

Towards Multilingualism in Europe: the importance of quality standards in language learning*

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Abstract

In the context of Europe in the 21st century, multilingualism and pluricultural understanding are noble, necessary and achievable goals. Much depends on the ways in which mainstream schools across the continent respond to the challenge. However, an important role is also played by specialist language education providers outside the mainstream system, who provide valuable additional and lifelong opportunities for language learning. And by private and state colleges supporting adult learning

A factor that is key to the success of any education provision, whether classroom-based, blended or accessed autonomously, is quality, and in particular the standards established and the manner in which provision is assessed against these standards. This is particularly true of language education, and of innovations and creative solutions in education. This talk will explore what quality means in this context, how it can be assessed, and what can be done to support continuing improvement for the benefit of language learners, whatever their motivation, background and age.

Introduction

This paper reflects the content of a plenary address given at the conference "Creativity and Innovation to Promote Multilingualism and Intercultural Dialogue" on 11th June 2009. Like the presentation, the paper will first of all consider some drivers and factors behind multilingualism in Europe. It will then go on to consider modes of and services for language learning, and the criteria and evidence against which quality in language learning services could be assessed. This is followed by a brief discussion of what high quality in innovations and creativity in language education projects might mean. After looking at EAQUALS as an example of an organisation that concretely supports and accredits quality in language teaching and learning, some of the implications of a quality-orientated approach will be considered.

Multilingualism in Europe

The European Commission's Communication 'Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004 – 2006' (2003) states: "*The European Union is built around the free movement of its citizens, capital and services. The citizen with good language skills is better equipped to take advantage of the freedom to work or study in another Member State (It will have) 450 million citizens from diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It will be more important than ever that citizens have the skills necessary to understand and communicate with their neighbours*' (p3). This

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simple statement backed up by the rest of the communication lays out the practical and human rationale for a multilingual Europe, and the role that language learning should play in creating it. Of course, each nation will have its own priorities and additional reasons but for European citizens multilingualism is necessary, and for many a fact of life.

If we consider what the individual and social factors and drivers are behind multilingualism in the modern world (not just Europe), it is clear that mobility and migration are higher on the agenda than at other times in history, and nowadays more a matter of free will than of absolute necessity (e.g. flight from persecution) than once was the case. Personal aspirations related to education, to working life and career development, leisure travel, and family bonds are now key factors in the desire to live for a period (or permanently) in another country and to be able to function in a different socio-economic and linguistic context. This 'search for a better life' extends to economic migrants around the world, who believe that certain regions including Europe seem to offer opportunities that do not (yet) exist at home. Thus, one of the commitments in the 2004-2006 Action Plan referred to above was "*Member States agree that pupils should master at least two foreign languages, with the emphasis on effective communicative ability: active skills rather than passive knowledge. 'Native speaker' fluency is not the objective, but appropriate levels of skill in reading, listening, writing and speaking in two foreign languages are required, together with intercultural competencies and the ability to learn languages whether with a teacher or alone.*" (p.8).

We can see from this that a considerable pressure is being applied and will continue to be applied to language teaching and learning as the key factor in developing a multilingual Europe in which most citizens have plurilingual competence and are able to function in interaction with speakers of at least three languages. The imperative is referred to also in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which has become a key instrument of international language education policy, and in some cases of language education practice: "*The rich heritage of diverse languages and cultures in Europe is a valuable common resource to be protected and developed ... a major educational effort is needed to convert that diversity from a barrier to communication into a source of mutual enrichment and understanding; it is only through a better knowledge of European Modern Languages that it will be possible to facilitate communication and interaction among Europeans ... in order to promote European mobility, mutual understanding and co-operation and overcome prejudice and discrimination*" (CEFR 2001, p1). Given the diversity of Europe's population in the 21st century, we might wish to suggest that it is not only a question of European languages or indeed European people: immigration, which has contributed so much to European nations in terms of economic and cultural wealth puts an obligation on European citizens to improve communication and interaction with the non-Europeans living in our societies, and to address prejudice and discrimination especially where this immigrant population is concerned.

