

Unit 3: Systems, processes and instruments for quality management – *Laura Muresan*

3.1 Setting up systems for monitoring the quality of educational processes

3.2 Institutional self-evaluation

3.3 Class observation as an integral part of quality assurance and professional development

Summary of Unit 3

The main themes of this unit are the setting up of internal systems for quality management, the steps and processes involved, and the instruments that can be used for quality assurance and enhancement in language education institutions/departments.

Questions addressed in this unit include: How to identify symptoms of low quality? How to diagnose the causes and plan appropriate remedial action? Possible ways of collecting, selecting and using data are exemplified – such as action research, classroom observation, interviews, focus group discussions, etc.

The second part of Unit 3 explores institutional self-evaluation with its various dimensions. Principles, functions and aims are discussed in relation to the context and main focus of the self-evaluation process. The guide encourages readers to explore the link between individual and team self-evaluation, as well as the role of participatory analysis of institutional processes and procedures for action planning and quality enhancement.

The main focus in the last part of this unit is on class observation, which is presented as a key component both of quality management and of professional development. Its multiple functions are discussed in relation to the different types of observation and the contexts of use. From a quality management perspective, effective observation serves the purpose of identifying both areas for improvement and areas of strength. Setting up systems for the sharing of good practice, facilitating a culture of constructive feedback and continuous professional development benefit both the institution and all the individual professionals involved in the process of quality assurance.

The importance of a collaborative atmosphere and appropriate attitudes and skills is highlighted both in relation to class observation and institutional self-evaluation.

The methodological approach throughout the unit is that of encouraging readers to reflect on their own experience of systems and processes, and to take a problem-solving approach to the activities and case studies presented.

Unit 3

3.1 Setting up systems for monitoring the quality of educational processes

To make sure that the entire institution/department operates at high quality standards, it is vital that there are effective quality management systems in place and that all those involved in the educational process – management, teachers, learners, the administrative team and other “actors” – are aware both of the institutional goals and of the systems existing in the institution.

The effectiveness of quality management systems depends on the meaningful implementation of methods and instruments for monitoring the quality of all processes. Dynamic, forward-looking institutions are constantly preoccupied to improve their services, to introduce innovation and to ensure consistent integration of institutional development with individual self-learning.

