

Stakeholders in Language Evaluation Program

-- A Review and Re-examining of the 'How to' Framework on Working with Stakeholders in Language Assessment Evaluation

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Abstract

Language evaluation program is a dynamic analyzing process concerning about all parties, events and consequences happened in language programs. It aims to provide comprehensive understanding of language program and reliable evidence of decision-making for both insiders and outsiders. To guarantee the efficiency and accuracy of the evaluation result, it is necessary to identify key stakeholders according to different evaluation purposes. Thus, this article takes the "How to" framework as a tool to reexamine its effectiveness in stakeholder identification process, and its implication in language evaluation program.

Keywords

Stakeholder Identification; "How to" Framework; Efficiency and Accuracy.

1. Introduction

Evaluation as a systematic and ongoing process involves gathering trustworthy data and information, judging the efficiency and sufficiency on what have been done in language teaching, learning and assessment. The purpose of evaluation is to support long-term improvement to the program by providing a benchmark for decision-making, and action-taking. In the early stage, language program evaluation (LPE) focuses on measuring teacher competency and student retention rates from an external inspector position (Kiely & Rea-Dickins, 2005). In 1950s, evaluations were considered in a larger context and effects from stakeholders were stressed (Wilson, 2012). In contemporary time, the construction of LPE evaluation is more diverse and the need to maximize the use of outcomes through involving stakeholders into the process are featured (Patton, 2006; Kiely & Rea-Dickins, 2009).

Given the fundamental purpose of evaluation, taking stakeholders' responses, attitude and interests into judgments is crucial in making decisions, particularly in such an interconnected world where one problem also encompassing several interest groups. Any social issue lies on a complex stake internet which connects directly or indirectly individuals, groups, institutions, and organizations together and runs through each social levels. Interests of numerous stakeholders are interwoven by one issue and affected by each other. In a shared-power world, no one is fully in charge, instead, everyone involves in (Kettl, 2002). In the other words, taking stakeholders into consideration is consistent with the nature of pluralism era, especially on public issues as education. Therefore, this paper focuses on stakeholder concept in LPE context, taking language assessment as the specific area to explore how stakeholders be identified and their perspective be collected and valued.

This paper aims to review the techniques in stakeholders identifying and analyzing posed in a 'how-to' framework from Bryson et al. (2010), and randomly choose a paper to examine its applicability in language assessments context.

2. Identifying Stakeholders

According to Freeman (1984) who brought this concept into a prominent position in program evaluation, the definition of stakeholder is 'any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives.' This concept is widely applied in business and commercial fields. After decades' development, 'stakeholder' is brought into various areas, its importance on program evaluation is acknowledged by evaluators. In language program evaluation area, previous surveys have shown that even though most evaluators recognize the value of stakeholder involvement and accept to including stakeholders as part of their job responsibility, they still face practical problem about 'how to' do with stakeholders. Given the financial cost and time allocations, it is necessary to identify key stakeholders before the program launched and to engage them into the evaluation process, capturing their perspectives efficiently. Accurate reflections on stakeholders' concern closely relate to the referential value of the evaluation.

Many approaches have been argued in studies on stakeholder involvement issues. Patton (2008) as a key figure in this area has suggested involving stakeholders in every phase of the LPE project to make use of evaluation outcomes by those people who benefit the most and help the development of the program. In 'Working with evaluation stakeholders: a rationale, step-wise approach and toolkit', Bryson, Patton & Bowman (2010) presented a straight-forward stakeholder identification and analysis tool for involving most essential stakeholders throughout process with the least costing. To improve the efficiency of stakeholder involvement practice, they came up with a five-step framework which breaks the whole evaluation project into five steps, and the first one is the preparatory and pre-selection phases. At the first stages (evaluation planning), stakeholder identification and analysis techniques are involved. List all potential stakeholders at first to set up the range of consideration and modify it in the process. With the gathering of informative inputs in sequent steps, the range of stakeholders could be narrowed and changed, and better located in different levels. Secondly, conduct interest analysis to do 'internal' comparison and contrast, then add power consideration to relocate these stakeholders into four categories. Draw a diagram to sort out influence among four types of stakeholders being mentioned and illustrate the coming resource of power and actual interests by arrows. In addition, evaluation is a highly context-based process. And according to literatures and studies, stakeholder choosing is determined by the purpose of evaluation as well, like what Patton (2008) has posed, there are five types of evaluation project: 1) making decisions about program; 2) program improvement; 3) to add knowledge to the field and inform decision-making; 4) support development of new innovations; 5) accountability. Due to selecting of stakeholders decides the development direction of the project which directly relates with the effectiveness of evaluation results, it is crucial to examine the feasibility and reliability of this framework in practices. To address such concerns, I would apply these techniques in the framework to a stakeholder involved language assessment studies for reexamining its applicability.