Ways and means of language learning – considerable diversity

In Europe today, language education and training result both from top-down policy and from bottom-up choice. In schools, including kindergartens, languages form part of the top-down mainstream curriculum, being taught either as separate subjects or in the context of ‘content and language integrated learning’ (CLIL), where subjects such as geography or science are taught though and together with a foreign language. Pupils may have a degree of choice as to which other language(s) they learn, but in most countries there is now an assumption that language learning will begin at primary level so that by the end of secondary there is a realistic chance that young people will be able to communicate effectively in at least one additional language. Even in England, where foreign language attainment has been historically low, and taking a foreign language after age 14 is now optional, measures are being put in place to try to ensure that far more widespread proficiency in languages is achieved. This puts additional pressure on schools, especially primary schools, to identify and train teachers who can teach and/or teach in one of the languages selected as a priority in the country concerned. This pressure extends to secondary schools, where (in due course) the levels of language attainment by students graduating from primary school will be higher, or at least more diverse, and CLIL will become more commonplace.

The bottom-up requirement for language-learning services arises at an early age in many countries: in addition to the school curriculum, many parents want to give their children extracurricular language learning opportunities, for example in specialist language schools or on holiday courses in a country where the target language is spoken. English in particular has, like it or not, now attained the status of a ‘basic skill’ in many countries – a skill which parents see as essential to their children’s future prospects, and thus worth investing in.

Bottom-up demand from students themselves begins as soon as decisions are taken about future careers and/or vocational and higher education. Depending on the specialism, and the ambitions of the individual to be able to travel within and beyond Europe, he or she will want to achieve competence in a given foreign language (especially English) that enables him/her to study and eventually to work in the medium of that language. The fact that English in particular has become a global lingua franca adds to this pressure to be able to function adequately in the language. Post-16 students have the choice of opting for specialist courses, for example, in language for specific or academic purposes, and may supplement their learning through internet-based or blended courses, courses abroad as well as other forms of lifelong language learning. Once they are in work, people may again be subject to top-down pressure from their employer, as well as bottom-up pressure relating to their own career aspirations, to take language courses, and may be fortunate enough to have these paid for by their employers and delivered at their place of work.

Quality in language learning services

Quality is one of those words that has suffered through overuse to such an extent that it is in danger of losing its meaning. Defining it for modern life has been a problem. Oakland (2004) writes *“If we are to define quality in a way that is useful to its management, then we must recognise the need to include in the assessment of quality the true requirements of the ‘customer’ – the needs and expectations. Quality then is simply meeting the customer requirements... This has wide implications. The requirements may include availability, delivery, reliability, maintainability and cost-effectiveness, among many other features. The first item on the list of things to do is to find out what the requirements are.”*(p 5, p12). The meaning of quality (or high quality) then varies according to the service or product in question and who the customer is. It will depend on the extent to which customers’ needs and expectations in terms of:

- The efficiency and effectiveness of the service
- Value for money
- Ethics and honesty
- Attention to customer needs
- Professionalism in planning and delivery
- Motivation and engagement
- Success and satisfaction

The International Standards Organisation (ISO) has recently begun to co-ordinate the drafting of service standards to complement the many technical standards for products that have been created over many years and the well-known quality management standard, ISO 9001. One recent service standard that is still at draft stage is ISO 29990 *‘Learning services for non-formal education and training —Basic requirements for service providers’* (ISO 2009). This standard seeks to address directly quality in educational services, including the management system that supports them, focusing in particular on learning service delivered outside the framework of mainstream primary, secondary and higher education. It is aimed in particular at quality in the non-formal sectors, including lifelong learning, general further education, and corporate training. Here the customer may be individual students or their parents, or companies or official bodies buying training services for their staff.

The EU Commission also has views on quality in educational provision: *“Poor quality provision of adult learning leads to poor quality learning outcomes. ... The following deserve special attention: Teaching methods; quality of staff ; quality of providers; quality of delivery.*

***Message 2:** In order to foster a culture of quality in adult learning, Member States should invest in improving teaching methods and materials adapted to adult learners, and put in place initial and continuing professional development measures to qualify and up-skill people working in adult learning. **They should introduce quality assurance mechanisms, and improve delivery.**”*(my emphasis)

Communication from The EU Commission (2006) - Adult learning: It is never too late to learn, (page 7).

The importance of such a ‘message’ is clear: if high quality is important in other service sectors such as at restaurants, at banks and on trains, how much more important is it in an on-going, often year-round and potentially life-long service like education and training? And what impact can high quality as opposed to low quality have on the lives and opportunities of both individuals and nations?

Criteria for quality in language education

Any learning service can be divided into three separate areas, as indicated in figure 1.

