skills. Thus, removal of the proficiency exam is strongly recommended.
2. Individualized program: Upon students' admission to the program, students' foreign language learning needs should be determined in the proficiency exam. Students who score less than a predetermined criterion should be part of a more intensive training. Similarly, those who score higher than the predetermined criterion should have opportunities to develop in different aspects. In other words, students should not be forced to receive the exactly the same training. Students should attend grammar, reading, writing, listening and speaking courses as much as they need to improve their skills. That's how democratic learning environment will also be established.

3. Using materials: Those courses which stick to one main course book was criticized and found boring. Thus, instructors should provide variety in their resources, allocating more time for ELT related materials, and choose materials in line with students' interests.
4. Determining program outcomes: One of the deficits in prep program is not determining the program outcomes that students should attain at the end of the program. Hence, it is suggested that each and every instructor should make their program outcomes that would be targeted for their courses explicit. Students should be able to self-evaluate their own progress by using these outcomes and determine which skill they need to improve based on it (can-do-statements). This is also significant to foster student autonomy in getting control over their own learning processes.
5. Technical infrastructure: Renovating the language lab in ELT Department, enabling better internet connection, buying necessary software, and renewing headphone sets might be considered.

5. CONCLUSION

In the light of all these findings, a model that consists of four significant processes was proposed to increase the efficiency of the prep programs in general. These processes are students' admission to the program, individualized English language prep program, and reconstructing the program based on the results gained from yearly evaluations from all stakeholders.

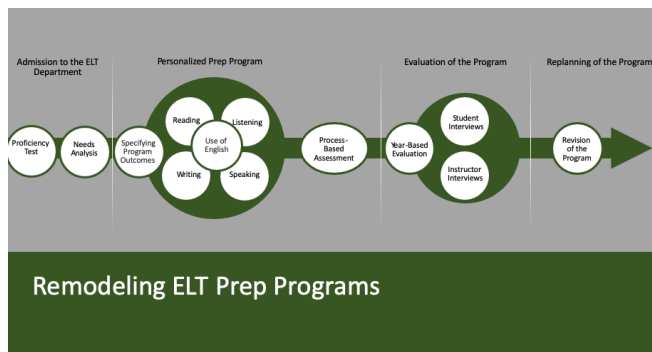


Fig. 1: Remodeling ELT Prep Programs.

According to this model, students are required to take English Language Proficiency Exam. Then, in order to determine students' learning needs, needs analysis is conducted. Data gathered from the need analysis are used to design individualized English language prep program for each skill. Efficiency and effectiveness of the program is evaluated via yearly interviews with both students and instructors to see whether the program meets aims and objectives. Lastly, taking all evaluations into consideration necessary changes and modifications are done to remedy the prep program.

In conclusion, the results of the current study indicated that each stage listed in "Re-modelling English Language Teaching Prep Program" is of vital importance in terms of the efficiency of the program. In this regard, it is suggested that prep programs should be remodeled so as to meet the students' individual needs and should be made stronger via yearly program evaluations.

6. LIMITATIONS

This study is not without its limitations. For instance, reading course was not evaluated since the instructor left. Besides, it was not possible to get responses from all students while administering questionnaires. For further studies it is suggested that all stakeholders' active participation should be achieved in the long run.

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