

RETHINKING LANGUAGE EDUCATION AFTER THE EXPERIENCE OF COVID

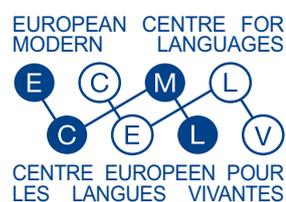
Final report



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An initiative
of the Professional Network Forum
of the European Centre for Modern Languages
of the Council of Europe

Editors:
Richard Rossner and Frank Heyworth



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As an Enlarged Partial Agreement of the Council of Europe situated at the interface between policy, teacher education and classroom practice and in constant dialogue with ministries, national networks, individual experts and NGOs across Europe and beyond, the ECML is in a unique position to develop innovative, research-informed responses to challenges in language education. One such challenge, whose repercussions will continue for years to come, was the Covid pandemic; one such response is this publication, the final output of the initiative "*Language education in the light of Covid: lessons learned and ways forward*". The brainchild of Eaquals, one of the 16 member institutions of the ECML's Professional Network Forum which brings together INGOs with common values and complementary expertise, and co-funded through the ECML's Cooperation Agreement with the European Commission, this initiative is a wonderful example of what can be achieved when we work together in the service of quality language education.

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Foreword

In March 2020, the world as we knew it seemed to come a standstill. Predictability and routine were replaced by uncertainty and fear. Knowledge and skills developed over a lifetime no longer seemed to serve us so well in this eerie new context. Things we had taken for granted were brought into question and carefully laid plans thrown out the window - which was now open for increasingly long periods during the day! Incarcerated in our homes, we wondered whether we would ever get back to our previous lives and why we had ever complained about them in the first place. When we did dare to switch on the media, we were confronted with only depressing headlines. We waited and hoped for a miracle solution – not really knowing what that might be or how long it could take.

We comforted ourselves that, no matter what part of the world we lived in, we were now all in the same boat – weren't we? Well, not really, the injustices and inequalities were only amplified for the not so well off, often confined to cramped accommodation, and needing to share the means and technology to access and communicate with the 'outside' world.

School buildings remained quiet and empty – devoid of the life and energy which had once made them special and, sometimes at least, joyful places! And yet, in this strange atmosphere,

behind the scenes, human creativity was sparking into action. Suddenly, technology which had sometimes been regarded as the preserve of 'specialists' and avoided by those who felt ill-prepared, was not only easily accessible but enabled us all to do things in different and sometimes better ways. The skills we had thought were no longer of use, now seemed like they might again be relevant after all, if we could just dust them off and adjust them to the new reality. By adapting and daring to be adventurous, we found we were able to achieve results we didn't think were possible only a few weeks previously. We shared our experiences of what worked well and perhaps not so well with others. We were also inspired by others' successes and not so afraid of failures which could always be blamed on the technology or the unfamiliar situation we were facing.

There were many tragic losses and setbacks, and when we are reminded of this strange and almost surreal situation which occurred just a short time ago, we sometimes find ourselves trying to push it out of our thoughts. We managed to get through it and we have moved on - the fear and uncertainty we felt at the time have been replaced by new challenges as well as the anxiety and pain caused by the latest man-made horrors facing us. Yet, it is only by looking back that we can hope to move forward. Now is exactly the time when we

should look back and reflect on what we achieved and what we can learn from this painful chapter in our lives - so that when the next crisis inevitably arises, we not only struggle through, but tackle it with confidence and aspire to emerge stronger as a result.

“Rethinking language education after the experience of Covid” offers not only a reflection on the challenges faced and the approaches developed over the course of the pandemic but a look into the future at ways in which the skills and insights gained may bring about beneficial lasting changes in the teaching and learning of languages.

We are extremely grateful to the contributors to this initiative who took on this huge endeavour at the height of the pandemic. Through contact with teachers, learners and policy makers from all over Europe, they have succeeded in developing a most valuable publication that should serve to inform and stimulate discussion among all stakeholders in language education for many years to come.

The ECML Secretariat

Introduction and executive summary

Frank Heyworth

Background

The Covid pandemic has been a unique and testing experience for everyone. It has had a significant impact on many aspects of life, including language learning and teaching. In this publication we provide insights into how language learners and teachers have lived and worked through the pandemic – the long school closures, remote learning, social distancing, mask wearing, isolation – and we reflect on what lessons can be drawn from this for the future of language education.

For some teachers, adapting to the constraints of the Covid emergency has been a positive experience, as illustrated by comments made in response to a large-scale survey:

Speaking from personal experience, after over 30 years of teaching face-to-face, the transfer to online teaching has forced me to re-evaluate a lot of what I do in class and provided an opportunity for creativity which has been beneficial to me and, I hope, to learners. I have developed a new set of skills and finally taken on board the enormous potential of the internet as a resource. This is also true for the majority of my colleagues.

But this wasn't true for everyone:

The pandemic has highlighted the difficulties in social and educational backgrounds for the less privileged. Programmes for the integration of students from different backgrounds (refugees, immigrants) have come to a stop. Education has become largely out of reach for those with financial difficulties, who receive practically no help at all, apart from the efforts of teachers, who have been left to their own devices to do their best and are at the receiving end of society's censure.

In the publication we attempt to find a balance between acknowledging and analysing the challenges on the one hand, and identifying the positive lessons that can be drawn for the future of language education in normal circumstances and under the constraints of a future emergency, on the other.

The initiative was launched in autumn 2020 when three founder members of Eequals, Peter Brown, Richard Rossner and Frank Heyworth, recognised that the consequences of Covid could be far-reaching for language education. Eequals is one of the members of the ECML's Professional Network Forum (PNF), so they contacted the ECML with the idea of carrying out a survey into the impact of the pandemic. The ECML welcomed the proposal and

suggested that it should be broadened to include a wide spectrum of the language education community through involving both the ECML's PNF and members of the ECML's Governing Board. This led to the formation in the autumn of 2020 of an international project group composed of eight experts:

Representing the PNF:

- Frank Heyworth, Richard Rossner and Peter Brown, *Equals – Fostering Excellence in Language Education*
- Bernd Rüschoff, AILA – the International Association of Applied Linguistics
- Sabina Schaffner, CercleS - the European Confederation of Language Centres in Higher Education

Representing the ECML Governing Board:

- Pille Põiklik, the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research
- Bronka Straus, the Slovenian Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport

Having recognised the potential importance of the initiative, the European Commission agreed to co-finance it within the framework of the cooperation agreement between the Commission and the ECML, "Innovative methodologies and assessment in language learning".

The activities and achievements of the initiative: 2021

The initiative lasted from autumn 2020 until December 2022. As indicated in the image below, it involved a varied series of actions spread over more than two years.

The initial survey

The first step in the initiative was to gather information and opinions from teachers about what they had experienced – and were at that time still experiencing – during the pandemic. A questionnaire was designed in late 2020 and sent out through the ECML mailing list and website in February 2021. The survey, described in detail in Part 1 of this publication, included closed questions about how schools and teachers had coped with the pandemic and the closures of schools, with an emphasis on the challenges of remote and socially distanced teaching. The survey also provided opportunities for respondents to express their views in free text about the challenges, the difficulties and the positive opportunities afforded by the unfamiliar experiences.

There were 1735 responses to the questionnaire, more than expected, with respondents from 41 countries, although just over half came from two countries, Greece and Romania. An initial analysis task was to check whether this imbalance of countries affected the validity and reliability of the survey; in fact, the results, whether with or without those from Greece and Romania, were practically identical. An initial detailed summary of the results is [available here](#) on the ECML website. It bears witness to teachers' concerns about their work during the pandemic in the periods when schools were closed. These included technical aspects such as:

- how to manage the technology of distance learning and remote interaction with learners
- the challenges posed by the difficulty of carrying out reliable assessment.

But more personal and emotional worries centred around the wellbeing (or lack of wellbeing) of both learners and teachers were also expressed. These concerns included:

- the psychological effects of isolation on learners
- for teachers, the loss of contact with colleagues
- the discomfort and alienation of days passed in front of a computer screen

INITIAL SURVEY: LANGUAGE EDUCATION DURING COVID - February 2021
WEBINAR ON SURVEY FINDINGS - April 2021
TWO VIRTUAL THINK TANKS - May and September 2021
21 CASE STUDIES OF PRACTICE EXAMPLES – June-November 2021
COLLOQUIUM TO REVIEW THE FIRST YEAR OF THE INITIATIVE - December 2021
LEARNERS' VOICES PROJECT WEBINAR - May 2022
COLLECTING LEARNERS' VOICES SURVEYS: PILOT March, MAIN May-June 2022
ANALYSIS OF LEARNERS' AND TEACHERS' VIEWS - June-September 2022
ENLARGED ECML BUREAU MEETING - October 2022
COLLOQUIUM TO REVIEW THE SECOND YEAR OF THE INITIATIVE - December 2022
GUIDELINES FOR DECISION TAKERS - January 2023
PUBLICATION ON THE INITIATIVE - Early 2023

The different phases of the initiative

Overall, the responses to this survey provide a very rich and varied record of how the pandemic has been experienced by teachers, together with an extensive collection of their opinions and feelings about it. These responses formed the basis for the further activities: the first webinar, two think tanks, the 2021 colloquium, and the 2022 learners' survey.

The 2021 webinar and the two think tanks

The first dissemination of the results was via a webinar '[The future of language education – learning lessons from the pandemic](#)' - held at the end of April 2021. It was clearly a topic which was close to the preoccupations of the language teaching community. Some 1,500 people took part in the webinar directly, and the YouTube recording has been viewed 4,300 times. The webinar was followed by two online think tanks held in May

and September 2021. In these, members of the PNF joined selected respondents to the survey in analysing and evaluating the results of the survey, with an emphasis on defining the challenges faced and the positive lessons for language education to be drawn from them. Outcomes of the think tanks included a decision to collect case studies from survey respondents who had given particularly interesting responses to the open questions.

Another decision was to develop discussion papers to help teachers, heads of schools and educational authorities to manage language education in the post-pandemic period and in future emergencies. Participants in the think tanks identified the issue of assessment and the problem of slippage in standardised exam levels as especially critical challenges. Another key discussion centred on the experience of schools in which remote and face-to-face learning were combined during the pandemic and the possible value of hybrid approaches to learning. A summary report of the think tanks is to be found [here](#).

Further development of the initiative in 2021

Work on the initiative continued throughout 2021. Major tasks included the collection, analysis and editing of 23 case studies and the production of a leaflet summarising the most important aspects of the survey. In [the leaflet](#) six “burning” issues are described:

- Providing technology and using it equitably
- Exploiting the advantages of online materials
- Choosing methods which fit new challenges
- Adapting assessment
- Supporting learners and favouring their autonomy
- Supporting teachers

Meanwhile, Bernd Rüschoff and Peter Brown continued the statistical analysis of the teachers’ survey, using corpus analysis to check the reliability and validity of the conclusions to be drawn from it. This analysis enabled us to refine the results and to pick out the key issues more clearly. The results were presented in the second think tank as input to the discussions on the lessons to be learned.

The case studies

In the open text responses to the survey there were many interesting comments from the teachers, in which they briefly described creative and original teaching approaches developed to cope with the challenges of lockdown. Respondents were invited to describe their initiatives in more detail in “case studies”. The 16 case studies demonstrate an impressive range of creative activities devised by teachers to engage their learners in spite of the difficult circumstances of lockdown and remote learning. They include exchanges between schools in Italy and Taiwan, interactive discussions of mental health issues related to Covid, studies of literature and collaborative storytelling, as well as more traditional language related activities. In all the case studies, digital resources and video are used inventively to bring learners together in cooperative ventures which contributed to combatting the isolation of long periods of

lockdown. A further set of seven case studies was produced following a ‘Relating language curricula, tests and examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference’ (RELANG) workshop in Cyprus. These deal with issues related to language assessment. The case studies are described in detail in Part 2 of the publication.

The 2021 colloquium

In December 2021, a colloquium was held (in Graz and remotely) to look back on the work done during the year and to debate its relevance to the future of language education. The aims were to address these issues:

- What insights had been gained from using radically different modes of language education – remote, hybrid and socially distanced – during the Covid pandemic?
- How can the challenges of examinations and assessment in such situations be overcome?
- What innovative kinds of support for learners and teachers were developed?
- What specific challenges arose in relation to ensuring inclusive language education for all?
- Do we now need a new kind of “educational literacy”?

In addition to the activities of the initiative, the colloquium focused on other activities of the ECML, especially the Training and Consultancy work on [RELANG](#) and on ‘[Supporting multilingual classrooms](#)’. The colloquium also featured reports on work done on the impact of Covid by the European Commission and the OECD given by representatives of both organisations. The representatives of the OECD presented the PISA response to the experiences of Covid. One of the case studies (collaboration between a school in Italy and another in Taiwan) was presented, and four case study authors provided two-minute video descriptions of their work. Recordings of these interventions and other colloquium sessions can be found [here](#).

Although there were no formal conclusions to the colloquium, there was consensus on a number of points:

- There would be formidable challenges for language education in the post-pandemic period:
 - Making up for the loss of learning during the periods of lockdown
 - Recalibrating the levels of public examinations where these had shown “slippage” as a result of closures, remote learning and different modes of examining
 - Addressing the problems related to learner – and teacher – wellbeing.
- The experience of remote learning and school lockdowns has prompted teachers to be innovative and inventive in ways that can usefully be transferred to “normal” teaching:
 - A better understanding of the potentialities of digital learning and the creation of resources which enhance learning
 - The development of methods and approaches to teaching which promote creative cooperation and collaboration among learners
 - An awareness of the potential benefits of hybrid learning
 - A hypothesis that to implement the changes a new form of “educational literacy”¹ may be needed.

There was consensus, too, that the initiative should be continued into 2022, and that one of the priorities should be to complement the survey of teachers’ views by finding out what learners thought and felt about their own experiences during the pandemic.

1 The term we subsequently decided to use is “educational adaptability”.

The activities and achievements of the initiative: 2022

There were some changes in the team for 2022: Bronka Straus and Sabina Schaffner withdrew because of other professional commitments, and Christine Lechner, an ECML project coordinator, joined the team. Richard Rossner took over the coordination of the initiative from Frank Heyworth.

The principal aim in 2022 was to complement the teacher survey by giving learners an opportunity to express their views about their experiences of language learning during the pandemic and to collect their opinions about how these experiences might have an influence on their future language learning. It was decided that, rather than carrying out a simple survey using a questionnaire, it would be better to integrate the questionnaire with a learning activity. Learners were invited to reflect on and discuss with their classmates what they thought and how they felt about the periods of lockdown and remote teaching and learning. A description of the suggested lesson ideas can be found [here](#) in the resources section of the initiative’s website and in Part 1 of this publication.

The ‘learners’ voices’ surveys

The learner survey was carried out in two phases. First there was a pilot phase in May and June 2022 involving 23 classes and 276 learners from 5 countries. The aim of this was to test whether the planned activities and the related questionnaire worked with learners, which was confirmed by the results. This was followed up by a more extensive survey based on the class activities with around 1100 secondary students from 9 European countries. Teachers of the participating classes were also asked to answer a simplified version of the initial teachers’ survey.

Although absences through Covid were still affecting many schools, those who responded to the 2022 survey of learners and teachers were in

schools which were working more or less normally; this meant that respondents were looking back at the experiences of lockdown, comparing them with face-to-face schooling and reflecting on what impact they might have on future teaching and learning. The key aim of the surveys was to find valid answers to the questions below:

- For learners
 - What helped or hindered you in your language learning?
 - What worked well and should be maintained?
 - What didn't work well and should be discarded in your view?
 - Do you have pointers for the future?
- For teachers
 - What are the burning issues arising from your experiences during the Covid pandemic?
 - Has anything changed since lockdowns ended and, if so, what?
 - Can you build on your experiences during the pandemic in your future teaching?
 - Do you have pointers for the future?