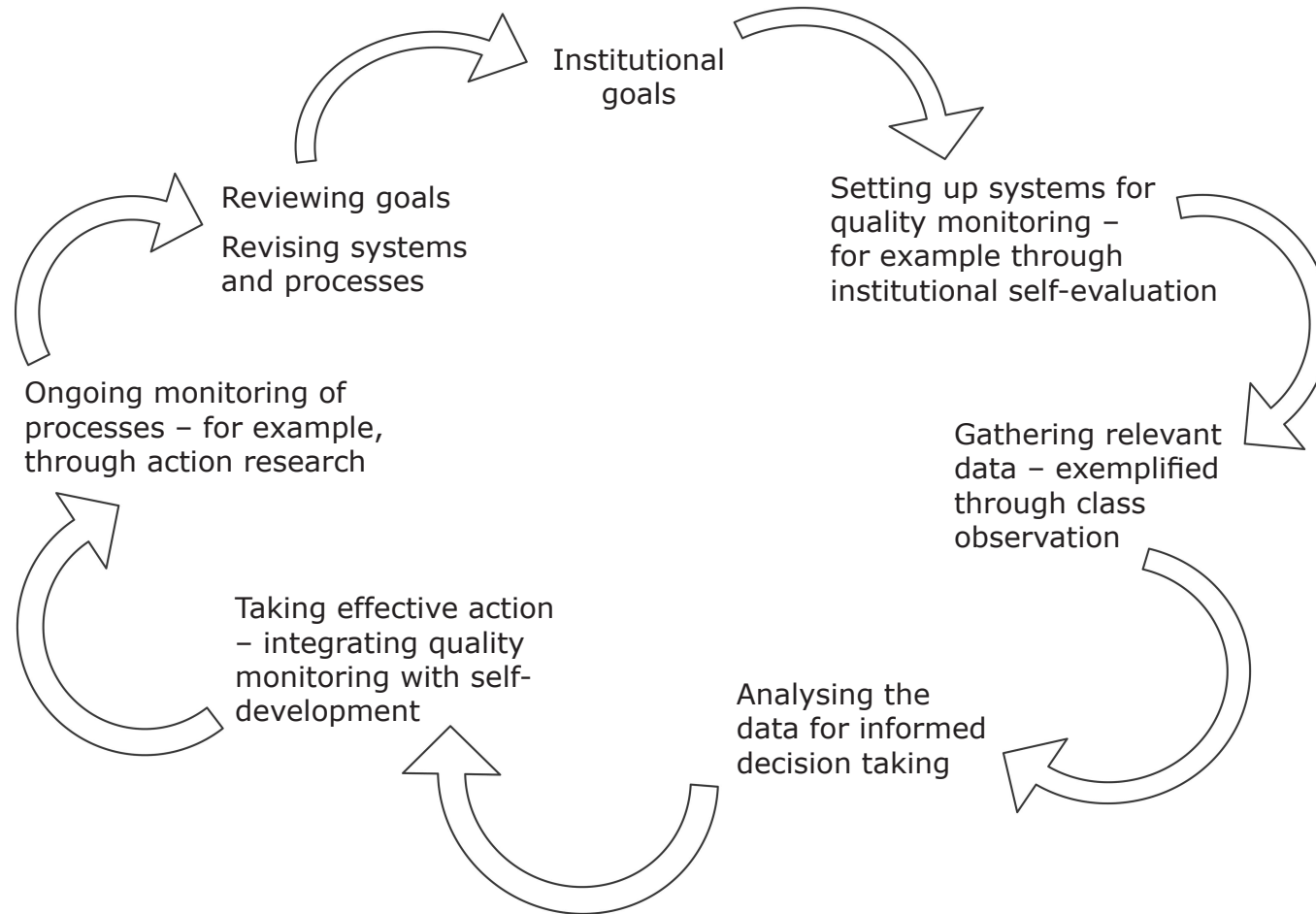
This involves setting up workable systems – developing or selecting procedures and instruments to be applied, as well as deciding on the various steps. Usually these include:

- gathering evidence and data relevant in relation to the goals set;
- analysing and interpreting the data so as to take informed decisions;
- taking effective action for improvement or remedial work;
- ongoing monitoring of processes and checking on the effect of action taken.

As a follow-up to such a complex exercise, institutional goals are reviewed, and systems and processes revised.

The steps of a quality cycle are presented synthetically in the following diagram.

Stages and processes in a quality cycle



Depending on the overall goal and the specific aims, the time frame and the scale of the operation, the institution – ideally in a team venture – will plan the steps within each stage and will decide on methodology.

Gathering relevant evidence and data

The most frequently used methods are:

- observation – of classes, of processes, etc. – as one of the most powerful tools of gathering data in a language education environment, as detailed in the third section of Unit 3;
- interviews, focus group meetings;
- surveys based on questionnaires;
- the study of documents, work scrutiny, the study of diaries, learner and/or teacher portfolios, etc.

Selecting the methods, techniques and instruments for data collection depends on what kind of information is needed, from whom, and in which concrete context (time, resources, etc.).

“Simple rules of thumb for selecting methods include:

- To find out what people do in public, use direct observation.
- To find out what they do in private, use interviews, questionnaires or diary techniques.
- To find out what they think, feel, believe, use interviews, questionnaires or attitude scales.
- To determine their abilities or measure their intelligence or personality, use standardised tests.”⁶

Quantitative data can be obtained through questionnaires (for examples see the questionnaires on the CD-Rom, for instance: www.ecml.at/html/quality/english/continuum/internal_quality_assurance/Greece_intro.htm⁷), structured interviews, “certificate numbering”, etc.

⁶ Robson (1993: 188-189).

⁷ In all cases the full link to the website is indicated – the accompanying CD-Rom is a static version of the site (downloaded on 01 September 2007).

