Report on two think tanks

As part of an ECML Professional Network Forum initiative on the 'Future of language education in the light of Covid - lessons learned and ways forward", two online think tanks were organised. The first took place on 10th and 11th May 2021, and the second on 20th and 21st September. Each lasted just over six hours.

The first think tank

22 language education professionals participated in the first think tank, which had the following desired outcomes:

Desired outcomes

a)   A plan for a detailed interpretation of the results of the survey
b)   A prioritised list of issues to be faced in language education during and after the pandemic, and ways in which they can usefully be addressed
c)   Means of making the positive results and good practice arising from the survey and the think tank available to the ECML, members of the PNF, and the professional community.

The programme was organised as follows:

Day 1

Introduction: presentation of the survey results, followed by questions and discussion

Breakout group sessions to discuss *"what are the main lessons to be drawn from the survey, and what further analysis would you propose in relation to your theme?"*

Themes for group discussion:

(1) Organisation of teaching – remote, socially distanced, hybrid
(2) Methods and resources
(3) Approaches to assessment
(4) The well-being of learners and teachers

Reporting back from groups and preview of day 2

Day 2

Presentation of plans for further analysis of the survey in the four areas above

Breakout groups to generate proposals for the contents of a manual of good practice *"what are the main challenges (a) in coping with the recent/present situation, and (b) for the future?"*

Reporting back from groups

Presentation by team and discussion of plans for further analysis and for drafting the manual; possible follow-up in the second think tank 2 and the colloquium

Review of the think tank, and questions and proposals from participants on their possible contribution to the project

The results guided further and more detailed analysis, including corpus analysis, of the responses to the online survey run in February 2021 and reported on in a webinar in April. A summary report of the results of the survey can be found here. They also provided a sound basis for conceiving a guide for

practitioners. A summary of the suggestions arising from group discussions can be found in appendix 1.

The second think tank

Participants in the second think tank totalled 29 language professionals, including 18 who had also participated in the first think tank. The desired outcomes were:

- An agreed way of developing a practical Guide on handling language education in the pandemic, as well as if/when Covid 19 becomes endemic
- Reflection on the results of further analysis of the survey results
- Means of obtaining instructive case studies of language teachers' experiences during the pandemic
- Insights into the handling of assessment of language learning during the pandemic, and their implications for the future.

This time, the programme was organised as follows:

Day 1

Introduction including a review of the initiative so far; presentation of a draft leaflet focusing on the proposed Guide

Presentation: What if the Covid pandemic becomes endemic?

Introduction followed by discussion in groups of the draft leaflet and the specific content of the proposed Guide

Suggested themes for group discussion:

- Organisation of language education
- Materials and resources
- Coping with hybrid learning, social distancing etc. in the language classroom
- Support and training for learners

Input: distillation of points arising from group discussion in think tank 1.

Reporting back from groups

Report on further analysis of the survey data: similarities and differences according to educational sector, corpus analysis relating to key words such as: assessment, motivation, inclusion, examinations, disadvantaged, support, training, hybrid etc. followed by questions.

review, and preview of day 2.

Day 2

Introduction: focus on case studies and participants' experiences and promising practice

Presentation of a case study, followed by discussion of what case studies should contain and how further ones can be generated

Presentation: issues arising from the experience of assessment in language education during the pandemic and their implications for the future, followed by an introduction to group work.

Discussion in groups: how should the lessons learned during the pandemic affect and improve assessment practices in language education, especially in state education? How should assessment of language learning be addressed in the Guide?

Reporting back on the recommendations from groups

The future of language education in the light of Covid - lessons learned and ways forward

Presentation: outline plan for the ECML colloquium in December

Group discussion: what outcomes of the initiative should be highlighted in the colloquium as important for language education in the future?

Roundup and feedback, including evaluation of the think tank.

The two think tanks will be followed by a one-day ECML colloquium in December 2021, part of which will focus on the 'Future of language education in the light of Covid' initiative.

The guide discussed during the think tanks and brainstormed as illustrated in the appendices below will be developed early in 2022 and will be accompanied by an illustrative leaflet. These resources, accompanied by case studies from various countries will be made available on the website and included in a publication on the theme of the initiative.

APPENDIX 1 – NOTES ON OUTPUT OF THINK TANK 1

Notes from group discussions

A. Findings from the survey and experiences during the pandemic which could have an impact on language education in the future, and to be focused on in a guide to good practice

Group A

1. Shift from T centred teaching to L centred teaching, with P2P the focus. The need to 'socialise' the students
2. Hybrid?
3. The role of continuous assessment; how to do it properly and not get stuck in rote learning.
4. Teacher competencies
5. How to go back to normal/How to create a new normal (what is normal?)
6. Issues with loss of learning
7. What will teachers carry forward? There has been limited cross pollination between language departments.