The most important conclusion to be drawn from the results of the learners' discussions is that learners clearly like being at school. They, of course, appreciated being able to sleep a little longer and not having to wear school uniform, but these were seen as minor advantages in comparison with the disadvantages of loss of contact with friends and the social aspects of school.

I felt sad, isolated and lonely. My eyesight got worse and I need glasses. I missed all my friends. Sometimes I didn't understand what the teacher wanted me to do. At school I just ask the teacher and my friends and it's clear.

We also disliked the cerfew (sic.), wearing masks and feeling worse because of the extensive use of computers and lack of human contact (sicknesses, headaches, sore eyes, depression).

We also missed each other because in school we learn a lot from each other and help each other when we do not know something regarding homework or things that we do in lessons. Though we sometimes preferred distant learning because it is less stressful than classroom learning we are more happy being in school.

These quotations from learners encapsulate the key findings of the surveys. A webinar in May 2022 provided a provisional summary of the results of the pilot learners' survey:

1. The learners want to be and learn in school rather than remotely. This point-of-view received almost unanimous support from secondary school language learners. It was mentioned repeatedly: irrespective of the question, the issue was raised nevertheless.
2. The impact on learners' wellbeing (also a key issue for teachers): about two thirds of the learners reported suffering from some form of social discomfort and stress arising from one or more factors, such as the socially distanced classroom, distance delivery, the wearing of masks, timetabling restrictions leading to lack of time, isolation, and resulting demotivation; whilst a quarter of all respondents reported more severe forms including some statements that were deemed potentially clinically relevant by a doctor.

During the webinar, other schools and teachers were invited to sign up to participate in the main survey in May-June 2022.

A systematic analysis of the results of the surveys

During the two years of the initiative a very considerable body of data has been collected – 5 surveys in all (3 for teachers, 2 for learners) plus 23 case studies, with a total of 4,000 responses, including a large corpus of open text comments. The team felt it was imperative that this treasure trove should be analysed scientifically and methodically to make sure that we avoided drawing superficial conclusions. This work was

undertaken by Peter Brown and Bernd Rüschoff and included statistical analysis of the closed questions in the surveys, together with the use of corpus analysis to extract the key themes of the open text comments. The aim was to provide insights into the issues raised and the opinions and emotions of the respondents. A description of the methodology used, and a collation of the results of all the surveys is provided in the report in Part 1 of this publication.

The 2022 colloquium

The two main aims of the initiative were, first, to put on record the experiences of language learners and teachers during the exceptional events of the Covid pandemic, and secondly to explore what conclusions might be drawn for future policy and practice in language education. In November 2022, the results of the surveys were presented to members of the ECML Governing Board at an enlarged Bureau Meeting as input to a discussion on the issues and challenges for decision makers. In December the overall results of the initiative were presented in a second colloquium, attended by members of the Governing Board and of the PNF, to mark 10 years of the ECML's cooperation agreement with the European Commission and review all related activities.

On the second day of the colloquium participants were divided into small discussion groups to look in turn more closely at the work of our initiative and at the two training and consultancy activities within the cooperation agreement, *'Relating language curricula, tests and examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference'* (RELANG) and *'Supporting multilingual classrooms'*.

Consultation on the Policy Guidelines resulting from the initiative

The Policy Guidelines developed by the team for our initiative are the culmination of two years' work. They go beyond the issues related to Covid and the pandemic and recommend that a more flexible and adaptable approach to educational

strategy should be taken in order to enable us to meet the challenges of present and future critical situations. While there is nothing radically new in the Guidelines, they are wide-ranging and offer positive advice on ways in which the results of the research carried out during the initiative can feed into a more considered response to future situations when face-to-face language education is unsafe. They also offer food for thought about ways in which language education can be redesigned in the light of the experiences during the Covid emergency. During the group discussion sessions at the 2022 colloquium participants were asked to review and provide detailed feedback on the draft guidelines.

The final version of the Guidelines, which takes account of many of the suggestions collected from colloquium participants is to be found in Part 4 of this publication. The Guidelines cover methods and practice, innovative use of technology, attention to the wellbeing of learners and teachers, efficient flexibility in assessment practices and the development of learner autonomy. They recommend that we should be ready to implement the same principles in different circumstances according to the needs of the situation, for example in hybrid education, combining both remote and face-to-face learning or the challenges of future lockdowns. The lessons learned during the Covid pandemic should also be applied in "normal" times and in future lockdowns. In short, we need to develop a capacity for "educational adaptability" and flexible educational practice that will enable institutions to react quickly and effectively both in critical times and as language education practice evolves.

Other studies

In the resources section of the website on the initiative there is a [bibliography](#) with links to a number of other studies, some large scale and general, from UNESCO and the OECD, for example. Others are more specifically concerned with language education. During our initiative we attempted to concentrate on the effects of the pandemic on language education, but this proved

to be quite difficult; a major challenge lay in the use of technology and finding suitable materials for remote learning, and this was a challenge shared by teachers of other subjects. Another concern shared by all teachers was the wellbeing of both learners and teachers. Two aspects emerge from nearly all the studies listed: a positive realisation of the potentialities offered by the use of technology and the wish to transfer this to “normal” teaching, for example using hybrid approaches. The other is a concerned awareness of the psychological effects of the lockdown on learners and the need to address these.

Part 1 – A report on the 2021 and 2022 surveys

Peter Brown

Introduction and scope of the research

As indicated in the introduction to this publication, the main objective of the initiative was to investigate the impact of the Covid emergency on language education and to identify what lessons there might be for the future of language education in non-emergency times. This involved researching the impact on teachers, on learners and on their institutions of the remote and constrained language teaching and learning caused by the pandemic by collecting information and their views about their experiences. This

was done by means of five inter-connected international surveys carried out longitudinally as follows, and as illustrated in fig. 1 below:

- February 2021 – a month-long survey of teachers' views
- March–April 2022 – two inter-related 3-week-long pilot surveys to collect the views of (a) teachers and (b) learners.
- May–June 2022 – two 5-week-long inter-related surveys of (a) teachers' and (b) learners' views

The data from the five surveys revealed several transversal themes raised by the respondents irrespective of their roles, sectors, age range,

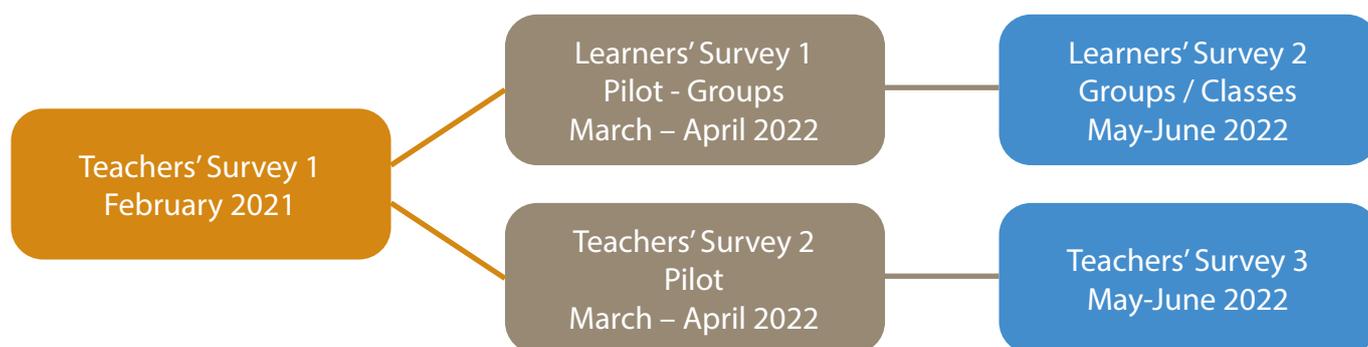


Figure 1: Timeline of the five surveys

CEFR language levels or countries. These themes are applicable both to contingency planning and to the general evolution of language education and should in turn impact on pre-service and in-service teacher education as well as curriculum and materials development in the future. We grouped these data outcomes under five broad headings:

- Language teaching and learning
- Language assessment
- Supporting language learners
- Supporting language teachers
- Educational adaptability²

We reported on and tested these ideas in a series of think tanks, colloquia and discussion groups hosted by the ECML in Graz. Following positive feedback from the participants, we drew together the findings from teachers and learners and thinking about what the outcomes mean for decision-makers. The resulting Guidelines, available in Part 4 of this publication, were produced in late 2022 as a means of disseminating the insights gained through the surveys to policy makers and decision makers at all levels.

The surveys

1. The 2021 teachers' survey

The first language teachers' survey was launched in February 2021 and ran for a month. 1,735 individual responses were received from some forty European countries. A [webinar](#), a [report on the results](#) of this survey and PowerPoint slides are available on the [website of the initiative](#).

This survey had 36 questions and included both discrete and multiple-choice items which could report to Likert scales for comparability, as well

² The less transparent term 'educational literacy' was originally used in working documents and workshop sessions.

as open text questions which gave the 1,735 respondents freedom to say whatever they chose within ample word limits (usually 400 words). The open text items were analysed using critical discourse methods, which involved reading each of the 4,150 comments received and selecting those which were generally representative of the cohort as well as those which gave the most interesting or challenging responses. In order to validate the initial outcome of the critical discourse reading mentioned above, the comments were then subjected to corpus analysis. This process generated statistical data to support both the summary of key aspects as well as the representativeness of the actual quotes selected and overviews of negativity and positivity etc. according to pre-defined categories. The ranking of issues raised was then determined by the number of individual responses each open question received.

The initial findings of the 2021 survey were presented and discussed in more detail at [two think tanks](#) and a [colloquium](#) hosted by the ECML.

2. The 2022 'learners' voices' surveys and inter-related teacher surveys

On the basis of the 2021 findings, it was decided to try to reach language learners directly. As most foreign language learning takes place at secondary level, secondary school learners were selected for the 2022 survey. Also, these learners are difficult to reach, and typically their voices are under-represented. For the purposes of an international survey, they could only be reached realistically via their class teachers.

As indicated in figure 1 above, in spring 2022 four brand new follow-up surveys were run, aimed separately at teachers and their learners. Given the complexity of actually reaching secondary school students, it was decided to run a pilot version to test, amongst other things: (a) proof of concept – would it do what it was designed to do? - and (b) washback - did the learners learn and practise new language in real-life situations, and would the proposed tasks engender debate concerning, for example, the value of autonomous learning?

After analysis and adjustments, the pilot surveys of learners and their teachers were followed by what were termed the 'main surveys'.

In the case of the teachers involved in the surveys, we wanted to know what hindsight and reflection might have taught them about the pandemic period, whether anything had changed in their practice as a result of that experience, and if so, what in particular. Importantly, we also asked them to provide information about the numbers of learners in their classes responding to the survey, as well as their opinions of the learners' voices surveys and the materials we had provided for them. We needed this information as cross-validation for the learners' responses. An overview of the teacher follow-up responses is in Table 2 below.

Through the surveys of learners, we wanted to hear learners' views specifically about their own experiences of, and feelings about, language learning during the Covid restrictions. The aim was to gain some factual insight into what had helped them to learn, what might have hindered their learning, and which elements of their learning experiences during the restrictions they would like to see continue in future.

The pilot versions were run in March–April 2022 in five Council of Europe and EU member states, involving 276 learners at secondary level. The results showed that the data capture system worked very well and met the design criteria. The pilot surveys worked better than expected, with some classes even producing full written reports for us, and the teachers' views were overwhelmingly positive, with many helpful suggestions for improvement. This gave us confidence that the proof of concept and the proof of content criteria had been met.

As indicated in figure 1 above, we then carried out two main surveys of secondary school learners and their teachers during five weeks in May–June 2022 using methodology identical to the two initial pilots. The main survey involved 1,083 learners from seven Council of Europe member states.

When planning the surveys of learners, we felt that it would be counter-productive simply to

distribute a questionnaire, so it was decided that these surveys should access the unfiltered learners' voices by means of a pack of classroom resources for teachers. These resources were designed to allow the teachers to create a learning environment where the issues relating to language learning under Covid conditions could be discussed or debated at class or group level, where different points of view could be freely aired and conclusions could be drawn. The suggested activities also provided learners with the means to express majority and minority views. Given the positive feedback from learners and teachers, the classroom resources used are now available in adapted form [here](#) on the website in case other language teachers wish to use them to stimulate classroom discussion.

The follow-up to the class discussion activity was for the learners to complete a simple 11-question questionnaire. This contained a simple demographic section followed by open text questions with high word limits to enable the learners involved to write whatever they wanted.

In their class discussions and the subsequent questionnaire, learners were asked certain key questions, such as "What helped you in your language learning during the pandemic?". They were given three successive opportunities to reply to this, of which only the first was mandatory. This approach assumed that the first comments from the class had top priority, followed by those in the second "what else" box, and finally those in the box labelled "anything else?". Parallel questions concerned what had not helped. In both cases, there were questions about the general circumstances of learning and specifically about language learning. In the questionnaires, learners and teachers were separately also asked specific questions about the usefulness of the survey learning activity. Both pilot surveys were deliberately limited in length, although the teachers' questionnaire also had items linked to the original 2021 survey to test whether anything had changed in their practice or their opinions and if so, what.

The written comments from learners, usually mediated by one or more class representatives,

were again processed into a semantically tagged corpus to allow consistent grouping of points of view. This enabled us to assign arithmetical values of 3 or 2 or 1 according to the priority level of each comment and to report the rankings indicated by the learner respondents themselves. We also asked for an overall class opinion, with separate spaces for majority and minority reports as we did not expect the whole class to agree. The 1,000-word limit was deliberately generous. A key criterion was that we wished to avoid purely anecdotal responses or skewed responses. Every effort was made to achieve a level of objectivity in the responses.

Limitations of the surveys

Overall, the limitations of the three surveys of teachers (the first in 2021, the others in 2022) and the two 'learners' voices' surveys in 2022 concern:

- a. Potential subjectivity in assigning semantic tags for statistical purposes
- b. The extent to which the surveys were representative³ in terms of the size of cohort (3,200 respondents in total, of whom c. 1,800 were teachers and c. 1,400 learners) as compared to the educational population of Europe
- c. The distribution of the learner surveys, which was done via class teachers in 10 European countries (5 in the pilot survey, 7 in the main survey, of which 2 yielded responses to both surveys)
- d. The complexity of analysing and ranking some 6,500 open text items, which also needs to be taken into consideration.

We recognise that unintentional bias cannot be entirely eliminated, but we attempted to overcome issues a) and d) through methodology: semantic tags were added by one member of the team and cross-referenced using corpus analysis by another. We make no claims to Europe-wide representativity (issue b), although we did

³ Great care was taken to ensure that the quotations used in this report are representative of the views of the cohort

identify transversal themes which we believe are of relevance to practitioners and educational authorities in Europe. These are themes that occurred repeatedly and independently of age, country, language level or educational context which we considered worthy of further scrutiny and reflection. As regards issue (c), we can only report what was actually said or reported by those learners and leave readers to judge for themselves.

Survey findings

The key test was whether we could find valid answers to these questions:

For teachers - what are the burning issues raised by your Covid experiences? Has anything changed since and if so, what? Can you build on your experiences during Covid in the future?

For learners - what helped or hindered you? What worked well and should be maintained? What didn't and should be discarded in your view? Do you have pointers for the future?

1. Results of the teachers' surveys

The main survey in 2021 collected responses from 1735 teachers in 41 countries, mostly in Europe, as illustrated in fig. 2 below, with a completion rate of 100% (i.e. all those who started the survey completed it), taking on average 30 minutes to do so. The survey contained 36 questions, some of which were broken down into subsections. All responses were anonymised. Ample space was given to open text comments and the 4,150 comments varied from a few words to paragraphs. The comments were ranked and assessed using corpus analysis.