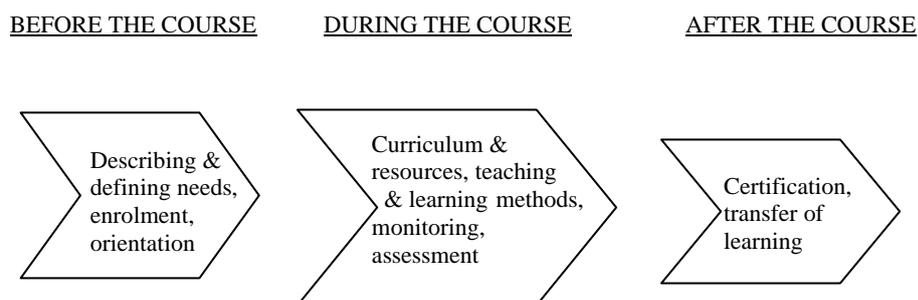


Fig. 1 three phases of learning services

The fundamental criteria in language learning services against which quality can be assessed span all three phases. The following can be identified as the main criteria for quality:

1. Students’ language learning needs: these must be evaluated and analysed at an individual level, and procedures have to be established for doing this effectively, and for taking individual and collective learning needs into account in the planning and delivery of language courses.

Needs analysis is a critical stage in the delivery of effective and targeted training, and this is particularly true for adults learning an additional language. However, it is a time-consuming process, involving collecting information from each individual about personal objectives, and assessing their current language competence. The resulting analysis must then be harmonised with national priorities, but may well go beyond them. It may also demonstrate considerable differences between the learning needs and wants of one group of students and those of others. This is particularly the case for learners with special needs such as migrants (see Rossner 2008).

2. Course objectives: an essential quality criterion is whether realistic course objectives and achievable language learning goals have been established that correspond both to the needs of learners and relate to a recognized framework such as the CEFR. Once the needs of language learners have been determined, reconciling these needs with the practical constraints on delivering language courses is a considerable task.
3. Course parameters: taking course objectives and desired outcomes fully into account, the following basic parameters of the course must be appropriately determined:

- The length of course modules in hours, i.e. the way in which language learners' language study is structured
- The proportion of the course that will involve face-to-face learning as opposed to on-line learning, or other self-directed learning, and self study
- The degree of learner choice within the programme
- The manner and languages in which the information about the provision is made available to intending learners
- The cost of the programme.

Here the basic quality questions are: does the shape of the course match the aims and the needs of the 'customers'?

Information and advice is of crucial importance and can directly affect the quality of the service. Clear information about the course, as well as about what participants can expect to achieve and how their progress will be assessed, must be provided in a form that is accessible. It must also accurately represent what happens on the course.

4. Course outline and curriculum: an appropriate curriculum must be devised to respond to learners' language learning needs in the context of the length and intensity of the course, and a syllabus carefully related to the curriculum that guides the delivery of the course is also required.

The overall curriculum specifies the scope and objectives of the course, and the approach and general methodology to be adopted; the syllabus or syllabuses that derive from it specify which language competences (for example, in terms of 'can do statements' derived from the CEFR), language 'knowledge' related to these (for example in terms of grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary), and competencies and background knowledge relating to intercultural learning, will be focused on in given periods of time. The criterion for successful course planning and course delivery is whether the syllabus provides an effective scaffolding for a given course, and whether language teachers are able to generate effective course plans or 'schemes of work' from their syllabuses. They are more likely to be successful in this if the syllabus takes full account of the practicalities of the teaching programme, and if teachers have been involved in syllabus development and trained to 'interpret' the syllabus flexibly.

Closely related to syllabuses and course plans are the means and instruments used for assessment, both during and at the end of the course in order to measure outcomes and determine whether or not learners have achieved their own objectives and those of the course.

5. The language learning services team: from a quality perspective, it is essential that good systems and procedures exist to ensure that suitable and competent staff are available to deliver the programme. These must take into account:

- the language teaching competences needed
- the number of teachers required
- the training and support that teachers will need before and during the course
- Other staff needed for academic co-ordination, resources administration, student welfare etc, and the skills and experience required of them

Apart from the learners' own motivation and approach to learning, teachers and other staff are almost certain to be the 'critical factors' in determining whether or not a course is successful in achieving its aims. The process by which teachers are recruited, managed and professionally developed is thus of key importance.