Qualitative data is usually collected through observation, focus group meetings, peer review, open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, etc. See the questionnaires and interviews on the CD-Rom, for instance:

- www.ecml.at/html/quality/english/continuum/internal_quality_assurance/MF_France_intro_E.htm;
- www.ecml.at/html/quality/english/continuum/external_quality_assurance/Interviews/Interviews_E.htm;
- www.ecml.at/html/quality/english/continuum/internal_quality_assurance/LM_Interview_LW.htm.

Since all methods have their strengths and shortcomings, to ensure complementarity and objectivity, it is advisable to use a mixture of methods, techniques and instruments, as well as to collect both quantitative and qualitative data.

Analysing and interpreting the data

Depending on the nature of the data and the contextual factors, the approach taken can be:

- comparative – for example, when preparing for an external inspection, data on the school's performance will be compared with the national standard or with the quality standards set out in the inspection documents of the national or international accreditation body (for details on benchmarking, see Unit 4 in this guide and the examples on the CD-Rom, for instance: www.ecml.at/html/quality/english/continuum/external_quality_assurance/assoc_national.htm);
- longitudinal – analysing the school's performance over a longer span of time, for example when implementing change or after having identified problems (such as drops in satisfaction rates, exam results below national norms, issues raised in buzz observations and focus groups).

Whatever the choice of instruments, and however simple or complex as an operation, a thumb rule remains the ethical approach to confidentiality and the use of data obtained. This involves addressing questions such as: Who is going to have access to the information? How is it going to be used? Is this transparent and clear from the very beginning to all those involved in the evaluation?

Taking effective action to correct problems and piloting possible solutions

Before committing to a hypothetical solution, it is advisable to try out possible ways of action and to carry out school-based research in order to see which alternative works best in a given context.

Action research is “a form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social educational practices”.⁸ It has tended to involve a wide range of approaches for gathering data about both individual teachers’ work and institutional processes. Its added value consists in its relevance both to teacher development and institutional quality assurance. To strengthen this dual role, it is important to enhance its systematic character, “to ensure that the personal reflection is carried out in a valid way”⁹.

While acknowledging the value of the individual teacher’s concerns and value judgments, it is vital to keep it open for peer support and collaborative action, and to use it coherently for diagnosing problematic areas, communicating the outcomes of research, and collaboratively working towards finding appropriate solutions.

Even if “eclectic”, it needs to be “premised on a number of principles:

- that its aim is educational improvement;
- that it incorporates the self-development of the main researcher and the other people that become involved;
- that it is rigorous and self-critical of assumptions;
- and that its outcomes are made public.”¹⁰



For examples of successful action research carried out by teachers in their own context – see the case studies at the end of this guide and further examples on the CD-Rom.

8 Kemmis and McTaggart (1988: 5).

9 Craft (1996: 23).

10 Lomax (1996: 85).



What experience with action research have you got in your institution?

In what contexts/situations have you used it?

Has it contributed to improving educational processes?



What instruments and techniques are you using in your institutional context?

For what purpose?

With what results?

The sections on institutional self-evaluation and class observation below also include examples of top-down and bottom-up approaches, with a focus on shared responsibility and co-operative processes, for increased staff motivation.

Checking on the effect of action taken

To check on the effects of action taken, most of the above methods and instruments can be applied. Data collection, therefore, needs to be seen as a continuous process, so that before and after comparisons are possible. Once pilot projects are considered successful, action can be taken for large/larger scale implementation of improvements or change.

For an illustration of how this process works in reality, see the case study “An ICT quality system to support learning” by David Turrell.

In reality, most of the above processes, methods and instruments are interconnected and can be used for multiple purposes, depending on the stage in which they are introduced and on the institution’s goals at a given moment in its development.



In what stages of the quality monitoring process would you use the following methods and instruments? Please fill in the table below. With your peer, select one area and discuss in more detail the purposes pursued through the use of specific methods/instruments and the results obtained:

- surveys based on questionnaires with all staff members;
- surveys based on questionnaires and/or interviews with learners and parents;
- focus group meetings with staff, with students, etc.
- interviews – informal or focused, semi-structured or structured;
- peer review;
- whole team meetings;
- working group meetings;
- observation of activities, of processes and persons;
- audio or video recording of processes;
- evaluation sheets addressed to customers or other stakeholders, etc.
- portfolios for learners (adapted to age group);
- portfolios for teachers;
- checklists and questionnaires for teacher self-assessment;
- student work audits;
- diaries, logbooks, etc.