The top seven items (Table 1 on the next page) drew some 3,840 responses, nearly 93% of the total survey responses.

The breakdown of respondents was: 52% foreign languages teachers, almost 10% parents, 7% higher education lecturers, 6% teachers of

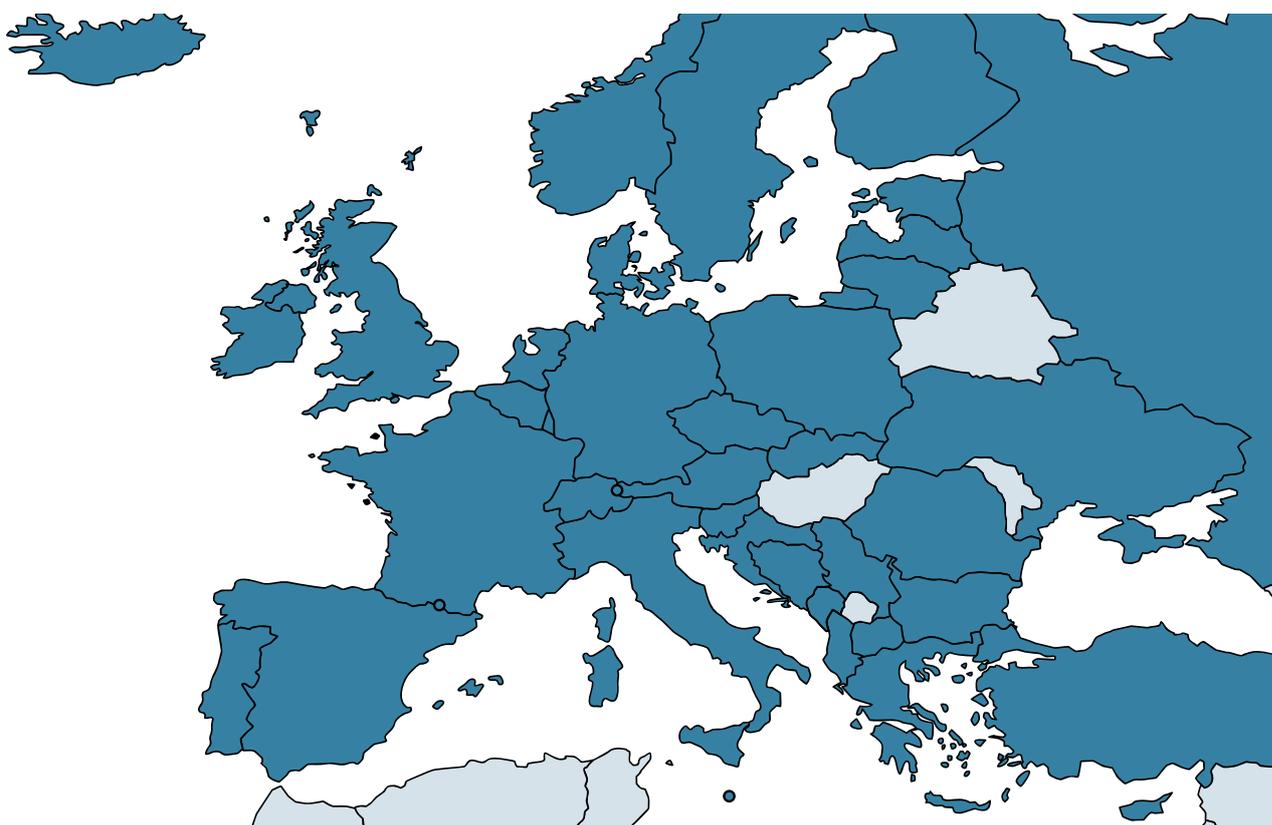


Figure 2 – European countries from which responses to the 2021 survey were received

languages of schooling, 4% lecturers in adult education. One key question was: were there significant differences between the overall results and the results just for those who identify themselves as teachers? The answer was 'no':

partly because of the predominance of those who identified themselves as teachers, and partly confirmed by the Likert scales used for the fixed item or multiple-choice questions.

Teachers' comments by category, ranked in order of number of individual responses		
individuals responding (rounded)	Open-ended survey Item regarding:	Question number
630	Important lessons learned – and also applicable in the future	Q.33
610	Challenges to overcome , both historical and ongoing	Q.36
600	Hybrid lessons and related teaching issues – predominance of negative views	Q.12
600	Teachers' and learners' wellbeing , welfare, stress etc.	Q.25
600	Important positive aspects relevant to language teaching in the future	Q.35
490	Significant assessment & testing issues etc.	Q.21
310	Impact on time & timings, flexibility etc.	Q.6

Table 1: Teachers' comments, ranked according to total number of comments

Another important question was: do the results for the primary, lower secondary and upper secondary sectors show significant differences? Mainly they did not, although there were some context-based differences, e.g. in primary.

From our analysis we inferred that:

- there were widely shared views among language teachers who responded to the surveys independent of their country, sector, or the time of survey;
- further, certain new insights, which are reflected in the Guidelines in part 4 of this publication, are partly specific to foreign language education and are transversally applicable (i.e. largely independent of specific educational contexts), or they are issues that were commented on repeatedly, independent of the specific question being answered ('need to be in class', 'flexibility', 'assessment', and 'stress' are prime examples of this.)

Based on the evidence of the results of the 2021 survey, the 'top ten burning issues' for teachers, which in several cases are interrelated and impact on or interact with one another, were those listed below.

- The challenges of assessment, especially during the disruption of testing
- The challenges of hybrid teaching where some learners were present in a classroom and others were joining the lesson online
- The impact of lengthened lessons on the one hand, and of reduced lesson time per week on the other
- Learners being left behind, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds
- Teachers' and learners' increased stress arising from isolation and the difficulties of remote teaching and learning, and the impact of this on the general wellbeing of both learners and teachers
- Positive teaching experiences and initiatives that might make a positive difference in 'normal' face-to-face teaching and might also have a positive impact on the flexible

integration of learning spaces inside and outside the classroom

- The challenges of identifying coping strategies to deal with the exceptional teaching circumstances
- Developing digital skills and learning to use new technologies quickly
- The absence of training and development support
- The positive aspects of peer support and networking.

The 2022 teachers' surveys mainly confirmed the views expressed in the 2021 survey with, however, some important new insights. The main one was what had changed in their practice as a result of the pandemic and / or other ongoing emergencies, such as the influx of refugees as a result of the war in Ukraine. On a five-point scale from - 2 (regressed), with mid-point 0 (nothing has changed), to +2 (significant change), overall teachers views came to an average of +1.545. This indicates that more teachers chose +2 (the maximum possible) than +1 (the next highest). This, in turn, equates to more than halfway between the rubric "+1 = our experiences during the pandemic have led us to make some positive changes to our practice" and moving towards the top "+2 = ...to make significant positive changes to our practice". See Table 2 below. We deemed this result both significant and encouraging.

Significant variations between the pilot and main teachers' surveys of 2022			
Item	Pilot	Main	Overall / Note
Teachers*	13	44	57
Learners – Groups or Classes *	25	109	134
Teacher was with the class for whole or part of pandemic: *	53%	73%	
New to the class in school year 2021-22:	47%	27%	
FL Teachers *	83%	79%	
Main sector in which teaching *	Upper secondary	Lower secondary	
Q5.1: Remote learning experiences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More emphasis on receptive skills than in face-to-face teaching • More emphasis on productive skills • The balance was roughly the same 	36% - 64%	41% 7% 52%	Reflection – looking back
Q5.2: Speaking and Writing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gave more written work than pre-emergency • More oral work • The balance was roughly the same 	38% 38% 24%	37% 33% 30%	Reflection – looking back
Q7a: Has anything changed since the emergency? Five point scale from -2 : +2 Our experiences during the pandemic: -2 = had a significant negative effect on our practice -1 = had a negative effect on our practice 0 = nothing has changed +1 = have led us to make <u>some</u> positive changes to our practice +2 = have led us to make <u>significant</u> positive changes to our practice	N/A	+ 1.545	Reflection – looking back
Q8 (multi-part): The technology we used can be transferred to normal practice: Agree Strongly agree	71% 29%	** 50% 45%	** remaining 5% = no opinion or disagreed
Q8: Have learners become more autonomous?	3.64	3.16	Mean / 5
Q8: Has the replacement of tests had a positive effect on reducing stress?	3.36	3.16	Mean / 5
*Note: some items are also reported in Table 5 <i>Variations in learners' responses between the pilot and main 2022 surveys</i> because they are also relevant to the learners' contexts and may influence how we interpret learner responses. The data reported above are relevant to teachers specifically.			

Table 2: Relevant variations in teachers' responses between the pilot and main 2022 surveys

2. Results of the learners' surveys

The 2022 surveys of secondary school learners, both pilot and main, essentially confirmed the 2021 findings. They indicated that, even with hindsight, from the point of view of the learners surveyed, the key issues to be addressed are those listed in Table 1 above. The data collected from the pilot and main surveys were merged and analysed using statistical

methods and critical discourse analysis of the open text responses, supported for confirmation or for modification through corpus analysis.

One point worthy of special attention is that, in response to Question 11 in the survey, the learners themselves, not just the teachers, raised issues related to educational adaptability. For example:

Learners' responses by open text question, ranked in order of priority/importance (both 2022 surveys)		
Question – in survey order Max 400 – 1,000 words	Headline response – top 5	Scale / score
Q1: What did you not like?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Social restrictions being imposed 2. Remote learning, obliged to work at a distance 3. Technology limitations 4. Being obliged to wear masks in lessons 5. Workload – mainly caused by 1,2 and 3 above 	Three separate responses possible for each item.
Q2: What did you like?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Flexibility of times and approaches 2. One day a week working from home 3. Positives – mix of exercises, video, games 4. Autonomous learning – taking responsibility 5. Appreciation of efforts made by teachers 	Weighted scores, and ranked in order of priority, descending
Q3: What did not help you learn?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Insistence on single skills – typically reading - or exercises (often via static PDFs); misuse of breakout rooms 2. The system of learning imposed by the emergency 3. Technological limitations and lack of training for it 4. Teachers struggling to cope 5. Exercises, exercises, and more exercises 	
Q4: What helped you learn?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Certain apps (named) 2. Certain interactive exercises (named) 3. Specific skills work (named), inter-related 4. Working in groups – especially for the real-life situations like the survey itself 5. Videos and video clips (real world) 	
Q7: The majority report	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The top priority need is to learn in school 2. Apply successful technologies and techniques in future 3. Need for greater flexibility of methods, approaches, materials, and schedules 4. Need for greater attention to motivation 5. Note: many reports tried hard to achieve a balance, e.g. between criticism followed by 'but on the other hand' – complex to assess 	

Q8: The minority report	Most agreed with the majority report with one or two provisos – e.g. greater attention to autonomous vs group learning, exploiting technology better – also in class e.g. potential use of breakout rooms in future, appreciation of real life situations	Single item, opinions expressed by number, descending
Q10: Changes and wish list for the future	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a wish for no (further) changes a wish for better and more focused technology applications – especially video the need to learn in classes in school, preferably with flexibility the need for a better mix or balance of activities an increased use of video, real-life scenarios, and also more practical language, interactivity and language games, offset by less of other activities, particularly homework 	Single item, opinions expressed by number, descending
Q11: Anything else to add?	Note: there were relatively few additions. The most frequent comment from the learners referred to the need for what we later termed 'educational adaptability', followed by the over-riding need for flexibility, and comments on stress, positive aspects of overcoming challenges, the value of in-class language learning (interaction), and motivation.	Single item

Table 3: Learners' comments, ranked in order of priority/importance

Learner responses to multiple choice items, ranked according to Likert scale or percentage		
Survey question number	Choices offered, ranked	Ranked
Q5: Which activity chosen?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Discussion in small groups Individual work Class debate 	48% 25% 23%
Q6: Which statements did the class / group chose to discuss?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> With remote learning I don't feel as motivated and don't work as hard as in face-to-face When learning at home I was easily distracted by people around me and other things I could do which were more interesting With remote learning it was sometimes difficult to understand the content and know how to really learn it The most difficult part of learning remotely was being isolated from my classmates and teachers 	By greatest number, descending
Q9: What did you think of the activity you chose for debate / discussion?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> It/they helped us express our opinions We found it/them useful We liked the activity/activities We learned something about working and learning together and individually from the activity/activities We learned some new language while doing the activity/activities 	Also see Table 5

Table 4: Learners' responses to discrete items, ranked

Perhaps this was eye opening and school systems would change (adapt) because of this. (122059502 – Main), or

We became convinced that school systems should be updated and made more interactive. (121100755 – Pilot).

The ranking of responses to the discrete items listed in Table 4 below, was derived from the statistics generated by the on-line survey platform, QuestionPro.

It should be borne in mind that (a) the learners were all in secondary education in either the state or private sector, and (b) tables 3 and 4 report responses to individual questions and are ranked accordingly. However, the transversal issues that arose in more than one response inevitably produce different rankings. By 'transversal issues' we mean responses that occur in more than one place independently of the question being asked, the age of learners, the school, the country or learners' CEFR level. 'Flexibility' in its different

Variations between the pilot and main learners' surveys			
Item	Pilot	Main	Overall
Teachers	13	44	57
Learners - Individuals	276	1083 *	1359 *
Learners – Groups or Classes	25	109 *	134 *
Average Age	15-16+	13-14+	
CEFR level	B2-B2+	A2-B1+	
Teacher was with the class for whole or part of pandemic:	53%	73%	
New to the class in school year 2021-22:	47%	27%	
FL Teachers	83%	79%	
Main target	Upper secondary	Lower secondary	
Q5: Activity type chosen	1. Discussion in small groups, individual work, class debate(s)	Same but wider range of activities including posters, use of Padlet	See Table 4
Q6: Topic	2. Broadly similar	Broadly similar	See Table 4
Q9: Usefulness of survey exercise	3. Broadly similar but top response differs: "It/they helped us express our opinions"	Broadly similar but top response differs: "We learned something about working and learning together and individually from the activity/activities"	Likert scale - 1 (low) to 5 (high) - average response differed. Pilot Av rating: 4.04 Main Av rating: 3.33
*These are the exact numbers furnished by the class teachers. However, they did not all complete the 'number of class participants' field so it is reasonable to assume that this is an under-estimate.			

Table 5: Variations in learners' responses between the pilot and main 2022 surveys

senses is a prime example of this and is frequently mentioned in the Guidelines in Part 4 of this publication.

As expected, there were also variations in the responses between the pilot and the main survey. The principal differences are summarised in Table 5.

Discussion

The impact on learners' wellbeing

Some two thirds of the learners reported suffering from some form of social discomfort and stress arising from one or more factors, such as the socially distanced classroom, distance delivery, the wearing of masks, timetabling restrictions leading to lack of time, isolation, and resulting demotivation. Meanwhile, a quarter of all respondents reported more severe problems including some whose statements were deemed by a doctor to be potentially clinically relevant.

These findings need to be compared to data for the entire population in order to fully estimate the extent and gravity of these issues and to answer the question: 'To what extent are these problems restricted to school environments? Are they indicative of a general Covid-related malaise in the population? And were they, at least partially, already in existence but unobserved before Covid struck?' There are some indications that Covid acted as a lens that magnified and accelerated pre-existing conditions.

Some examples from the learners' voices data:

Response 122090499 to the question: "what did you dislike the most during the pandemic?" reported:

When being given an assignment in some internet classroom (like Google Classroom), it was sometimes hard to understand the topic without being given an additional explanation, questions couldn't be asked

etc. - the amount of work given in the Google classroom was often too excessive (more than we would get during normal classes) - the deadline given to hand in the assignments was sometimes unrealistically set (we didn't have enough time to do it).