Group B

1. Emphasizing language use (incl. informal learning) along with language learning
2. Opportunities for creativity and flexibility in language teaching (new techniques/ methodologies) and language learning (novel ways of engaging learners in language interaction)
3. Longer term planning; assessment (and its forms) as a component of planning and as an opportunity for interaction
4. Support systems for change in language teaching - including support for teachers (through communities of practice, too)
5. Promoting more learner autonomy in remote teaching/learning contexts

---

Group C:

1. The level of digital literacy of the learner & the student
2. The disparity of access, the space to use technology, the right access to devices
3. The role of parents in education
4. Early language learning - Ss more affected (6 – 9-year-old Ss)
5. The simpler, the better - careful choice of platforms, tools
6. Traditional approach vs digital approach
7. Clarification of concepts - hybrid/synchronous/ asynchronous/blended
8. Different marginalised groups (e.g migrants), not many well-developed resources for specific languages
9. Create social agents/communities of practice in a digital space, for a specific purpose
10. Assessment - how it needs to be adapted, formative vs summative
11. Building learners' autonomy at a very early age, self-awareness of progress

---

Group D:

1. Digitalization versus analogue: not just different but better
2. Educational contexts (related to institutions, age, socio-cognitive aspects, …)
3. Teacher training (formal: pre-service, in-service, CPD; informal: peer-learning networks)
4. Curricula, pedagogies, didactics, and assessment
5. → re-think current education and language education

B. Distillation of 'issues to explore further' from group discussions

The organisation of language teaching – remote, socially distanced, hybrid:

- What factors contributed to the <u>positive experiences</u> of some teachers (e.g., technical knowhow, peer learning, community of support)? (Perhaps analysis of corpus data, e.g. recurring words, phrases)
- In which contexts are <u>most difficulties and successes</u> experienced? What kinds of difficulties and successes related to language teaching and learning?
- What opportunities are there for <u>developing learner autonomy and social skills</u> in informal ways during and around online language learning?
- How does <u>group dynamics</u> affect language learning/teaching, especially during online learning?
- How do factors related to context, content, the relationship between teachers and learners etc. <u>impact on the effectiveness of hybrid language teaching and learning</u>?

Language learning methods and materials

- How can <u>learner-centred peer and self-reflection aid migration and adaptation to online language learning</u>? What opportunities are/were found for learners to learn and review at their own pace? <u>How much are/were learners involved</u> in the process of pivoting to online language learning?
- How can one take advantage of the opportunities offered by online language learning <u>to find a new normal where learning with the help of a teacher online and/or in school is combined effectively with independent learning</u> anywhere and anytime?
- How do teachers find, familiarize themselves with, and become able <u>to use existing materials designed or suitable for online language learning</u>? How are/were they able to do this when there

was little formal guidance and how long does/did it take? Was there collaboration with other departments (e.g. language and geography to reduce screen time)?

- How do/did language teachers feel about <u>their loss of "control" of the traditional classroom</u> set up? In which contexts is/was the transition to online learning easier?
- How can we develop a great <u>sense of collaborative learning and establish communities of practice</u> to aid the process of adaptation to and the effectiveness of online language teaching?
- How are/were learners given <u>learning breaks and socialization opportunities </u>during online learning? (e.g. virtual coffee breaks, online games, Gather.town).
- What examples are there of <u>observations by supervisors, peers, and of self-recording as an aid to professional learning </u>and developing communities of practice?

Assessment

- How do/did practices, attitudes and beliefs vary according to context, especially educational sector?
- What alternative types of assessment are we talking about and how much liberty do/did teachers have to make changes?
- How can (especially state school) teachers best be supported with the challenge of switching from the kind of assessment they are familiar with to assessment for learning (focus on policy makers)? What kind of training and materials are needed?
- How are/were communication skills assessed in remote teaching and learning?
- Can self-assessment and continuous assessment be aided by use of a language portfolio?

C. Advice on the scope and nature of the proposed guide, and on the steps needed to develop it

Group A:

- Website: with some clear ideas, videos, sample materials/tools
- Focus on bridging competencies for teachers/the change in posture/what needs to be emphasised, etc.
- Guidance parts: different contexts?
- 'Clicks and mortar' schools
- Online enables different approaches to language teaching
- There are so many opportunities in online learning that we need to look at
- We should be writing this for institutions/programmes who are not being forced to go online but are doing it by choice
- Who is this for: teachers, governing bodies, etc. (the report doesn't have to be one thing).
  - o For teachers: a website/practical guidance
  - o For Trainees: practical training in both online and face to face
  - o For students: a guide to online learning
  - o For governing bodies: a report with clear recommendations.