Stages	Examples of methods and instruments	For what purpose?	With what results?
Setting up systems and planning activities			
Gathering relevant data			
Analysing and interpreting the data			
Taking action to correct problems and piloting possible solutions			
Checking on the effects of action taken			
Reviewing goals and revising systems			

3.2 Institutional self-evaluation

An important dimension of quality monitoring is objective self-evaluation. This involves distribution of leadership roles in a team venture, setting the framework for a collegiate exercise, setting up workable systems, developing and selecting procedures and instruments to be applied, as well as deciding on the various steps.

Institutional self-evaluation is defined as participatory evaluation initiated in the institution (school, language centre, programme) by the school/centre personnel or project team to facilitate periodic or continuous improvement of the teaching operation/language services/the overall activity (adapted from Mackay et al., 1998).

The functions and aims of self-evaluation may differ, depending on the context and the evaluation focus. Thus, self-evaluation may play multiple roles and can serve one or several of the following purposes:

- **analysing the unfolding of a project or a programme:** in a project or programme framework, project teams analyse the unfolding of the project or the programme, “measuring” progress and outcomes against the initial objectives and the action plan decided on. Among other aims, this may also serve the purpose of justifying the manner in which the resources assigned to the project had been used, of demonstrating the success of the project and applying for a continuation of the funding. When this approach was introduced as an alternative to evaluation by external experts, it was perceived as a novelty. In the course of time, it has become standard practice to expect project teams to self-evaluate progress against initial objectives. For the 3rd medium-term programme of the ECML, for instance, it is already in the project proposal phase that candidates are asked to indicate what self-evaluation tools they intend to use for the ongoing monitoring of progress (see the project proposal template on the ECML website – www.ecml.at);
- **diagnosing existing problems and documenting the need for change and innovation:** to increase the chances of successful change, it is important for the organisation (management and teaching team) to determine the readiness for change, to identify possible obstacles, to analyse the costs and benefits of intervention, to find a realistic point of entry for initiating change. In

Activity for small groups

Consider your own context and discuss the following:

- In your institution/department, is there a system for self-evaluation? If “yes”, who moderates it?
- Who is involved? At individual level? At institutional level?
- How? What mechanisms are applied?
- Is there any action taken in response to the outcomes of self-evaluation?

an educational environment – especially in a language teaching/learning context – all this would involve “steps like a self-assessment process, a focused period of class observation, staff meetings, etc.”¹¹;

- serving as an instrument of quality management: in an institution or department, systematic self-evaluation allows teams to analyse all the aspects of institutional activity, to identify problems and suggest an action plan for certain priority areas that may need improvement or change – see the case studies at the end of this guide;
- serving as an instrument and exercise for internal quality assurance – as quality control by “insiders” – for instance, when preparing for an external inspection (quality control by “outsiders”), such as when applying for membership of a national or international quality organisation (Maxwell-Hyslop, 1999) or when applying for awards such as the “investors in people” award in Great Britain (www.investorsinpeople.co.uk/Pages/Home.aspx).

For examples of self-evaluation as internal quality assurance, see “Quality management in language education” on the CD-Rom:

- www.ecml.at/html/quality/english/continuum/self_assessement/self_assessment.htm;
- www.ecml.at/html/quality/english/continuum/internal_quality_assurance/internal.htm.
- a formative role in the “learning company” approach, enhancing development opportunities for all, both at an institutional level, and at a personal level for each of the participants in the process.

International experience and practice have proved that this type of evaluation allows for a well-documented analysis, and in addition to this, it relies on motivation that is intrinsic to the programme or the school. In Case study 4a in this guide – “A quality vision for whole school learning” – David Turrell convincingly illustrates how:

“a systematic and comprehensive approach to Quality Assurance ... embodies whole school self-evaluation, multi-level development planning and a belief in change and improvement using pedagogical innovation. It sees professional learning and school based enquiry and research as the bedrock to improving the quality of education for its students.”