Response 122157015:

Having work to do all the time, even at the weekend - already lost the pleasure of movement and activities, there seemed to be no difference between the weekdays and the weekend. Much prefer learning face (-to-face⁴ as difficult to concentrate and a lot of distractions at home. Some though liked the more personalised contact with the teacher, and the fact that she started each session with letting everyone express how they were feeling. Workload too heavy, and did not like hours on end of online sessions.

Individual student 122059052 added:

I felt sad, isolated and lonely. My eyesight got worse and I need glasses. I missed all my friends. Sometimes I didn't understand what the teacher wanted me to do. At school I just ask the teacher and my friends and it's clear.

Most tellingly, a few students were moved to coin new words to describe the unprecedented Covid challenges: "the idea of unliberty" (122142969).

The team were concerned to receive statements such as:

We also disliked the cerfew, wearing masks and feeling worse because of the extensive use of computers and lack of human contact (sicknesses, headaches, sore eyes, depression) (122059717).

4 On principle, responses are never corrected or edited

Positive aspects of language learning during the pandemic

Learners were asked to comment on and talk about what had worked well for them in their language learning during the pandemic. In response to the question: "Which language learning activities, tasks and exercises helped you to learn and would be helpful in the future?", learners provided a range of positive responses. A typical response was:

You had to be well organized and make your own plan how and when to do things. I had to take responsibility for my work (122059502).

Another group said:

We did quite a lot of group work and presentations. We learnt to use power point, Canva and other apps to create our presentations and we also improved our presentation skills and to work as part of a team (121677824).

Or again:

Watching videos with subtitles, writing summaries, groupwork, uploaded videos in e-classrooms, pair-work (122159566).

One even went so far as to say: "Websites like this" (122058541) referring to the ECML website on the Covid initiative.

Looked at transversally (i.e. responses to and comments on more than one specific question), statistically the top learner responses in the form of a wish-list for the future were (in rank order):

1. Video (clips rather than films)
2. A mix of teaching approaches and activities
3. Language games (age related)
4. Collaborative learning, working in groups (level & age related)
5. Useful exercises – often with detailed examples
6. Applications – specific or relevant to language learning (Kahoot was most often mentioned)

7. Skills work – exemplified
8. Autonomous vs collaborative learning approaches – benefits, enjoyment of these
9. Flexibility
 - flexibility of teaching approaches
 - flexibility of learning times (most often cited: it was vital to be in class together with, perhaps, one day a week working remotely from home).

Further reflections on how the findings of the surveys might in the future inform discussions concerning more flexibility in the use of (digitally enhanced) learning spaces and action-oriented methodologies are discussed in Part 3 in a discussion paper entitled *The impact of the Covid pandemic on the future of digitally enhanced language education*.

Negative aspects of language learning during the pandemic

In answer to the question: "Our point of view after our discussion about language learning during the pandemic and afterwards – this is the opinion of most people in the class * (maximum 1000 words)": a learner summarised the majority point of view of her/his class as follows:

We felt really isolated from classmates and teachers when we were in quarantines. We could not go out to play with them or go to school to meet them. We were sad. Some classmates did not see each other for more than a month as some of us do not have their own cellphones. We also missed each other because in school we learn a lot from each other and help each other when we do not know something regarding homework or things that we do in lessons. Though we sometimes preferred distant learning because it is less stressful than classroom learning we are more happy being in school. When we were learning at home other things distracted us from learning, for example we rather watched TV, played video games or played with our toys than learn so our

knowledge today is not as good as it could be. If we could, we would work from home one day a week (122159743).

Comments were also invited from minority viewpoints in the class or group:

We had a different opinion on statements 1 (With remote learning I don't feel as motivated and don't work as hard as in face-to-face lessons. I do better when I'm in normal lessons.), 5 (My teachers / my family were really supportive and helpful during lockdowns.) and 7 (I think my grades were not fair and did not really reflect the effort I made when working remotely) (122089940).

During the pandemic and it was time for free time because there was a lot of homework work, you had little time for breakfast in the morning (122090625)...

The burning issue for learners

One point-of-view received almost unanimous support from secondary school language learners, namely that they want to be and learn in school. This was stated repeatedly: irrespective of the question, this issue was nevertheless mentioned.

Some examples:

In our opinion remote learning wasn't a positive experience, there were many technical difficulties with computers, often low quality of sound, students not concentrated (122107168)...

We did not like distant learning. It is better to be at school (122092244).

It was harder than at school (122090734).

We concluded that none of us wishes to participate in that kind of learning in the future. Although there were some pros, as we mentioned above, we soon got fed up with them and wished we had normal lessons. The school is not only about learning content, it is also learning about social interactions

and having fun with our friends. Remote learning cannot give you that. It's a type of learning that you can participate in for a short period of time. It is not human friendly on the long run, as it causes health problems such as depression, obesity and addiction from technology. A lot of kids who were physically active before the remote learning are now not active anymore in their sports. This cannot be good (122059717).

And many, many more such as:

we were distracted by phone, tv, family, food, my friends, grandparents, home pets, people driving by house (122058521)..., or

my phone was ringing all the time, my dog, my mom (122058522).

Looking to the future: what would learners like to see change?

Our class would like to share this message with other language learners in Europe. We would like to change that we could make more power-points and work more in groups. And that we could write on our tablets (iPads) instead of notebooks (121819029).

We would like to write less and talk more. We wish we could spend more time working in groups and working on projects. And also we don't want to have too much online classes (122117361).

Some said they wouldn't change anything. Some would like more explanations of learning material, more videos, more handouts and apps. More fun and relaxed classes (122144079).

Our message for the future: introduce more visual and listening materials. Check what young people are interested in before writing our books (122056819).

Conclusion

There are at least four clear outcomes that can be derived from the data in the surveys:

1. given the right materials for real-life communication, motivation, and well-prepared teachers, most secondary school learners can be relied on to provide accurate information and reflective comments autonomously. See also the brief reports in the appendix to this report, which were written by learners themselves in response to the pilot survey.
2. both language teachers and learners identified the burning issues referred to above arising from the jolt the pandemic gave education generally and language classrooms in particular.
3. there are evidently not only things to avoid, but also positives to learn from and apply in the future.
4. transversal issues came sharply into focus and needed to be fed into the Guidelines. In these, a new level of educational adaptability is also recommended to enable the lessons learned from learners' and teachers' comments to enrich language education in the future.

However, the key 'take home' message is the clear need to move from an era when we first faced the pandemic emergency, characterised by goodwill and good luck, to future scenarios, hopefully characterised by good planning and good preparation and training. This is what the quotation below from Pasteur refers to and what we have transferred to our educational contexts and termed 'educational adaptability'.

**'Le hasard ne favorise
que les esprits préparés'**

- Louis Pasteur

(Luck favours only well-prepared minds)

Note: The entire project team contributed to the survey construct and the interpretation of the results. Special thanks are due to Bernd Rüschoff for providing the corpus analysis of the surveys.

Appendix

'Our voices as language learners' – two class reports submitted by learners

Class report from Elisa, Valentino, Vasyi (unedited)

Introduction

The aim of this report is to outline what we were living in that period, during the pandemic and the use of remote learning. We are going to explain our difficulties and the positive aspects in this period of education.

People experienced

We know that the beginning of the pandemic was difficult for every kind of person but thanks to the support of not only the family but also of the classmates, we were able to pass this challenging time. All of us were unmotivated to do anything because of the distraction at home and also the new way of learning that was anything to understand.

New support way by the teachers

During March 2020 we discover a new way of support by the teachers of our school. We were able to see that they were worried about us and in addition they tried to find you activities for example:

- collaborative online task, to do with our classmates;
- different ways to do tasks and to see our level of learning interactive;
- interactive games;

We also know that the students have found new tools to use on a regular day like google meet and zoom, because they're easy to use and have a lot of tools.

The dark part of remote lessons

In this situation there was something really good, and also so many things were improved. But we also have some bad aspects to explain. We know that young people, teenagers, need to have contact with other people face-to-face. But in the pandemic their life was closed at home or their apartment, so they lost so many contacts with their friends and also they weren't so motivated at studying, because at home you could cheat and try to find some tricks for not studying. Also many students hated emailing teachers and using Microsoft teams, because these things were unuseful.

On the other hand, the teachers have done a good job, and all the grades at the end of the school year were fair to every student in Italy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we want to say that thanks to the pandemic we learned a lot of things, that a social life is really important but also how to use a computer and how to be able to remain in contact with each other all the time. But also we want to tell the teachers to create a guide book on how to act in the situation of remote learning, and also to be more supportive to the students and try to do more collaborative tasks and interactive games.

Class report from Emma, Martina, Mazarin, Viola (unedited)

Introduction

The aim of this report is to outline what can be seen during the pandemic and to make some recommendations on how the pandemic changed our life.

Aspect of quarantine

We start with the fact that you were able to chat with friends when you want. In addition, you could relax during the lessons due to we were blocked by the government. But on the other hand, there was the difficult to stay focused during the lessons because you had so many distractions at home.

Another negative aspect was the entire day spent at home. Perhaps we were able to cheat although we didn't remember anything.

Tools and activities in quarantine

The most liked platform to study was Google Meet because it was well organized and easy to use. Another activity was studying alone because we were able to concentrate. In addition, an activity that most people disliked was emailing the teachers as they didn't answer. Furthermore, a lot of people think that interactive games weren't useful.

Recommendations to government, schools, and teachers

School shouldn't send messages after a certain time for the fact that it's very annoying for the students. For the reason the students can't follow the lessons very well, in the future they shouldn't do hybrid lessons.

Conclusion

It was a difficult period for everybody, students, and teachers, but we tried to do our best. Finally, even if there were negative aspects/ bad times, we can learn life lessons.

Part 2 – The case studies: examples of innovation and creativity

Richard Rossner

As part of the initiative, an invitation was issued to those who had completed the 2021 survey and to professionals who are members of the ECML network to submit brief case studies of their experiences as language teachers during the pandemic. The invitation took the form of a simple template requesting information and personal impressions concerning a memorable language teaching experience which was particularly challenging or especially successful, as an example of their practice during the COVID pandemic, including:

- the national and institutional context and the language learners themselves
- the aims of the session, lesson or project
- a brief description of what they had done and what happened that made it an especially memorable experience
- the 'lessons' from their experience that might have implications for their language teaching beyond the pandemic.

Further questions asked how teachers and other colleagues in their context had supported each other during the pandemic, and how in general the pandemic (still ongoing at the time) was affecting their professional practice.

16 case studies were received from teachers in 10 ECML and/or EU member states. Summaries of each case study with links to the more detailed descriptions can be found at [here](#). The case studies covered a wide range of educational contexts from primary to university and teacher education, although the majority recorded experiences at lower or upper secondary level. A majority focused on the teaching of English, but other target languages - Italian, Chinese and French - were also represented.

Below is an overview of the key experiences and insights recorded in the case studies.

The experience of Covid as a topic for developing language skills

Three case studies focused on the Covid pandemic itself as a stimulus for developing oral skills. [One described a lively online debate](#) among year 8 students of English from different classes in Lithuania about the effects of lockdown on mental health. The teacher concerned felt that, especially in such circumstances, it is important not to forget learners' wellbeing while trying to meet the requirements of the curriculum. She also believed the experience showed that there is a

place in 'normal' circumstances for online teaching alongside face-to-face lessons.

Another case study was about a successful [online class project among Albanian students](#) of English focusing on the symptoms of Covid and means of protecting oneself from infection. The objective was for the class to prepare an information leaflet for the whole school, which involved planning, doing research, writing the leaflet and distributing it. For the teacher, this was an example of how teachers in general had to quickly adapt their teaching and learning activities, in this case interactive tasks for learners involving integrated skills, to the online mode and still maintain learners' motivation.

[The same teacher reported on another lesson](#) in which learners did online role-playing. Each learner was asked to write down a personal problem caused mainly by the Covid lockdown experience. Then learners in pairs took the roles of 'client' and 'counsellor' alternately for their role-plays, with the 'counsellors' then reporting back on their proposed advice on the various problems. The teacher said she was surprised by the fluency of learners' oral interaction and oral production, and she also felt the activity had given learners a chance to show support for each other and relieve some of the stress they were experiencing. For this teacher the Covid experience was enriched by the professional networking among teachers, including teachers of IT, and the sharing of problems and possible solutions.

Literature as a means of developing language skills

Two Italian teachers of English used literature as a means of encouraging upper secondary learners to further develop their language skills. [In one of them](#) the teacher uploaded a short self-made video on Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' to the class Moodle platform. Learners were invited to watch her video at home and, also via Moodle, to make notes on the poem, ask questions about the teacher's input, provide images and make comments. This was in order to stimulate written interaction among the learners before the online

lesson. In the lesson itself, there was feedback on the learners' work and analysis of parts of the poem, but things suddenly developed into a discussion of the worries and feelings evoked by the Covid emergency that learners associated with the themes of the poem, notably 'normal' life being 'blown away' as if by the wind. The teacher felt this lesson had given plentiful evidence of the need for flexibility, attention to the personal needs of learners and effective use of different technologies.

[In the other case study focusing on literature](#), a teacher of English was aiming to enable learners to begin appreciating artistic forms and then to get them to write some reflections in the form of a diary page or blog. Here the literary focus was the comparison between the forms and content of certain medieval English ballads and popular Italian and/or American folk or pop songs. After online lessons focusing on language and literary points, learners were asked to write a personal blog or diary entry and upload it with illustrations etc, to a class Padlet which was immediately visible to all. These contributions were used as a basis for oral discussion and chat dialogue in further online lessons. The teacher remarked that the experience was memorable because of the learners' enthusiasm about the move, as a consequence of restrictions, from traditional literature teaching to online tasks requiring interaction and creativity.

[A third case study, also from Italy](#) provided an account of a semi-literary lesson in which the focus was two fairy tales, *Snow White* and *Little Red Riding Hood*. These learners of English were already at B2 level, and the aim was to highlight linguistic features and practise text reconstruction, including preparing a summary of *Little Red Riding Hood* in breakout groups of three. Although this was an online lesson, learners were able to have fun and express themselves while also developing both their oral and writing skills. The teacher commented:

perhaps the most important lesson for me has been that of putting the student first, by being sensitive to mood, engaging interest through personalisation, being upbeat and maintaining a positive outlook

through difficult times. Technology has been fundamental, but it remains a tool and nothing more. Its over-use in the communicative language teaching environment can be a distraction and alienating for learners. This is equally true for face-to-face teaching.

Developing writing skills – an interactive approach

A teacher of English in Romania submitted a [case study](#) describing remote teaching and learning in preparation for a public exam early in the pandemic. She nicely describes the learning experience involved in working out how to teach and oversee creative written work online at an early stage in the lockdown. In this case, the task was to write a review of a digital application which learners had used. The challenges of preparing for this online and enabling learners to work effectively on their writing skills were overcome by using a PowerPoint presentation to stimulate learners to share ideas, including information and photos, and then to allow the writing to develop through interaction among learners and with the teacher. One of the lessons the teacher said she learned from this experience was “that students should be involved more in the process of learning, because they can produce invaluable ideas and their perspective is completely different from ours [as teachers]”.

Creative work at secondary level

An English teacher in the Czech Republic reported on a [lesson](#) during the Covid pandemic in which one group of learners did joint sentence writing on a virtual whiteboard (Collboard). Another group had to view a video of a ‘life coach’ presenting mottos and then choose one motto and agree or disagree with it and comment as to why. They were also asked to devise other examples. This work was then shared and commented on in the ensuing online session, producing a lot of good language and ideas, and providing enjoyment for all. This lesson was another example of how the constraints of online lessons can contribute to creativity and motivation, rather than inhibiting it.