The sample study 'Voices from stakeholders: what makes an academic English test 'international'?' was published by Gu & So (2014) which is designed to explore from stakeholders' perspectives what features a global academic English test like TOEFL should possess. Based on its study purpose, firstly this evaluation project aims at adding new connotations to the existed test and providing development and delivery advice. According to Patton's (2008) classification, it possessed features of 3 & 4 which value the experts view on possible modifications and teachers view on testing washback effects. Also, adopting the framework posed by Bryson et al., stakeholders whose interests are directly affected by the 'international' conception and powers could directly affect its development need be involved in. From this perspective, it can be noticed that the study involves "test takers" whose test

performance are directly affected by content of test, and “score users” - the representative of employer interests - whose requirements and attitudes affect the applicability of test. English teachers who are responsible for language teaching and test training are engaged into evaluation as well, representing the interest of educational institutions where washback effect can always be traced. In some cases, modification of test form or content could lead to corresponding changes happen in pedagogy, including materials, curriculums, and test strategies. The fourth party is language test professionals who provide expert view in this case to predict potential effects could be brought by the ‘international’ innovations on the test. They are speaking on the behalf of the test giver. Identifying through the ‘how-to’ guide, they all are the key stakeholders in this case.

Through analyzing identities of above four stakeholders in academic English assessment context, interests of test takers and language teachers are highly related with the test content but less powerful which rarely affect test change happens. As for score users, it stands in the central position in this context who has the right to choose test takers depending on their test performance, also has the power to make option on whether adopt the test or not. In this perspective, score users are powerful enough to affect test itself, and their new requirements on test implies what they expect to see on test takers. It means that score users could put impact on attitudes and reflections of test takers as well as English teachers by adding new contents into tests. In turn, both test takers and English teachers are less possible to change score takers’ language requirements. Therefore, score users are highly powered but less interest stakeholder. For language test professionals in this case working on the side of the test giver, they are not directly affected by the test who acts more like external experts to provide professional estimations on test validity and accessibility rather than test designers. Given the interest and power analysis, score users’ response to the notion of ‘international’ tests weight most in this network. On the one hand, their perspectives reflect the varying market needs on language competence for human resource in global time. On the other hand, it reflects their own attitudes on these issues. It is possible that score users agree the existence and legitimacy of ‘world English’ but they do not feel the necessity and urgency to alter the existed language requirement to accommodate the latest tendency, or even do not care. In contrast, direct stakeholders, test takers and teachers, they are thinking concretely on this issue and their voices indicate more realistic problems that likely occur in test reconstructions as well as reveal their thinking about current test form. As language test professionals, because they are not straightly involved in test, they have a neutral and objective stand in this issue who pay more attention on possible impact on test validity and fairness.

Applying the framework into this case to identify and analyze stakeholders’ interests and power and to relocate them in the interest-power network bring a clear picture about each stakeholder’s major concerns and their implications. This attempt evident that the framework is a practical tool which could be straightly used into evaluation project and tends to bring out logical outcomes. Comparing with the original approach adopted in the Gu & So study, the framework provides a step-by-step guideline as well as specific techniques to deal problems in each phase. From pre-selecting to primary analyzing, a more rigorous process is adopted to seek key stakeholders from a large scale. And taking interest as the cue to connect each stakeholder, meanwhile, using power as the reference to compare the effect among them, and forming a diagram, make the interactive relations in this issue clear. From the study, the applicability of this framework in language assessment evaluation is proved and its advantageous on generating a clear stakeholder-relation network is prominent. Based on the network, evaluators are easily to place different stakeholders’ concerns to different level and measure their significances in the whole process. With the help of the framework, evaluators’ outcomes become more reliable and convictive. Besides, comparing literature and previous research-based stakeholder selecting approach, using techniques in the framework to examine

the representativeness of stakeholders also enhances the efficiency of the whole study. In short, the framework is well suited in this language assessment case which reduce evaluators' work loading through its clear operation procedure and improve the outcome efficiency by focusing on key stakeholders.

3. Discussion

The framework sticks on a notion that narrowing evaluation scales and just involving key stakeholders in to maximize stakeholders' participations in the whole process of evaluation for making sure the efficiency and sufficiency of outcomes. As a result, evaluators have less control on the evaluation process due to the involvement of stakeholders whose attitudes on the evaluation are unstable, especially, like in this case, those 'context setters', such as 'score users' who have high power but low interest in test itself. It is possible that 'score users' are one key stakeholder in this evaluation, but they make light of this project and provide negative response to the evaluation. And their attitudes to evaluation might veil their actual attitude to the language program which affect the authenticity of outcomes. As what Bryson et al. (2010) noted evaluation is both technical and person skills. Therefore, adopting the 'how-to' framework only settle the technical and procedure problems, interpersonal issues as well as negotiation strategies are still mattering a lot in implications. What is crucial in language program evaluation is not which techniques or approaches are used, but to detect the various purpose encompassed by one issue, and to make these purpose accessible for all stakeholders for drawing their concerns into the process (Norris, 2016). And the framework is a straight tool that directs a clue to deal this complicated work which is always fixable within specific situations.

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