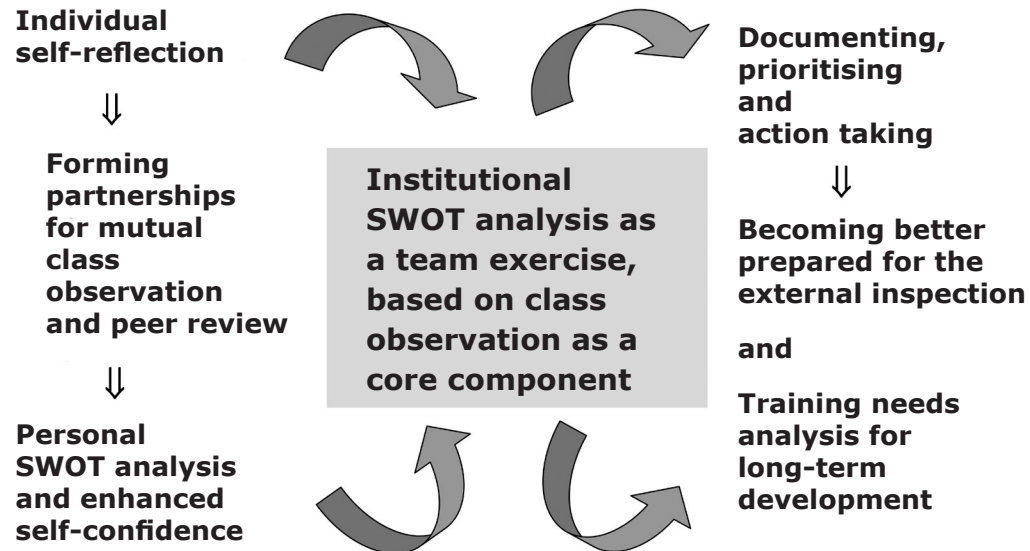
¹¹ Heyworth (2003a: 30).

When planning self-evaluation exercises – be they for a selected group of staff or for the entire institution – it is important to clarify and communicate from the outset issues such as: What data would be gathered and for what specific purpose? What would be the management and communication lines within the institutional “hierarchy”? Who will moderate the process? For example, the top level? Will it involve everybody? Who designs the criteria? Who receives and interprets the data?

In order to ensure the reliability and validity of the data, it is equally important to address also issues of transparency, honesty, ownership of the data, confidentiality – for example, How will the data be used? What will be the management’s attitude to risk taking? What are the consequences for the individual participants in the self-evaluation exercise?

In accordance with the developmental model of quality (as shown in Unit 1 – “Quality based on personal development”) and the “self-learning” dimension of a quality culture (Unit 2), self-evaluation can be seen as playing an important formative role, by ensuring the inter-relatedness between quality assurance, institutional development, team learning and personal professional growth, as suggested in the diagram below.

Linking quality assurance with professional development



For practical examples, see the case studies at the end of this guide.



To see examples from different European contexts and to explore the link between individual and institutional self-evaluation, as well as the connection between them and quality assurance, you can take a look at “Quality management in language education” on the CD-Rom: www.ecml.at/html/quality/english/continuum/self_assesment/self_assessment.htm.

3.3 Class observation as an integral part of quality assurance and professional development

In language education, class observation is a key component of quality assurance and human resources management, as well as of teacher training and development.

As a complex process and tool, class observation may take various forms and play multiple roles, as shown below.

For in-house quality management, class observation is carried out by those responsible for managing the teaching programme – heads of department, teacher trainers, senior teachers, the academic co-ordinator(s) – on a regular basis, in order to gather relevant data about the teaching and learning practice existing in the school, to identify areas for improvement, to ensure better customer care, etc. Institutions and departments with a clear commitment to quality also encourage and create an appropriate framework for peer observation, to ensure coherence of approach and to promote the sharing of expertise among teachers.