Creative work at primary level

Only [one of the case studies](#), from a teacher of English in Spain, was set in the context of early primary education. Again, the underlying theme was the children’s experience of and feelings about the pandemic shortly after online learning became the norm. Here the first, second- and third-year children were asked to create posters illustrating the ‘rainbow’ theme that was so symbolic during lockdowns. Having created them, they recorded themselves talking about their posters in English and about the feelings behind their creations. For the teacher concerned this was an example of how important it is to allow space for individual learners to express their emotions and feelings across subject boundaries. She also noted that language teachers have a special role to play in this because of the crucial nature of communication, including across national and cultural boundaries.

French as a foreign language

Three of the case studies were from specialists in French. Two of them were submitted by professionals working in Croatia. [The first was in the form of an online simulation of a mediation encounter](#) between a speaker of Croatian and a speaker of French, with a focus on a (fictional) e-mail received by the French speaker. The learners had to interpret and explain the contents of the e-mail orally while recording their explanation using a voice recording app, Vocaroo. This was so that it could later be used to assess each learner’s oral and mediation skills in French against a set of shared criteria. Learners found this activity motivating, and it again demonstrated the versatility possible in online teaching, and in this case, in language assessment.

[The other Croatian case study](#) focused on a teachers’ contribution to the preparation and recording of videos for broadcast to support the national curriculum for French during the pandemic at a time when only remote teaching was possible. The videos featured lesson objectives, interactive language tasks and assessment activities involving the use of numerous apps.

[A Swiss teacher preparing university students for an oral exam in French](#) at C1 level described how the fact that her 12 learners' faces were so close together on the screen actually made the exam practice, which was partly in dialogue and partly in monologue form, more intense and effective than it would have been in a classroom-based lesson. There was also greater co-operation among the learners when it came to peer assessment of performance against the specified criteria.

Oral and written interaction in Chinese as a foreign language

Two teachers working at upper secondary level in Italy reported on remote teaching of Chinese as a foreign language.

[In one of them the focus was on remote oral interaction in both Chinese and English](#) with learners of English in Taiwan via Google Meet. The learners had formed small groups to prepare presentation materials on small towns in their respective countries beforehand. In the two successive lessons in the same groups, they acted as 'tour guides' for their overseas partners. The Italian learners described and answered questions on the towns they had chosen in Italy, and the Taiwanese counterparts did the same thing about the towns they had chosen in English. As the teacher commented, it was an opportunity for learners to get to know each other and practise their language skills, but also to engage with significant amounts of culture-specific information not easily available in ordinary textbooks. The experience of learners in both countries was enriched by the international nature of the encounters and the fact that preparation had involved group members taking responsibility for different phases of preparation and presentation. Digital skills and online communication had made this possible.

[The other case study on learning Chinese focused on the written language](#). In the lesson, an online interactive platform, Spiral, which enables participants to work on the same topic and share opinions in written form in real time, was used. In the activity, the teacher uploaded a controversial

open question which learners were asked to respond to with their thoughts and opinions within 5 minutes. This was followed by discussion of the responses mediated by the teacher, with remarks on errors that had arisen in the written responses. This teacher summarised his opinion of the implications for 'normal' language teaching as follows:

Applying digital means in language teaching not only increases the number of possible tools for teaching but can also increase motivation and stimulate the interactive dynamic... my teaching approach is [now] way more flexible and integrated: it now includes a huge variety of tools I had never experienced before, like digital advice, learning platforms, apps and so on.

English in higher education

Two case studies were submitted by teachers working in higher education. [One from a teacher working with business students in Germany](#) described a business simulation lasting a whole semester focusing on on-line trade fairs. Early in the semester students in groups were asked to invent and develop presentations for fictitious companies. Following reading and research on the topic of virtual trade fairs and discussing how best to approach such events, they then had to create a virtual trade fair booth or stand for their company. They then presented their company online to the whole group. The teacher remarked that the experience had been especially memorable because the students learned about "a business trend during the pandemic – virtual trade fairs – and built upon what they learned in a fun and creative way in the target language".

[The other case study was submitted by two teacher educators working in Greece](#) and described a way of stimulating 22 students on a pre-service course to actively and cooperatively develop their skills after courses were switched to remote mode during the pandemic. The incentive used was a 'hackathon challenge', in this case an international European event focusing on 'how to put language learning in the service of social purpose'. The aim was to offer professional development

opportunities during the pandemic by exploring novel practices in pre-service teacher education contexts and by emphasising future teachers' skills and digital readiness. It involved the creation of plurilingual and pluricultural resources for the target language with an emphasis on digital activism and social participation. The results were made openly available on the DigiEduHack website. The process highlighted the power of collaboration and demonstrated that new ways of knowledge building and sharing are possible.

Summaries and links to the individual case studies described above are available [here](#).

Case studies focusing on assessment during the Covid emergency

Following a workshop run in Cyprus by the RELANG team, several additional case studies were submitted on this topic. Six of the case studies described online in-course assessment experiences at lower and upper secondary level. The case studies respectively illustrate the challenges of the following kinds of assessment during lockdown conditions:

- using project assignments such as preparing posters or online presentations on environmental themes and assessing them remotely
- running quizzes and assessing oral skills online, especially when there are problems with internet connections and distractions in the learners' homes
- assessing learners' reading comprehension using uploaded texts and tasks and getting learners to photograph and submit their answer sheets
- assessing learners' writing skills and providing adequate feedback in the face of learners' difficulties using the selected technology.

One case study was submitted by a university lecturer and described solutions to the problem of substituting mid-term and final exams with online assessments. A combination of open-ended questions relating to carefully selected

texts and quiz items on Moodle was used, as well as longer pieces of writing for assessing students' general language skills.

Summaries of the case studies on assessment practices and links to the individual case studies are available [here](#).

Conclusion

The main themes of the case studies include the inventive use of technology, dealing with learners' wellbeing and their feelings, finding ways of overcoming lockdown isolation through exchanges of ideas and cooperative work, alternative approaches to assessment, flexible handling of online lessons in response to learners' priorities, project work and various means of developing oral and interactive skills online. Although the case studies are accounts of experiences during Covid lockdowns, these themes and the accounts of teaching and learning are also all relevant to normal language teaching and point to ways in which language education can evolve and is evolving following the Covid experience.

Part 3 – Leaflet and discussion papers

Apart from the case studies described in Part 2 and the Guidelines in Part 4, five other documents have been produced as part of the initiative. The first to be developed in 2021 was a leaflet outlining the main messages from the 2021 survey. Subsequently four discussion papers have been written on key topics in language education. These outline developments and describe examples of good practice that are designed to be helpful to language teachers and other language education professionals.

The leaflet⁵ - lessons to be learned from the pandemic

⁵ This document was drafted in mid-2021 by Frank Heyworth. It draws together in a simple and attractive way the main messages that came out of the 2021 survey. The full-colour leaflet is best viewed online. Its contents are reproduced in the version below (texts in italics are quotations from responses to the 2021 survey).

The challenges of the pandemic, of coping with remote learning and teaching and with social distancing have led schools and teachers to develop new skills and resources. A positive outcome of the experience is that language educators are rethinking their practice and applying some of the lessons learned to their “normal” practice.

Rethinking our approach to teaching

The basic principles stay the same.

- Making language teaching learner-centred, not teacher-centred
- Prioritising action-orientated language along with formal and informal language learning
- Assuring the key role of affect when selecting topics and learning activities for language learning and tailoring these to the age of learners.

But they need to be adapted.

How can we cope with the differences (and similarities) between managing online and managing face-to-face learning (elicitation, wait time, student-student interaction, monitoring learning etc.)?

Some ideas:

- Orientate learners towards learning how to learn in a changed environment, with new approaches, methods, resources etc.
- Use 'new' teaching techniques to encourage creativity and flexibility.
- Find novel ways of engaging learners in interaction, including written interaction, focusing on peer-to-peer learning and 'socialisation' among learners.
- Create communities of practice for learners as 'social agents' working towards a specific common purpose in a digital space, e.g. through project work
- Mitigate the challenges of mask-wearing and social distancing in class.

Things that are important in classroom teaching – establishing a relationship, communicating, discussing, agreeing on objectives, ensuring variation, giving effective feedback etc.- are just as important or even more important in remote or hybrid teaching. Technology opens up new opportunities but must not be overused.

Finding new resources for learning – how technology can help

The challenges of remote, socially distanced and hybrid teaching have led to exploration of a wealth of new resources for learning. The teacher's task is to use technology to contribute to successful learning by:

- devising tasks and activities and selecting resources for task- and project-based language learning
- using the internet and relevant apps as resources for face-to-face and hybrid as well as online language learning
- ensuring that online resources are used in ways that are motivating and coherent with the syllabus.

Assessment is also a challenge...

Tools such as Google Docs have enhanced my ability to retrieve, rework, and focus on learner output. This in turn has improved the quality of my feedback and is certainly something I will keep in my teaching toolkit. It has helped me to prioritise learner language over coursebooks.

Fair and reliable assessment, especially in remote learning, poses a number of challenges:

- If examinations are replaced by teacher evaluation, how can this be effectively standardised?
- What ethical issues related to privacy and equity are posed by distance evaluation and how can they be addressed?
- What are the possible roles of the CEFR, self-assessment and language portfolios in meeting these challenges?
- How can we ensure coherence between curricula, pedagogy and assessment?

Continuous assessment has made it easier for teachers to get regular feedback on students' development and difficulties. These small tests were the foundation for individual feedback and helped interpret results of the final exam.

For teachers, effective assessment involves:

- careful planning of teaching that encompasses assessment in various forms as additional opportunities for interaction
- achieving an appropriate balance between formative and summative assessment, and identifying suitable means of doing both
- defining the role of continuous assessment/assessment for learning in a given context and how to do it effectively.

It's important to develop digital literacy

Online teaching can be far more effective than I had previously thought. As mentioned earlier, I have been struck by the potential it allows to focus on the learners' output. There has been an increase in the amount of "little and often" writing"

I've learned (1) that teachers can adapt to any environment when needed (2) that technology is an integral part of our daily lives and education as well (3) when we learn to use new methods of e-teaching we have a great tool in our hands. Teaching can be motivating, interesting, pleasant, free of stress.

The pandemic has prompted teacher and learners to develop their digital literacy. In the future, these skills may become an integral part of all language teaching and learning. The key aspects are:

- dealing with disparity of access and unsuitable conditions for online learning and teaching
- choosing appropriate digital resources (platforms, apps, software etc.)
- finding the right balance between what can best be done digitally and what absolutely requires face-to-face contact
- developing strategies for online learning, and knowing when to use technology and when not
- choosing online work appropriate to the learner's age and level.

I think that I have discovered a whole new world of ideas, of potential platforms, of gamification and other ways to motivate students. I was able to get instant feedback and use the tools to discover my students' creative work.

Support for learners

For many learners, especially those who may for a variety of reasons be at risk, the Covid pandemic has been a difficult time. How can we support learners, maintain their motivation, help them to catch up on lost learning?

We need to:

- find ways of making sure **all** learners are included in lessons
- propose activities which encourage social contact among learners
- identify means of compensating for loss of learning, especially for young learners and disadvantaged learners
- develop approaches and resources for supporting marginalised groups (e.g migrants)
- ensure that more well-developed resources for such groups are available in a range of different languages
- create a social environment online that brings together students who haven't yet met each other personally, thus helping them to socialize online
- include students in decision-making: they are sometimes faster with technology and can provide ideas for using it effectively.

I believe that we haven't started to touch the surface of the long-term effects this pandemic will have. Language learning is also about communication, and this has been lost and all the important learning that comes from playing with peers has gone. There are children that no longer speak, children with parents that no longer have jobs, children suffering more abuse than they ever did before as parents are at home. I feel strongly that these issues need to be addressed.

Teachers need support too

Teachers have had to cope with many difficulties – learning new skills, rethinking their teaching, working long hours at the computer...

What can be done to help in the short and long term?

- Focus on the further development of teacher competences in using relevant technology
- Provide training and support for teachers in the task of catching up on lost learning
- Provide support systems for change in language teaching through teacher communities of practice and peer-learning networks
- Enhance formal teacher education (pre-service, in-service and CPD) to include training in remote and socially distanced teaching.

Address the problems of teacher wellbeing due to the pandemic (and in general).

- Encourage cross pollination between language departments and between language teachers and teachers of other subjects
- Provide guidance on how to teach flexibly, adjust to changing situations and maintain the focus of the class
- Provide development and training in devising activities that work independently of whether the teaching environment is online, offline or hybrid.

Never back down. I have learned to adapt and have discovered a great number of resources for online teaching that I wouldn't have used if we hadn't been in lockdown. I have started to take part in social media groups of language teachers that give help, advice and exchange materials.

The discussion papers

Introduction

Having identified some key themes from the analysis of the responses to the various surveys, it was decided that it would be useful to commission discussion papers on those we considered most important. The authors used their knowledge of the results of the survey and, in the case of the discussion paper on assessment, their experience of running workshops on the theme through the Covid emergency, to draw together some key messages and points for reflection. The discussion papers cover the issues being addressed from the point of view of the authors themselves and are not designed to be interrelated or read in a specific order. There are four of them:

- The impact of experience during the Covid pandemic on the future of digitally enhanced language education (Bernd Rüschoff)
- The challenges of assessing language learning (José Noijons)
- Learner wellbeing and learner autonomy (Richard Rossner with Frank Heyworth)
- Language teacher support and professional learning (Christine Lechner)

The discussion papers provide valuable further food for thought about the future direction of language education following the Covid experience and allow space for the authors to express their own individual views on the priorities for future development.

The impact of the Covid pandemic on the future of digitally enhanced language education

Bernd Rüschoff

Introduction

The potential of digital tools and digitally enhanced learning spaces has been the subject of reflection in language education ever since the advent of personal computers and the internet (cf. Davies, Otto, Rüschoff, 2014). However, although easy-to-use platforms and tools for networking, collaborative learning, communication, sharing outputs etc. have been available for some time, their impact on the teaching and learning of languages prior to the pandemic was still somewhat limited. However, on the basis of their experience of using such tools in their daily lives, teachers and learners alike had begun to appreciate the possibilities these might offer for more flexible learner- and learning-oriented approaches and practices in language learning. Thus, already prior to the COVID pandemic, innovative uses of such technologies were beginning to lead to more flexibility in content and organisation of learning; these new media were no longer simply regarded as useful for traditional self-study but as tools affording more real-life classroom practice in language education.

In addition, changes in communication and interaction in everyday social and professional life and a growing acceptance of action-oriented methodologies as a means of developing language competences and interactional agency had begun to have an impact on curriculum development, materials design, and classroom practice.

It may well be that the pandemic served as a catalyst for progress in attitudes and practices, as suggested by the following teacher response collected in the survey:

I've learned that 1) teachers and learners can adapt to any environment when in need. 2) technology is an integral part of our daily lives and of education as well. 3) when we learn to use new methods of e-teaching, we have a great tool in our hands. Teaching can be motivating, interesting, pleasant, free of stress.

There is certainly evidence that the pandemic was instrumental in boosting acceptance of digitally enhanced learning as an integral and necessary part of language education, rather than as simple

add-ons at the fringes of teaching and learning languages.

Based on the results of the survey project presented in this publication, this discussion paper will focus on some reflections on the way digital resources and practices in the language classroom might impact language education in the future.