6. Teaching and learning materials and facilities: another factor in the quality equation is what books, equipment, IT resources, and other learning materials are selected to support teaching and learning; and how they are made available to students and staff. This is key area that requires careful planning and consultation: experienced teachers can, if properly trained, prepare a certain amount of teaching and learning material of their own drawing on 'realia' and 'authentic sources'. Part of the task of developing a curriculum or writing a course syllabus is, however, to consider what textbooks and reference books will be used, and what other resources can be drawn on in the teaching-learning process, and to refer to these materials in the syllabus. Careful planning in consultation with teachers is therefore needed to ensure that:

- the most suitable published materials are acquired by the institution, and if necessary also by the learners;
- if needed, supplementary materials are specially prepared;
- a range of resources are also available for self-study.

The financial and logistical planning implications are obvious.

7. Assessment of learning: systems and resources must be put in place to enable the staff to assess and evaluate learners' language competence at appropriate stages and in an appropriate manner, using assessment techniques that are compatible with the aims of the courses as well as with the teaching/learning orientation and the learners' cognitive experiences.

Apart from an analysis of their specific and individual needs, there needs to be a simple means of assessing learners' communicative competence in the target language before the start of the course in

order to ensure that they are placed in a course and group that is at the appropriate level. This assessment also serves as a benchmark for future progress.

During the course regular evaluation of progress is needed. This can be done mainly through assessment carried out by the teachers, for example during standard assessment tasks and other individualized activities and assignments. Tests of communicative skills and language knowledge to assess whether learners have acquired the competences, and language and other knowledge focused on during a given module of the course can be used by the teacher to complement his/her own assessment.

At the end of each section or level of the course, and at the end of the whole course, more comprehensive evaluation based on teacher assessment and tests is needed to determine what Language learners have achieved during the course, i.e. what progress they have made. This enables the course provider to issue a certificate and/or a detailed report on each learner's level of attainment.

These, then, are some key focus areas in any quality assurance system that seeks to assess the quality of language education provision, and of language learning services.

Inspection and accreditation

EAQUALS, the European Association for Quality Language Services, now in its 18th year, was created with two main objectives in mind:

- to improve the quality of language courses, language teaching, and thus of language learning, through its system of inspection and accreditation for language teaching organisations based on the criteria laid out in its four public Charters;
- to contribute to educational development in language education such as guidance in applying the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the development of an international European Language Portfolio (ELP) and electronic ELP in partnership with ALTE, the Association of Language Testers in Europe, and the creation of a wide range of support materials for EAQUALS Members and would-be members.

To achieve these aims, EAQUALS has put in place a rigorous and comprehensive inspection and accreditation system that has been widely used as a model for other national schemes. The EAQUALS system depends on the work of numerous trained inspectors who apply accreditation criteria such as those above in an independent but consistent way, supported by regular standardisation seminars. EAQUALS has also developed various means of providing support to institutions which wish to become accredited but do not yet feel ready. These include a self-assessment workshops and aids, pre-inspection advisory visits, and training resources. EAQUALS organises regular international conferences and workshop meetings at which new developments are presented and internal projects are carried forward. Current projects, for example, include the establishment of a system of certificates of achievement for learners

leaving courses at EAQUALS institutions, and the development of manual for EAQUALS schools preparing for certification under ISO 9001.

The four EAQUALS' Charters set out key criteria for language learning services such as those listed in the previous section, and many other standards that relate specifically to human resources issues, the dissemination of information, and ethical considerations. These Charters form the basis of the EAQUALS inspection system that is designed to systematically assess the quality of language teaching operations of all kinds teaching different languages in a wide range of contexts. The inspection scheme covers 50 separate areas in detail, and inspectors are asked to check each focus point carefully during their visits to schools and preparation for these.

The purpose of the inspection scheme is to enable EAQUALS to accredit language teaching institutions. 'Accreditation' is a way of verifying through the intervention of an outside organisation (in this case, EAQUALS) that language courses and the institutions that run them meet certain pre-established and public quality standards. Accreditation provides valuable reassurance for clients, students and other stakeholders (e.g. government).

The EAQUALS accreditation scheme independently verifies that:

- the 'promises' made by the provider to course participants and to clients are transparent and are kept, and that the promised high standards are maintained;
- the courses are principled and effective;
- there are also effective internal quality assurance and review procedures;
- These procedures involve assessment of teaching and learning, as well as checking management and administration systems;
- the findings and recommendations from internal and external quality audits are analysed and acted upon.