For internal quality assurance, it may be linked to human resources management, for example, incorporated in the recruitment process, it can be part of induction and may be included in or linked to appraisal, especially in language training institutions.

These situations may well be associated also with formative reasons, since proper quality management cannot be conceived without ongoing professional development.

External quality assurance systems in language education usually include class observation as a key element of the inspection process, carried out by external inspectors (EAQUALS, 1999/2004). In addition, it is often a component part of inspector training and the piloting of inspection systems in national contexts (for example, within OPTIMA, Bulgaria; QUEST, Romania; and MAQS, “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”), or in organisations consisting of chains of schools having their internal quality assurance system (for example, Bell International, the Goethe-Institut and International House World Organisation).



Activity for small groups

Consider your own context and discuss the following:

- In your context, what type of class observation is primarily used or relevant?
- Who carries it out and how often? What is the duration of a standard class observation in your context?
- How is feedback given?
- Is there any action taken as a result of the class observation process?

To close the loop, since observation is a key component of quality control, institutions preparing for an inspection use observation as a stepping stone in their quality assurance processes.

Evidence gathered through class observation, often integrated with action research, and other ways of gathering relevant data, can help institutions both (a) diagnose problems and (b) identify good practice existing in the institution. Systematic data gathering and analysis thus becomes a sound basis for planning teacher training and development.

In a formative context, observation may serve various purposes, such as (i) training; (ii) development and the sharing of best practice; (iii) assessment; or (iv) observer development. Each of these is usually associated with a specific situation, a certain type of observer-observee relationship, and as a result of this, also the “what” and “how” of feedback given may vary, as illustrated synthetically in the table¹² below.

¹² Adapted from Maingay (1988) and Wajnryb (1992: 3), with a few additional elements for exemplification purposes.

Main reason	Where/when	What/why	Who observes	How → feedback
Training	Pre-service	For example, trainee trying out teaching procedures	a) Trainer b) Peer trainee	a) Prescriptive b) Collaborative
Development	Teacher's place of work or an in-service course	For example, the development of self-appraisal skills	Trainer, or consultant, peer as mentor	Less directive, collaborative
Assessment	Pre- or in-service, part of a course or outside a course	To see whether teaching practice is in compliance with assessment criteria	Internal or external assessor	May take various forms or be inexistent
Observer development	The teacher's workplace	For the observer to pick up new ideas or to reflect on teaching by observing someone else teach	Can be a trainee trainer or observer, a peer	Collaborative

According to the stage in the organisation's life, one type or another is preponderantly used, for example:

- after recruiting new staff members, the developmental purposes, combined with quality monitoring, are top priority;
- when running an intensive course, with several teachers contributing to course design and taking turns in the conducting of the seminars, class observation (especially "sitting in") serves mainly the purpose of ensuring coherence of approach, efficiency and effectiveness (quality monitoring situation);
- in the pre-inspection period, all the experienced teachers are involved in class observation, mainly for quality monitoring purposes; most of the teachers and courses are observed at least once (quality monitoring).

Depending on the areas needing improvement, you may want to observe, for example: classroom management, teacher talking time, teacher-learner rapport, learner-learner rapport, learner attitudes and integrating theory with practice (how does teaching and learning practice compare with principles set out in the curriculum, syllabus, etc.).



Further questions and aspects for consideration:

- *matching the support given to needs; judging the quality of the support: what support is provided by the management, by peers, by consultants? Is it adequate? Are there other alternatives?*
- *dealing sensitively with staff; collegiality versus impact on students; supportiveness versus loyalty to students as main beneficiaries of the teaching process;*
- *aspects to be taken into account: responsibility, descriptors, finding the right language and attitudes to give feedback; how it is done;*
- *taking action: what are the penalties and sanctions? How long does it take until you can take action?*
- *link to the values model: honesty has to come from the values we believe in.*



See the CD-Rom for examples of checklists and observation protocols – and advice on how and what to observe:

- www.ecml.at/html/quality/english/continuum/self_assesement/MM_Class_obs.pdf;
- www.ecml.at/html/quality/english/continuum/self_assesement/learners/obs%20de%20classe_E.pdf.