Context: the impact of the use of digital media in everyday life on education

Considering the results of the survey presented in this publication, it can be predicted that the COVID 19 experience will have an impact on the use of digital media in (language) education in the future. However, the increased use of digital devices and media in everyday social and professional life prior to the pandemic can be regarded as an equally relevant key factor. Communicative practices in digital contexts often differ significantly from the way people communicate in oral, face-to-face, or more traditional written contexts. The flexible modes of interaction and collaboration available when using social networks, such as mixing and mashing multimodal and multisensory ways of expressing oneself, involve additional communicative and interactive practices and strategies. Consequently, educationalists have been arguing for some time that the competencies and agencies needed in such contexts must also be recognised and fostered in the language classroom. As well as addressing the issue of how to use technology effectively in language teaching and learning, it has become more necessary than ever to analyse carefully what learning means in principle, and what learners do and need to do in the real world. This inevitably involves the use of digital media. Integrating digital practice into language education is crucial if language education is to serve learners' needs.

Digital tools and practices have now become a common fact of life, and it is safe to say that we have in fact reached the stage of normalisation, confirming hypotheses put forward by Bax in

2003 and 2011. However, the pandemic has no doubt further helped technology to find its natural place in language education. As one teacher contributing to the 2021 survey put it:

Personally, I did not need the pandemic to realize the importance of technology in language learning. [However,] I [finally] had the opportunity to use ... internet ... and [technology], which made my [teaching] ... more productive.

Online interaction in the Common European Framework of Reference

The need to fully integrate “normalised” digital applications and tools into language education is also reflected by the fact that the Council of Europe expanded the descriptors contained in its Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) with a section concerned with online communication, online interaction, and online goal-oriented transaction in the CEFR Companion Volume (CV) launched in 2020. The additions and adaptations in the descriptive scheme are based on the many observations that applied linguists have put forward to characterise the specific quality of communication in digital contexts. It is beyond the scope of this paper to reflect these in all their manifestations, but a few might be exemplified here. Amongst these are, for example, the need for more redundancy in messages, as well as the need to check that a message has been correctly understood.

Strategically, this includes an ability to reformulate in order to support comprehension and to deal with misunderstandings, together with a high degree of intercultural sensitivity and an ability to handle emotional reactions. This is the case both in synchronous and asynchronous modes of interaction. Important features in blogs or chats are participation in sustained interaction with one or more interlocutors and appropriate ways of composing contributions for others to respond to.

The CEFR Companion Volume now reflects in its descriptors and scales the way language is used in the digital era. These include all the multimodalities of communication and

interaction, e.g. modes of composing and reacting to messages with embedded media, including symbols, images, and other codes for making messages convey tone and 'non-verbal' subtext, and so on. More detail is available in the CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe 2020, 84-86). It appears that the revised descriptive scheme of the CEFR Companion Volume, now fully reflecting academic as well as societal and professional developments since the publication of the original Framework in 2001, came just in time, as practically everyone has now had his or her share of digitally supported modes of social and professional practice. Interactions via communication platforms such as Zoom and Telcos, or working from home office, which in the past were limited to the professional domain, have now become common in almost any walk of life, and need addressing in the language classroom.

As far as classroom practice itself is concerned, an action-oriented approach, often seen as a natural result of the methodological message embedded in the CEFR, puts the co-construction of meaning through interaction at the centre of the language learning and teaching process (North 2014). Action-oriented paradigms for language learning suggest the need for more flexible learning arrangements, not just in times of emergency. Digital tools and digital learning practices can enhance flexible, participatory classroom practice, self-directed collaborative knowledge construction, authenticity, and goal-oriented learning. This involves more flexible use of the classroom or learning space.

As the results of the survey show, the experience of a mixture of remote and face-to-face teaching as well as variations of hybrid/blended learning scenarios led both teachers and learners to re-think their attitudes towards digitally enhanced language learning. During the Covid pandemic, such scenarios, i.e. combining and integrating learning in the classroom with remote activities in learning spaces outside the classroom and the school, suddenly became a necessity rather than an option, and language teachers began to appreciate their usefulness in creating more diverse learning opportunities. Language education was in some respects actually better prepared than some other subject areas when the

Covid lockdowns of 2020-2021 enforced remote online teaching and learning around the globe in order to ensure that teaching and learning could continue.

We are still grappling with how to define the "return to normal" in language education as we begin to reflect and learn from these experiences in order to potentially redesign the teaching and learning of languages for the future.

Experiences in digital modes of teaching and learning

Let us now briefly explore the outcomes of the ECML surveys and their implications for the future of digitally enhanced practices in language education. A large number of respondents acknowledged that technology played a major role in gradually and progressively empowering both language teachers and language learners. This is reflected in the following two statements, which are representative of many similar sentiments expressed in teachers and learners' contributions. As one teacher put it:

Despite some difficulty in interacting with students ... the wide range of materials available has made teaching more varied and enticing.

Looking at learners' reflections on their experiences, the following quote from the learner survey corpus, which is also representative of a significant number of similar comments, almost mirrors the view of the teacher above:

We have learned to study in different environments. At first, when we unexpectedly had to start working online, both teachers and students encountered many problems. With time, everybody got used to this new way of teaching and learning and discovered its advantages. We cannot say which way of learning is the best. Different people like different things. [Some] ... prefer face-to-face lessons. Some others find remote learning better as a less stressful way to learn, but they say too much of it is not good either.

Another comment expands on this:

Now that we have gotten used to the hybrid way of learning, we see that both face-to-face and remote learning can be successfully combined.

Obviously, approaches to using digital tools to create more flexible, blended and hybrid contexts for language learning had been discussed for quite some time before the pandemic. However, based on comments by teachers and learners of the kind quoted here, there might now be more acceptance and willingness to make hybrid learning, in which some learners are present in classrooms and some are accessing the same class online, and blended learning, where learning for all learners involves a blend of face-to-face classroom learning and online learning, a regular feature of language education. It became apparent when analysing the responses that experiences reported in the survey contain a lot of food for thought when rethinking the construct of hybridity for future language learning arrangements.

Let us further consider examples of what worked and what teachers might therefore want to keep. Comments about the potential of some form of hybrid or remote learning confirm that teachers have become more open towards integrating such options into future learning arrangements in language education.

The following concordance extracted from the corpus of teacher responses in the survey project exemplifies this:

Responses concerned with such aspects also suggest that future deliberations based on the surveys need to address the exact definitions and constructs of hybrid and blended learning -i.e. combining learning activities inside and outside the classroom, as opposed to fully remote distance learning - and what they actually entail.

The number of concrete references to practical examples in the responses was fairly limited. These mainly referred to computer exercises, work in breakout groups, video clips, use of some specific apps, and some interesting collaborative work. However, none of the responses indicated really coherent or comprehensive didactic and pedagogic approaches to hybrid learning scenarios in particular. The concordances above represent just a few examples to demonstrate ways in which teachers' comments inform and substantiate the general conclusions presented in the final part of this paper.

The kinds of teaching and learning conditions experienced during emergency remote teaching posed different challenges for language teachers than for teachers of other subjects, and the results from both the teacher and learner surveys suggest that for language education a different and potentially wider and richer mix of teaching and learning activities and resources is needed. Comments made by language teachers in response to the surveys showed that many believed the experience gained during the Covid emergency can and should be used to enrich language education in 'normal' times. Such sentiments were also expressed by the learners in

<i>The future is only in front of us and it is based on</i>	<i>< blended learning ></i>	
<i>Technology opened new options when it comes to students' autonomy</i>	<i>< blended learning ></i>	<i>it definitely fosters</i>
<i>Some online classes in the future will extend keep aspects of online learning</i>	<i>< blended learning ></i>	<i>approaches and will</i>
<i>have to use new methods and approaches such as in contact with the real world</i>	<i>< blended learning ></i>	<i>if we would like to stay</i>

the 2022 survey, as exemplified by the following learner response:

We believe that in the future a mixture of learning both in class and remotely would be a perfect option. Students would ... be provided with a bigger variety of tasks, which is perfect.

Amongst the top 50 most mentioned content words in the learners' comments were terms referring to the social context of learning or learning spaces, such as class, classroom, classmates, home (schooling), fellow students etc. These learners often referred to the importance of interaction and social context in language learning, but they also commented on examples of successful practice in distance and hybrid learning. They mentioned the potential of flexible digitally enhanced modes of collaboration and interaction, which they would like to see more of in their regular learning, a point exemplified by learner comments quoted above and also underlined by the following comments:

- **Teacher's observation:** *Most of my students enjoyed the online classes, as new methodology and more interactive games and personalised interaction was used.*
- **Learner's observation:** *The fact that we had more time to organize our notes and that we could be more flexible in when we decided to learn. ... interactive exercises in the e-classrooms were great.*

Such perceptions dovetail with some of the key affordances that have always been associated with digital tools in language education. For example, added flexibility in participatory classroom practice and interaction and self-directed collaborative learning are referred to in many of the positive references to interactive distance and hybrid learning experiences. These need to be carefully considered when rethinking the role of digital tools beyond simple options for self-study and supposedly interactive homework. When referring to useful exercises they worked with, learners mentioned (collaborative) language games, a range of specific (language) learning apps such as Kahoot etc., access to online resources and video clips as examples of what

they considered to be key ingredients of more flexible teaching approaches. As one group of learners put it:

We liked when teachers offered us active methods, like games, for learning new material, it made us feel more engaged in the lesson.

In addition, tools that supported collaborative learning and group work and allowed greater flexibility in integrating different learning spaces and times and more integrated uses of in-class and home activities were appreciated and enjoyed. Teachers often broadened the scope of their use of online learning arrangements by integrating telecollaborative elements in activities involving learning partners from outside their classes, their institutions and even their countries. Learners considered this very helpful, as the following statement confirms:

Meeting people from all over the world online in class, ... for example native speakers, ... [helped] to improve ... pronunciation.

In their responses, a large number of learners commented favourably on the mix of teaching approaches and activities leading, in the learners' perceptions, to acquiring new and useful skills and becoming more autonomous. This was acknowledged by comments such as:

technology impacted ... learning in a positive way.

we improved our technical skills e.g. online meetings with teachers after lessons, we learned how to manage our time, trying to take advantage of every single minute.

Some learners saw communicating via digital channels as a means of "getting more individual attention from [their] teachers". Thus, the true potential of the role of digital tools in supporting collaboration, communication and interaction might need to be revisited when building on teaching and learning experiences during the pandemic. As one teacher put it:

Things that are important in classroom teaching – establishing a relationship,

communicating/ discussing/ agreeing on objectives, ensuring variation, giving effective feedback etc. - are just as important or even more important in remote or hybrid teaching. Technology opens up new opportunities but must not be overused.

Lessons for the future

To conclude, let us now consider some of the Guidelines presented in part 4 of this publication with a focus on the future of digital practices in language education. As documented above, responses to the surveys from both learners and teachers contained a significant number of constructive suggestions as to how the teaching and learning of languages might benefit from “digitalisation” based on the experiences and insights gained during the pandemic. “We became convinced that school systems should be updated and made more interactive” was one way learners put it, with teachers also pointing out that “Education is still based on a model formed in the 19th century”, adding: “it is about time we joined the 21st century and adopted an approach more in keeping with the digital age and all the benefits and opportunities they afford going forward.”

As one teacher wrote:

I rather enjoyed having to use my wits and leave my comfort zone, thus experiment with Zoom, flipped classroom, super clarifying instructions, using learners’ recordings more often.

Another observed that the experience:

...has given teachers a confidence boost since at the outset it was a daunting thought to have to teach online and now teachers are experts at it.

Similarly, learners commented that – while they preferred the “real” classroom, online and hybrid learning experiences gave them the opportunity to appreciate that, in such set-ups,

...different resources [can be] more interactive and the lessons ... more entertaining.

Consequently, there seems to be growing support for and acceptance of approaches that support language teaching and learning through greater flexibility in the use of classrooms and the focused integration of other learning spaces, both virtual and physical outside the classroom, to foster varied and effective language learning. Such teaching and learning arrangements need to encourage a wide range of approaches and allow for a focused use of resources, including online resources, suitable for diverse groups of learners and variable teaching/learning conditions.

Teaching and learning scenarios along these lines require changes in professional development in order to equip language teachers to align lesson objectives with different options for lesson design and to integrate a variety of learning spaces. As both teachers and learners remarked, this also implies a growing need to respond effectively to mixed ability, heterogeneity and individual needs among language learners, as well as to different learning environments (e.g. remote or face-to-face). Educational adaptability needs to be fostered both in initial and in-service teacher training. Responses to the survey suggest that teachers are, in fact, more than willing to react constructively to such challenges and welcome training and networking opportunities. “Teachers worked together to find solutions to problems and attended seminars and free classes provided by universities to support teachers in adapting in-class teaching to distance teaching or in learning about new online teaching and learning environments.” Digital competence, which includes managing different digital platforms, online materials, etc, has developed dramatically, both for students and teachers. However, teachers did ask for more “space for professional development for teachers” and regarded a “wide variety of webinars” as one suitable option for further professionalisation.

Ways forward

What is clearly needed, as was confirmed by teachers’ responses and is recommended in the Guidelines in part 4, is that a clear rationale for selecting distant or hybrid modes of learning should be defined at policy level and that

educational authorities ensure that the necessary practical and technical arrangements are made to fully draw on the experiences and expertise gained during the pandemic. Further support is needed in developing and adapting a wider range of versatile language learning resources, especially digital resources, and ensuring that teachers and learners are able to use them in an educational context. In this way, the full and truly normalized (Bax 2003 & 2011) integration of digital tools into language education can take place. Such support will empower teachers to quickly adapt the resources and activities they are using to the context of learning, for example when they are changing from whole class teaching to work in small groups or breakout rooms, and/or to cater for learners with mixed ability.

During the pandemic, even teachers working mainly in more traditional ways began to appreciate the challenges and affordances of devising and managing project-based language learning options involving both interaction during the lesson and individual work or group activities in-between sessions. Technology played a major part in this process, as the following response from the 2021 survey suggests:

Speaking from personal experience, after over 30 years of teaching face-to-face, the transfer to online teaching has forced me to re-evaluate a lot of what I do in class and provided an opportunity for creativity which has been beneficial to me and, I hope, to learners. I have developed a new set of skills and finally taken on board the enormous potential of the internet as a resource. This is also true for the majority of my colleagues.

However, as suggested by various learners in their responses to the 2022 survey, it is also important to clearly define and explain to learners the role, purpose, and chosen practice of each resource/tool/app used for remote or face-to-face learning. A fair share of learner comments, such as “generally speaking, the excessive use of breakout rooms was not particularly useful because they lasted too long and we often ran out of things to say”, suggest that, for example, when planning remote or face-to-face lessons teachers should try to avoid selecting a single preferred technology

or only one or two ways of doing collaborative work.

Consequently, in their future language lessons, especially when working remotely, teachers might try to achieve an effective balance between whole class work and interactive activities in small groups and pairs. Such regular smaller group activities and tasks, whether face-to-face or online, require an integrated approach to using digital tools and their potential, and need to encourage socialisation and peer language learning as a complement to whole class learning. Learners appreciated being given the opportunity to expand their learning skills during the pandemic, as exemplified by the following response:

I had to take responsibility for my work. Working with technology was fun. Online activities ... are more fun than activity book exercises. Writing tasks are easier to do in a digital form.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that more than half of the teachers confirmed the perception that learners became more autonomous during the periods of remote learning. Learning to learn and learner autonomy have been discussed by language educationalists as key factors in language learning, and, judging from responses like this, teachers and learners alike respond favourably to working with digital tools in their regular teaching and learning. They appreciated being introduced to and familiarised with language teaching and learning tasks, activities and resources which they may not have previously encountered, such as apps used for language learning, word and grammar games, online dictionaries, interactive textbook tasks, etc. They considered these to be useful and productively applicable in “normal” schooling. However, again based on teacher and learner responses to this effect, steps need to be taken to carefully introduce such digital tools, explain their purpose and demonstrate how they function. Digital literacy in language learning often entails more than the skills practised in everyday life outside school, while interactive competences in digital spaces have now been integrated into the set of aims and outcomes of language learning, e.g. in the CEFR Companion Volume. After all, “despite

popular assumptions, digital literacies do not just refer to the skills for using computers but to new functional, sociocultural and transformational literacies that allow people to effectively navigate an increasingly multimodal and digital world" (Mavridi, 2022, p.50).