An EAQUALS inspection is a complex and carefully organised operation. It involves among other things: the analysis of documents provided by the institution before and during the two-day inspection by two inspectors (normally from different countries); systematic use of the inspection manual and checklists, and of 'country notes' about national legal requirements and norms; the gathering of evidence from different sources, and by using a variety of methods such as:

- lesson observations
- Looking at teaching materials, tests and plans
- interviews with staff and students
- Meeting with academic managers and directors
- Checking premises and facilities, and procedures for internal quality assurance & complaints.

After the inspection a comprehensive report is prepared on the inspectors' findings. This includes clear but supportive recommendations for change and also, if necessary, requirements that the institution

must comply with before accreditation can be conferred. For Accredited Members this inspection process is repeated every three years so that there is verification that the quality standards are being maintained.

EAQUALS, a not-for-profit international non-governmental organisation, is now present through its membership of 100 accredited members and 20 associate members in 22 countries. It has Participatory Status with the Council of Europe, regularly contributing to Language Policy Division projects, and Liaison Status with two technical committees within ISO. It has also signed co-operation agreements with the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) and with the Association of Language Tester in Europe (ALTE). EAQUALS offers the primary forum for international exchange and information sharing on language education, and advisory support for national quality assurance and accreditation services in the field.

Quality in innovation and creativity

The EU Action plan referred to above makes specific recommendations for means of implementing 'better language teaching' that will help to achieve the objectives of the plan:

The language friendly school: *'it is important that schools and training institutions adopt a holistic approach to the teaching of language, which makes appropriate connections between the teaching of 'mother tongue', foreign' languages, the language of instruction, and the languages of migrant communities' (p.9);*

The languages classroom: the Communication pointed out the importance of e-learning and internet facilities for contact between students in different communities, and for twinning arrangements;

Language teacher training: *"Language teachers have a crucial role to play in building a multilingual Europe. They, more than teachers of other subjects, are called upon to exemplify the European values of openness to others, tolerance of differences, and willingness to communicate..... All teachers of a foreign language should have spent an extended period in a country where that language is spoken and have regular opportunities to update their training"* (p.10)

Supply of language teachers: the Communication stressed the need for less restriction on movement, and more exchange of teachers;

Training teachers of other subjects: The Communication advocated wider use of a CLIL approach: *"Many more members of the teaching profession should in future be able to teach their subject(s) through at least one foreign language...trainee teachers should study language(s) alongside their area of specialisation"* (p. 10);

Testing language skills: The Communication stressed the need for data on language competence across EU to be comparable, and the role that the CEFR and European Language Portfolios could play in this.

[*Communication from the Commission - “Promoting Language Learning & Linguistic Diversity – Action Plan 2004-2006”*]

This ‘shopping list’ and the encouragement of EU-funded projects that ran alongside it has given rise to a considerable amount of innovation and creativity in the field of language education, as exemplified by the TOOL and ALL projects featured at this conference. But how should quality be assured when introducing innovations, which by definition may have unforeseen outcomes? From an EAQUALS point of view, some of the key questions that need to be asked in order to test the quality of innovation management are:

- Planning – does the innovation meet learners’ needs? Have all the necessary preparations been made?
- Orientation of stakeholders – do learners and staff understand why the innovation is being made and how it will be introduced?
- Implementation – have teachers been effectively trained to use the innovation?
- Monitoring and assessment – how will the impact of the innovation be monitored and assessed to find out whether it is effective and whether adjustments are needed?
- Feedback - what do learners, sponsors and teachers think of the innovation? Do they have suggestions for improvement?
- Documentation – are useful records kept of what is happening and what the impact is?

Only by following a systematic approach can the quality of innovations in education be assessed and a proper chance of success be assured.

Conclusion

Foreign language learning and effective educational services to support it are crucial in a multilingual, multicultural world, and in order to meet people’s needs and aspirations, not just in Europe but everywhere. In order for language learning to be successful, continual innovation is needed, and equally important is continuing attention to raising and maintaining standards so that learners can benefit fully from their courses and other learning experiences. Quality assurance, both internal and external, can contribute directly and indirectly to educational effectiveness for the benefit of all.

EAQUALS’ commitment is to support this effort to enhance quality for the benefit of all stakeholders through its accreditation scheme, and by participating in joint efforts to strengthen the resources and frameworks upon which high quality in language education and the training of language teachers depends.

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