Group B

- Eliciting literature: explore dimensions that aren't in the data and connect to literature review (including ECML/Council of Europe studies, projects) for the interpretative aspects of the forthcoming study.
- Identify positive patterns that language users discovered during the pandemic -set them against the negative dimensions

- Eliciting case studies: like scenarios or vignettes (to situate a case in particular context)- (submitted in a pre-defined template)
- Structure the guide by sector (e.g. private/public sector, or education level? or dimensions of LL?) To increase user-friendliness of the guide. Along with more universal/transversal sections of the guide.
- Following up with respondents of the first round of survey-to gain insights into particular issues that they have mentioned
- A section on how to deal with remote language learning when there is no other alternative
- Lessons learned from the pandemic and lessons still to deal with (the guide to be bi-directional: give support to a continuing pandemic context but also to emphasize practices that emerged as opportunities and concern language learning more generally)

Group C:

- Concept of systemic alignment
- Use the CEFR in order to align all aspects of language learning
- The potential of the digital world in order to exploit the virtual space
- Language as activity
- The best practices - the success of teaching online (contextualised reflection)
- Accessibility and dissemination
- User-friendly
- Inclusion

Group D:

- To incorporate a focus on language learning for social justice and democratic citizenship
- To engender a review that leads to ongoing and sustainable change
- Audiences: FL educators, FL teacher trainers, policy-makers
- A guide to good practices

APPENDIX 2 – NOTES ON OUTPUT OF THINK TANK 2

A. Collated feedback from group discussion on the content of the proposed guide (edited)

TOPIC	WHAT SPECIFIC CONTENT COULD/SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN AN EXTENDED PDF GUIDE?	HOW CAN THE SPECIFIC NEEDS OF DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS AND EDUCATIONAL SECTORS BE HIGHLIGHTED?
The organisation of language education	• Organize it based on the main themes and hierarchy of the survey: technology, assessment, methodology [difficulty of being active online], psycho-social issues, inclusion, anxiety and teachers' well-being. • How to deal with a mixture of remote + face-to-face delivery methods including social distancing and masks	• Add something for adult learners, i.e. university students; vulnerable sectors; • The aspect of time and timing, including phases of reactions and responses, lengths of classes and courses), and length of the pan/endemic • Language classes offer the opportunity to interact more, so

	• Motivation, technology and methodology are linked (and should not be dealt with in isolation): offer practical solutions, e.g. flexible materials.	cover issues such as group dynamics, teacher-learner relationships, how to build community [related to each age group]. Does this give language education a special role to unite and help students communicate?
Language teaching materials and resources	• Follow-up materials and curricula that empower teachers • Suggestions for helping learners to adjust to the learning materials • Transversal themes in textbooks and other resources e.g. globalisation, raising good citizens, cultural awareness (in digital learning contexts) • Digital literacy: adapting teaching skills so as to make them more effective and suitable for online teaching and learning.	• The nature of homework/ assignments: encourage more independent work, more research (adapt from textbooks to make them more manageable) • Materials tailored for the students' level (elementary - pre-elementary) and ages - different educational sectors • Making resources transparent and accessible for different age groups, sectors etc.
Coping with social distancing, masks etc. in the language classroom	• Using technology to pre-prepare for the lesson (with learning objectives etc.): ways in which this can be used to promote learner autonomy. • 'Hybrid' is defined in different ways: there's a need to settle on a definition • Promote flexibility, e.g. switching between face-to-face and remote (including issues such as pronunciation, etc.) • Improving the digital literacy of teachers and students, including use of synchronous and asynchronous online learning/teaching, • Consultation with and among teachers on what is happening in the classroom	• Need for separation and understanding of different context • The 'return' to face-to-face: students need support in concentration, focusing and dealing with anxiety
Support and training for learners and teachers	• Development and training in online and offline activities that work independently of whether the teaching environment is online, offline or hybrid. This can give a sense of security and routine. • How to teach flexibly and adjust to changing situations and how to maintain the focus of the class • Teach flexibility, what are the main things to be careful about; what do we have in mind when talking about flexibility (time management etc.) • Students should be included the in decision making -> they are	• Find common points of all activities that address especially younger learners • Upper secondary level: Introverted students are sometimes better at coping with the situation e.g. via one-on-one face time with individual students. • How to create a social environment online that brings together also students who haven't met each other personally / how to help learners socialize online (example: talk about and show your environment to have something to

	sometimes faster with technology and can provide ideas on how to use it efficiently • Develop a library of different ICT-tools, activities and ways of teaching (reusable ideas. This will aid faster learning for the teachers as well. • How to support students who have difficulties with the technology? -> Digital literacy should be part of the curriculum. • How to address different levels of access to technology. Example of France in Africa (but also Europe): national TV lessons. Slovenia: different TV lessons for different target groups	connect to: easier to establish intercultural contact when introducing oneself • Young learners at elementary level: how can we help them learn online? Example: special ICT-moments with story time lessons, at the same time getting used to the technology • Usage of the same set of tools for different subjects, so that students get along with it well • Mutual support between teachers: regular meeting with exchange of best practice, team-teaching. Also workshops courses & one-on-one-talk.