Parallel to the ECML/PNF surveys carried out by the team reported on this paper, a number of other surveys and research projects of varying scales have been conducted in the area of language education. Some of these, e.g. Mavridi's (2022) study referred to above on *Language Teaching Experiences During Covid-19*, recently published by the British Council, which is similar in scale to the ECML/PNF initiative, appear at first reading to have come to conclusions similar to those of the surveys discussed here. Negative aspects reported are very similar to the ones voiced by teachers and learners, with many teachers also reported as thinking "that their experiences during Covid-19 can signal new opportunities for online and blended language learning after the pandemic. Others admit that they are now more receptive to change and innovation" (Mavridi, 2022, p. 9-10).

Conclusion

In summary, empowering the teaching and learning of languages in flexible contexts includes choosing methods that fit given learning spaces, deciding on how to use and combine a variety of learning spaces, including the traditional classroom space, and appropriately and effectively exploiting a variety of tools and resources, while competently managing the resulting diversity of learning spaces and interactions. Mavridi in her study, referring to Carrier et al. (2017) and McRae (2020), also highlights the fact that not just since Covid 19 "... the literature confirms that students need training and support to develop the cognitive, digital and intellectual skills that will enable them to take ownership of their digital learning" (Mavridi, 2022, p. 45). This need for training applies equally to teachers and would have pedagogical and educational agency as a key ingredient, going beyond mere methodological skills. As our survey response shows, teachers and learners alike have begun to appreciate that:

...technology is an integral part of our daily lives and of education as well ... we ... now ... have a great tool in our hands. Teaching can be [more] motivating, interesting, pleasant, ...

What is needed now is a concerted effort in language education to exploit the true potential of digitally enhanced learning and to foster the necessary practical skill set and infrastructure, but also the theoretical and pedagogical mindset at all levels.

As early as 2006, Bax identified as an additional key ingredient of true normalisation that "... teachers ... need to have sympathetic support, both technical and pedagogical; they need the opportunity for sympathetic development, probably in collaborative mode; they need computing facilities to be accessible and organised in ways conducive to the easy integration of computer activities with non-computer activities." (Chambers & Bax 2006, 477). This is still true today, as the survey results suggest. A first step might be to enable teachers, through professional and peer learning, to gain broader experience of the many digital and non-digital options available in educational settings, to compare and reflect on these experiences, to discuss relevant theories as well as practical implications, and to select wisely from a broader and expanded range of alternatives in their teaching and learning.

I have learnt the importance of the internet and ... online resources which I rarely used before. I have developed a lot of new skills.

as teachers ... we must keep on working [and take] advantage of all the resources & materials that come in handy, depending on the circumstances: it's a must to provide both face-to-face [and] remote teaching /learning with a purpose ...

As far as digital tools are concerned, the pandemic appears to have had a positive impact on the mindset of the language teaching community to this effect.

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The challenges of assessing language learning

José Noijons

Introduction

One of the strong messages coming out of the Covid-related initiative has been that, while assessment was felt to be essential, significant difficulties arose for learners, teachers and institutions when much of language education had to be provided remotely. In many countries, external nation-wide examinations were cancelled or were administered online. Subject matter was reduced, and assessment criteria were adapted. Irregularities were reported on, and the validity and the reliability of examinations were called into question.

With a view to a future with similar challenges, the RELANG Training and Consultancy offer⁶ has started developing methods to *complement* external nationwide examinations with alternative, classroom-based methods of assessment. Even if such alternative methods do have a formative function, in this paper the emphasis is on their summative function and use of these methods.

6 The RELANG project – ‘Relating language curricula, tests and examinations to the CEFR’ - is part of an initiative co-funded by the European Union and the European Centre for Modern Languages. Further details can be found at <https://relang.ecml.at/>

The focus will be on what examinees have been able to demonstrate in a classroom context, rather than in a fixed day external examination. Such methods of alternative assessment have been widely used during the Covid pandemic. In this discussion paper we will place alternative methods of assessment in the context of the CEFR and its Companion Volume.

What is alternative assessment?

Alternative assessment is here defined as an alternative to external assessment. Alternative assessment has frequently replaced external fixed-point examinations during the COVID pandemic, when live administrations of tests and examinations were not possible and online examinations were difficult to organise. Alternative assessment is also understood as summative in the sense that it is a complement to summative assessment which “sums up attainment at the end of the course with a grade.” (Council of Europe 2001: 186).

The advantage of alternative assessment is that it may include a great variety of tasks in real-life or authentic situations. People have warned that the term alternative assessment

...may carry several negative connotations, which impact upon its acceptability and subsequent implementation in EFL/ESL instruction. These connotations include the suggestion that such forms of assessment involved completely new procedures, which are untried and not supported by research, and that they do not require rigorous approaches to test construction, implementation, and decision making. (Al-Mahrooqi et al. 2018: 1-2).

In developing materials for alternative assessment, these negative connotations need to be taken into account and materials need to conform to standards of validity and reliability. However, a suggestion that (all) standardised tests would meet these standards is not realistic either.

Validity and reliability of alternative assessment

Alternative assessment is often classed as formative assessment. The CEFR defines formative assessment as

...an ongoing process of gathering information on the extent of learning, on strengths and weaknesses, which the teacher can feed back into their course planning and the actual feedback they give learners. Formative assessment is often used in a very broad sense so as to include non-quantifiable information from questionnaires and consultations (Council of Europe 2001: 186).

This latter aspect of formative assessment, “non-quantifiable information”, i.e. feedback, teachers’ notes, comments and other evidence of learners’ achievement, is often listed as one of the essential differences with external assessment. It is even used as an argument not to use the results gathered in formative assessment for the purposes of summative assessment as this evidence may be too subjective and biased, and indeed it may be one reason why external examinations exist in the first place.

The most important characteristic of formative assessment is that it provides feedback to the

learner on the success of what has been learnt and taught and evidence to the teacher of each learner’s progress. Alternative assessments offer opportunities to obtain such evidence and could thus be viewed as part of formative assessment. This combined or multi-faceted approach to assessment is part of a current trend that assessment for learning has assumed greater importance than assessment of learning, as happens in external examinations. Although tests and exams currently have far greater weight as evidence of a learner’s achievement and qualifications, it may very well be that alternative assessment has a greater effect on learning than do tests at the end of the learning process.

Enhancing the validity and the reliability of alternative assessment

If examinations are to be complemented or even replaced by teacher evaluation, how can the validity and reliability of this assessment be ensured? How can valid and reliable CEFR-related evidence be collected on what has been achieved by the student in their language learning? We may be able to show that more, and more relevant, evidence can be gathered through alternative assessment and that this may cover more aspects of language learning than external examinations can assess. Our challenge is to make sure that, from a validity and reliability point of view, such evidence is comparable to that gathered in external examinations. The Covid pandemic has shown that, when external examinations cannot be administered, alternative assessment may need to provide such evidence.

Types of alternative assessment

Commonly used types of alternative assessment are portfolios, journals and diaries, writing folders, teacher observations, peer and teacher-student conferences, audio-visual recordings, checklists and self-assessments. It is clear that most of these methods can hardly be used in fixed-point, external assessment situations. What most of these assessment types have in common, however, is that they assess student behaviour

over a longer period of time than in an external examination.

A brief characterisation of some of the above types of alternative assessment follows below.

Portfolios

In the educational field, a portfolio refers to a collection of samples of students' work. It is often used to give evidence of progress in learning. Portfolios contain a record of students' learning activities, ideas and reflections. Generally, learners make their own decisions about what to include in the portfolio. Portfolios may contain the various documents that were listed above. Various types of portfolios can be distinguished, such as the personal portfolio, the record-keeping portfolio, the group portfolio, the thematic portfolio and the multiyear portfolio.

One specific example of a portfolio is the *European Language Portfolio* (ELP). However, the ELP is not meant as an assessment tool in the first place. The ELP can be very useful in that it can present information about a learner's experience and concrete evidence of his or her foreign language achievements, much in the way that was discussed above. The ELP has two functions:

1. *Reporting*. Like the artist's portfolio, the ELP displays the owner's capabilities, but in relation to foreign languages. Its purpose is not to replace the certificates and diplomas that are awarded on the basis of formal examinations, but to supplement them by presenting additional information about the owner's experience and concrete evidence of his or her foreign language achievements.
2. *Pedagogical*. The ELP is also intended to be used as a means of making the language learning process more transparent to learners, helping them to develop their capacity for reflection and self-assessment, and thus enabling them gradually to assume more and more responsibility for their own learning. (Little and Perclová (2001))

The table below indicates how we judge the usefulness of portfolios in alternative assessment.

Type of assessment	Usefulness
Formative	++
Complementary to external summative assessment	+
Replacement of external summative assessment	-

Anecdotal records and teacher's feedback kept for the record

Worley (2001) defines an anecdotal record as "a collection of written observations of students related to their progress in learning." "Teacher notes to students, whether offering criticism or encouragement, and student notes to teachers should also be part of the anecdotal records, as well as teacher annotations on a student paper". This type of recording of students' progress clearly is extremely useful in the formative phases of education. It would, however, tend to be too "anecdotal" for summative assessment.

Type of assessment	Usefulness
Formative	++
Complementary to external summative assessment	+
Replacement of external summative assessment	-

Audio and video recordings

As Al-Mahrooqi et al. (2018: 4) point out:

"[i]n audiovisual recordings in the language classroom, the teacher and/or the learners record the performance of a variety of tasks that require the use of FL within authentic or real-life settings. Audiovisual recordings are ideal for keeping the record of learners' speaking and listening skills. They also allow students to demonstrate a number of higher-order thinking skills and, where appropriate, knowledge of sociocultural conventions in

the target language. Above all, recordings (a) are highly motivating for learners, (b) make it possible for teachers to compare performance at different points in time and easily spot significant developments in language proficiency, and (c) give students a chance to demonstrate speaking and presentation skills without the pressure of performing in front of a large class”.

As with the anecdotal records, this type of recording of students’ performances and growth is very useful in the formative phases of education. If the assessment is carried out in a valid and reliable way, it may be useful in summative assessment as well, certainly in cases where speaking is not tested in an external, fixed-day examination.

Type of assessment	Usefulness
Formative	++
Complementary to external summative assessment	++
Replacement of external summative assessment	-/+

Checklists, rating scales and rubrics

Worley (2001), citing a number of other authors, makes the following distinction between various assessment tools such as checklists, rating scales and rubrics:

- “Checklists provide evidence of either the presence or the absence of a particular behavior, trait, ability, or characteristic. The simple checklist merely requires the observer to check yes or no as to whether or not the item was observed.” (Worley 2001: 3)
- “Rating scales are checklists that require the observer to make a judgment concerning the degree to which the behavior was performed by placing scores on a scale from high to low performance.” (Worley 2001: 3)
- A rubric is a scoring tool “that lists the criteria for a piece of work and articulates gradations of quality for each criterion, from excellent

to poor.” (...) “Rubrics are used to make the expectations of the teacher clear. They help students become more thoughtful judges of the quality of their own and others’ work. They reduce the amount of time teachers spend evaluating student work. They allow teachers to accommodate heterogeneous classes. Rubrics provide an easy way to explain student evaluation to parents.” (Worley 2001: 3).

Clearly the use of checklists, rating scales and rubrics can be extremely useful both for formative and (external) summative assessment. We will return to the construction of checklists etc in the annex to this paper.

Type of assessment	Usefulness
Formative	++
Complementary to external summative assessment	++
Replacement of external summative assessment	+

Diaries, journals and writing folders

According to Al-Mahrooqi and Denman,

“diaries, journals, and writing folders can be implemented as alternative assessment in a number of different forms: as daily records of student progress, as more general journals of learners’ lives, as records of current issues and news events, as collections of writing samples from across the curriculum, and so on. Diaries, journals, and writing folders encourage learners to reflect upon both what they have learned and how they have learned it, to make links across the curriculum, and to develop a connection with their instructor that can deepen their relationship while also potentially guiding their future learning” (2018: 4).

Type of assessment	Usefulness
Formative	++
Complementary to external summative assessment	+
Replacement of external summative assessment	-

Conferences

Conferences are in fact occasions where stakeholders get together. As Worley (2001) points out, there are several types of conferences that can occur within the school setting. A peer conference is composed of a group of five to six students who meet to assess the written work of the group members. Students are expected to provide help, feedback and ideas to each other in a non-threatening atmosphere before work is handed in to the teacher for grading.

The teacher-student conference is held to provide vital communication between the teacher and the student concerning the student's educational progress. Such conferences usually occur at the middle school level as part of the advisory programme where affective problems may be discussed as well as academic matters. As students develop the capacity, they should assume more responsibility for documenting their progress in their school-work and other activities. All of the alternative assessment tools, such as portfolios, journals, recordings, etc., should be included in this conferencing.

The extent to which conferences can be used to assess the development of students' language skills is debatable, but they may certainly motivate students in exploring ways to increase their competences.

Type of assessment	Usefulness
Formative	+
Complementary to external summative assessment	-/+
Replacement of external summative assessment	-/+

Tasks and alternative assessment

Many of the teachers' alternative assessment activities in class tend to focus more on the development of relevant tasks, on acquainting students with meaningful, real-life language situations and less on collecting (valid and reliable) information on student performance. Such formative assessment may not sufficiently inform stakeholders about the extent to which students have reached the learning objectives laid down in the curriculum, or to what extent they meet the minimum requirements. Even more specifically, formative assessment may not provide information about whether or not a student can actually do what (for example) the portfolio claims s/he is able to do. Thus, a task is not in and of itself an assessment but merely a tool to elicit evidence of a student's performance. This also applies to the portfolio. The product that is elicited by the task or the performance or product that is incorporated in the portfolio needs to be assessed using some form of rating procedure, be it a rating scale, a holistic evaluation or whatever procedure is most relevant and practical.

The rating procedures need to meet a number of criteria of validity, reliability and relevance to the task. Such procedures depend principally on the circumstances in which tasks are administered and on the function of the assessment (formative or summative), as well as on the quality of orientation and training offered to those doing the rating. In the annex at the end of this discussion paper, we offer a number of (generic) rating instruments that can be used in alternative assessment.

Conclusion

Formative assessment plays an important role in the teaching and learning process. In the recent COVID epidemic, the results gathered in formative assessment have been used for summative purposes, to make up for the absence of external fixed-day examinations. This has created some validity and reliability issues. For one thing, such results were not collected for summative purposes and may have been invalid for that very reason. We have found that for many of the tasks that teachers set their students there is no clear assessment component, or the assessment is rather general and personal and does not lend itself to reliable comparisons between student performances. In regular formative situations this may perhaps not be such a problem, but if alternative assessment is to complement or even replace external summative assessment, then valid and reliable assessment procedures should accompany such assessment.

The use of alternative, classroom-based types of assessment, to be used for both formative and summative purposes, can be enhanced if more attention is paid to the validity and reliability aspects of the assessment. There will always be a need for external summative examinations, but the validity of such examinations may in fact be enhanced by the additional information gathered through good quality alternative assessment.