B. Conclusions from group discussions on assessment, another key topic for the guide

Group A:

- Challenging in cheating prevention; solution: more personalised tasks; group projects
- Incorporate online assessment in curricula
- Peer assessment may be used more often
- Personalised learning and assessment
- Not just grammar and writing - more reading and speaking
- More action-oriented tasks
- Focus on tasks, not tests!
- Shift to more formative/continuing than summative assessment - reduces cheating
- More assessment for learning, reinforced by technology
- Rather positive than negative lessons learned
- More focus on content/topic/cultural issues than just linguistic form
- Learners see the point with language learning more clearly
- Collaborative learning reinforced, with impact on assessment; 'soft skills'
- Enhanced group work - impact on assessment?
- Opportunity to 'relax' the rigorous prescribed procedures and routines of 'normal' assessment
- Not just feedback but 'feed forward' - enhanced motivation; focus on the positive
- New learning strategies > new assessment tasks.

Group B

- Importance of context: What do we want to know about the students? What is the purpose of the assessment?
- learning oriented assessment is necessary for a frame of reference, for a progression

- Current solutions are not working very well, especially in certain contexts. Teachers need training.
- Technical solutions are a way of linking together participants.
- importance of using the CEFR for linking purposes: can do statements are missing in some contexts & they can be linked to curriculum goals, they can be the starting point for tasks - even young learners can know what to do
- Revive the European Language Portfolio!

Group C

- The students have become more autonomous during Covid, so the communication strategies they have learned should be applied in assessment
- Enhanced emphasis on formative assessment
- Raise awareness about ethical issues regarding assessment data among teachers.
- Encourage teachers to start a dialogue at local level regarding these issues.
- Policymakers should consider issues regarding ethical aspects of assessment.
- Consider the role of automated scoring in high stakes testing and examination.
- Assessment avoidance is not an adequate strategy or solution because students need to obtain feedback regarding their progress.
- Teachers have become more aware of the value of their formative assessment, which we hope would change their assessment practices in the future.
- Washback effect of national examinations diminishes the role of formative assessments.
- Problems with cheating especially with assessment of writing becomes more evident in online instruction because students have access to other texts that they can copy or use translation applications.
- Tasks that require integration of different language skills may allow us to follow students' language production from different perspectives.

Group D

What have we learned?

- assessment is a continuous process --> assessment for learning, more formative assessment
- assessment is more than tests --> written project-based work (creativity, autonomy), tasked-based assessment
- less focus on exams and summative assessment --> less pressure, more "horizontal" learning and individualized assessment
- teach students how to effectively work with EdTech
- The less assessment that we do, the more individualized feedback we can give.

How should assessment practices be addressed in the Guide?

- focus on continuous assessment, individualized feedback, project-based & task-base assessment, self-assessment
- transparent assessment: use assessment rubrics/grids (descriptors)

- allow for differentiation in assessment
- prepare shifts for new assessment methods: teach teachers and learners how to become proficient in these new practices
- recommendation: offer further teacher training on assessment

---

Extrapolated key issues:

o Put more focus on continuous formative assessment for learning, and less on summative assessment and exams: see assessment as part of learning
o Focus assessment on what we (and the students) need to know in their context
o Develop new assessment methods to reflect and match with new/different learning strategies
o Use more task/project-based assessment that integrate language skills in place of traditional assessment practices. Focus on content and topic, not just language
o Use collaborative learning and assessment, including peer assessment
o Include personalised individualised assessment to enhance learner autonomy (using e.g. the European Language Portfolio).
o Provide not only feedback but also 'feed forward' to enhance motivation
o Allow for differentiation
o Use reference criteria such as CEFR scales/descriptors to enhance transparency and focus in both curriculum and assessment
o Use educational technology and online resources to enrich assessment and enhance collaboration
o Orientate students to formative assessment and provide learner training in the methods used
o Provide/strengthen pre-service and in-service training for teachers on assessment practices
o Raise awareness of and pay attention to ethical issues around the use of assessment data and procedures.