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Appendix

Examples of rating instruments

Alternative assessment needs to be valid and reliable. Certainly, if it is to complement or even replace external summative assessment tasks, it will need to be accompanied by valid and reliable rating procedures. Below we show a variety of rating instruments, which were originally provided by Jana Běrešová and then extensively amended by the RELANG project team. These scales may be used for a variety of assessment tasks, some of them mainly for formative purposes, others for summative purposes or for both.

Checklist

The following checklist can be used for teacher feedback, self-assessment and peer assessment.

Rating criteria	Yes	No
Is the writer's purpose clear?		
Does the writer fully cover the topic?		
Does the writer achieve the communicative aim of the task?		
Is there a relevant beginning?		
Does each paragraph have a main idea?		
Does it contain a relevant conclusion?		
Are all the sentences complete?		
Is vocabulary used appropriately?		
Is grammar used appropriately?		

Rating scale 1

This scale can be used formatively or summatively at the end of a learning phase. It distinguishes a number of relevant criteria for the assessment of the individual student's participation in a group discussion.

Rating Criteria	Assessment			
Interacts with all members of the group during the task	1	2	3	4
Maintains rapport with other members of the group	1	2	3	4
Expresses readiness to change his/her point of view	1	2	3	4
Expresses appreciation of others' contributions	1	2	3	4
Uses a range of structures (targeted in the teaching)	1	2	3	4
Uses a range of vocabulary (targeted in the teaching)	1	2	3	4
Pronunciation is comprehensible	1	2	3	4

1 = little evidence; 4 = much evidence

Rating scale 2

This rating scale has a more holistic approach: it combines a number of characteristics of various levels of performance.

Score band	Descriptions of performance
5	Well organized with very few errors in grammar to impede comprehension. A wide and appropriate use of vocabulary. Fully comprehensible.
4	Minor problems in content and/or organization. Some errors in grammar and lexical choice that require attention. Generally comprehensible.
3	Although some problems in content and/or organization are evident, the paper is comprehensible for the most part. There are obvious errors in grammar and lexical choice that indicate a need for further language development.
2	There are serious problems in content and/or organization. The paper is difficult to understand at times. Errors in grammar and lexical choice are frequent and distracting. Not easy to understand.
1	Unclear content and organization. Overwhelming problems with grammar and lexical choice that make comprehension very difficult.

Criteria sheet 1

This holistic criteria sheet is similar to rating scale 2. It helps teachers to report to students, parents and other stakeholders in more concrete terms than just 'outstanding', 'satisfactory' etc.

Judgement	Descriptions of performance
Outstanding	Describes most story elements (characters, setting, beginning, middle and end of story) through written language Exhibits correct and effective word choice Is usually accurate in structure Connects ideas using appropriate conjunctions
Good	Provides an accurate account of the story with some details Uses a sufficient range of vocabulary, mostly accurately Is sometimes accurate in structure Connects ideas using some conjunctions
Satisfactory	Mentions some story elements through written language Uses a less sufficient range of vocabulary but not always accurately Is occasionally accurate in structure Occasionally connects ideas
Needs improvement	Fails to clearly describe most story elements through written language Uses a limited range of words with some inaccuracies Is seldom accurate in structure Rarely connects ideas

Criteria sheet 2

This is an analytic criteria sheet. It distinguishes between various aspects of the language performance. It can be used both in a formative and in a summative context. However, if used summatively, for each criterion it must be stated what the minimum performance should be for the student to pass the assessment.

Criteria	Needs improvement	Satisfactory	Good	Outstanding
Description of the story elements	Fails to clearly describe most story elements through written language	Mentions some story elements through written language	Provides an accurate account of the story with some details	Describes most story elements (characters, settings, beginning, middle, and end of story) through written language
Vocabulary	Uses a limited range of words with some inaccuracies	Uses a less sufficient range of vocabulary but not always accurately	Uses a sufficient range of vocabulary, mostly accurately	Exhibits correct and effective word choice
Grammar	Is usually accurate in structure	Is sometimes accurate in structure	Is occasionally accurate in structure	Is seldom accurate in structure
Cohesion and coherence	Rarely connects ideas	connects ideas	Connects ideas using some conjunctions	Connects ideas using appropriate conjunctions

Learner wellbeing and learner autonomy

Richard Rossner with Frank Heyworth

Introduction

Learner wellbeing is essential if learners are to feel comfortable in learning situations, take full advantage of their educational opportunities and develop their ability to learn autonomously inside and outside the classroom. Certain aspects of competence related to wellbeing, such as positive socio-psychological attitudes, a high level of physical and mental health awareness and the ability to regulate one's emotions, are now included among the global or transversal competences specified in school curricula in various countries.

But what can language teachers with classes of up to 30 students (or more) do to support individual learners and enhance their wellbeing so that they can flourish even in situations such as the periods of Covid lockdown? This discussion paper looks at some ways in which Covid lockdown situations made giving attention to learner wellbeing and ensuring that all learners were able to keep up even more important than in normal teaching circumstances. It will also examine the importance of learner autonomy in all language learning situations and ways in which learner autonomy contributes to learner wellbeing.

What can language teachers do to enhance learner wellbeing?

As Mercer (2021:16) points out, "learner wellbeing has been receiving increasing attention but, on the whole, there is much that we do not yet know or understand about its nature in relation to learning a language specifically and how best to promote it in practical terms alongside linguistic competences". UNICEF's model of the 'transferable skills' that every child needs to acquire during their education includes 'emotional skills' as one of its three main areas, the other two being 'cognitive skills' and 'social skills' (UNICEF 2019: 10). Emotional skills are skills that relate to understanding and regulating one's own emotions, coping with stress, understanding the emotions of others, and being able to empathise with others.

In their responses to the surveys carried out as part of the initiative described in this publication, both language teachers and language learners referred to issues related to the wellbeing of learners, particularly the feelings of isolation and the lack of social contact with classmates and friends during periods of lockdown and remote learning. In the 2021 survey, respondents (mostly teachers) were asked "*What in your view are the most important challenges to language education*

during the pandemic to be addressed in the future?'. Several responses focused on learner wellbeing. Here are two examples:

How to create a learning environment that helps learners (and teachers) to cope even better with loneliness and stress, since these are important issues during a lockdown. Wellbeing affects learning (and teaching) output in an important way.

Inclusion; learners with learning difficulties; disengaged learners; anger and depression issues; missing out on socialising; learning to handle strong feelings towards others without going overboard; learning social skills.

While groups of learners who responded to the 'learners' voices' survey questionnaire following discussion with their classmates mentioned positive aspects of remote learning, such as not needing to travel to school and being able to get up later, they also mirrored comments on wellbeing made by teachers. Here are some examples:

We did not see our friends and, as we were without them, we missed them a lot. We were lonely.

I felt sad, isolated and lonely. My eyesight got worse, and I need glasses. I missed all my friends. Sometimes I didn't understand what the teacher wanted me to do.

We missed physical contact with friends, lack of motivation, home distractions, looking at the screen 8 hours a day, getting bad posture because of sitting, it was stressful.

These kinds of feelings are not restricted to online or remote learning: depending on the age of learners, there can often be ups and downs at school when socialising with classmates. Bullying is an extreme example that can seriously affect the wellbeing and even the mental health of learners, but even normal relations with classmates may cause anxiety. The unhappiness of individual students can have many other causes too, some related to home life, to lack of confidence, physical discomfort etc. Distress may also be a result of

what happens in their learning: not being able to understand what the teacher is explaining, being given a bad mark after a test, hearing a negative comment from a classmate, or the feeling of being unable to keep up, of falling behind.

An advantage of language education is that learners need to practise using the spoken and written language, and this implies a constant need for something to talk or write about. Language textbooks often cover a wide range of subject matter, but this may not include topics such as stress, strong emotions, social relationships or loneliness. Teachers can, however, create simple discussion or writing activities that address such issues, perhaps using a story, poem, song or literary passage as a stimulus. Some examples were included among the case studies described in Part 2 of this publication.

It is demanding for language teachers – and other teachers – to both teach their subjects and give proper attention to the wellbeing of their students, and this is made more difficult in school lockdowns such as were experienced during the Covid emergency. An approach that was adopted by several of those who responded to the surveys was to shorten the times in the week when the whole class would work together online and to spend time instead working with individuals and small groups, especially those who were having difficulties and seemed to be falling behind. This more individualised approach not only meant that more time could be devoted to working on individual areas of difficulty with language learning but also allowed opportunities to explore feelings of stress, isolation or upset which individuals were experiencing, and where possible to reassure them or, in severe cases, organise professional support for them. Such interactions may be more difficult to maintain under 'normal' circumstances but can bring considerable benefits to more vulnerable learners or those experiencing emotional or learning difficulties, however mild.

How can learner autonomy be encouraged, and how is it affected by wellbeing?

What do we mean by 'learner autonomy'? One of the earliest definitions, and it referred specifically to language learning, was 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (Holec 1981). But in the school environment, it is not that easy. Most young children do a lot of independent learning about things that interest them before they go to school and later outside school settings. But sitting in a class with teachers can quickly lead to less autonomy and more reliance on the teacher to tell students what to learn and how. In other words, in the school environment most students do not automatically take charge of their own language learning (or other learning), and just telling students that they need to take responsibility for their own learning will not make it happen. It requires planning, encouragement and support from teachers, parents and other learners.

In situations like those experienced by teachers and students during the Covid emergency it suddenly becomes even more urgent for students to work autonomously. For example, during Covid lockdowns lessons often took place entirely online, and students' time with teachers was usually shortened. Teachers had to plan their lessons differently and needed to persuade students to work independently between lessons. One of the respondents to the 2021 survey said:

I deferred certain aspects of the learning process to individualised exercises and tasks to make more active use of the precious face-to-face time [online].

So how did teachers manage to provide students with the support they needed to take responsibility for at least part of their own language learning, and how successful were their efforts? Teachers cannot force learners to be autonomous, but they can provide a learning environment which encourages independent learning and can help learners to develop the attitudes and skills needed for autonomy. Below

are some of the features of an 'autonomy-friendly' learning environment.

- Learners need to have confidence in their ability to work independently and to be able to focus on the tasks they will be doing on their own.
- They need to fully understand the objectives of a learning sequence and the activities which the institution and teacher organise.
- They need to master the skills needed to study successfully, such as working patiently and persevering with tasks, including the more difficult ones.
- There needs to be some independence in the choice of activities or the learning methods that learners can use. Learners do not all work in the same way.
- There should be opportunities for learners to be creative when carrying out learning tasks.
- Teachers need to provide opportunities for learners to ask questions about the learning approach, seek help and offer their own suggestions about aims and ways of working.

These features don't just apply to individual work: they are important in autonomous group work, too. As another teacher commented in response to the 2021 survey:

Students got more opportunities to work independently, but not all of them were using them. Some of them are becoming better problem-solvers. Teachers and students have to build new strategies that they will continue to use once all are able to return to school buildings. The challenge is helping build more independent learners.

During the Covid pandemic language teachers and their learners had to adjust to special educational environments. In many cases, these included teaching and learning remotely via the internet using Zoom, Teams or a similar application. At other times, teachers and students worked in classrooms where mask-wearing and social distancing were required. In all these cases, but especially in remote learning, students had to take a lot of responsibility for managing their

learning because their progress depended to a great extent on working autonomously due to shortened lesson-times and interruptions to learning. Those learners who had difficulty working independently probably made less progress in their language learning. This points to the need for teachers to encourage learners sometimes to work together in pairs or small groups, even in remote learning. That way, they can learn from, motivate, and socialise with each other, which are also good ways of enhancing learners' wellbeing and confidence.

Here are some practical ideas on how language teachers (and parents) can create conditions which encourage learner autonomy in normal circumstances as well as in periods when remote teaching and learning are necessary:

- Give learners responsibility for aspects of language learning which can be done independently. Another respondent to our survey wrote:

Use time productively by leaving the reading/grammar/research activities for learners to do on their own, making the class time way more productive, and allowing us to have smaller groups each time.

- Make it possible for learners to organise their study time by explaining clearly in advance the content of the lesson(s) and the deadlines for presenting their finished work.
- At relevant times, offer a choice of learning tasks in which students can express their personal interests and use their creativity. Individual and group projects can be a valuable vehicle for this kind of individual work.
- Encourage learners to reflect on and discuss how they prefer to study and how they choose their study methods. They could use a learner diary to provide a framework for this.
- Include self-assessment and peer-assessment as a major part both of language teaching and learning and of assessment and evaluation processes. This should include self-assessment of specific pieces of work, but also the longer-

term assessment of learners' individual progress towards the course objectives. Language portfolios based on the European Language Portfolio model are useful tools for this, provided that teachers initially supervise their use.

- Encourage learners to develop self-confidence, both to undertake independent work and to ask for help when they need it.
- Increase the flexibility of school systems so that there is time and space for learners to take initiatives and to influence the way in which learning is organised.

The importance of digital literacy and educational adaptability

It is clear from experience during periods of remote or distance learning that it is essential for learners to achieve a good level of digital literacy, and schools and teachers have realised that this is also necessary in "normal" times. Use of the Internet, language learning apps, communication platforms and so on enables learners to work by themselves on tasks without teacher input. To take full advantage of digital resources it is even more important that learners develop their educational adaptability, including their understanding of how language (and other) competences can be developed, and the willingness and ability to use an increasingly wide range of study skills.

In more detail, what steps can teachers (and parents) take to help learners to become more independent?

Learner autonomy requires substantial learner support. There are various ways in which teachers and parents can prepare and encourage children and older learners to become more independent in their learning. Here are some examples:

1. Get them to think about the ways in which they learn: children and older learners do not all have the same 'learning styles' and learning preferences. Some find it easier to work with words, and others prefer images and diagrams. Some find it easier to remember information

than others, and so on. Learners can be asked what they find easy or difficult and can be pointed to ways of making learning easier for them as individuals.

2. Check whether learners of all ages have special learning needs which may mean that they can easily be 'left behind' in their learning. For example, some youngsters may have a mild or more serious form of dyslexia, making it harder for them to read and write; others may have emotional or concentration problems that make it difficult for them to focus on an activity for enough time; other learners may be recently arrived migrants who are unfamiliar with the culture and the language of schooling. In many schools there are specialists who are trained to help such learners.
3. From a very early age get learners to do some activities in small groups or by themselves, without the teacher supervising them all the time. Teachers can help to accustom them to working independently by first ensuring that that they understand what they need to do, and secondly by starting the activity off with them before leaving them to work alone or in a small group.
4. Familiarise them with the technology and apps that they will need to use. From an early age, youngsters are now accustomed to using technology, but it is easy for some to get left behind. Teachers need to show learners how new digital learning tools work before asking them to use them in their learning, especially in autonomous learning. Usually, a simple demonstration and practice exercise is sufficient. In some cases, if necessary, learners can show each other in pairs or groups how the tool works to increase individual confidence.
5. Help them plan their work and their time. This can be done by telling learners they have choices in the way they do things and asking them to explain what they are going to do and how. It may be that they will not all work in the same way, and different groups and individuals should be allowed to choose. But they also need to know how much time they have. In face-to-face lessons this may be expressed

in minutes. In online learning they may have plenty of time between one lesson and the next, but they still need to plan their work.

6. Give them some help at the beginning of the activity or during the first few minutes. For example in language learning, giving them some vocabulary or expressions that they can use; introducing a reading or listening text by asking 'warm-up' questions about what knowledge they already have of the topic(s) and what kind of text it is; suggesting some different ways they can approach a task or an activity, and showing them how a puzzle works are all means of getting learners to more easily work alone or in their small group.
7. Show them that you are confident that they can do things by themselves, and that they do not always need to be helped or supervised. Encouraging them by giving individual feedback during a task or at the end and appreciating what they have been able to do well can help learners to have more belief and confidence in their own capabilities.
8. Get them accustomed to assessing their own progress and their own work. Give them 'can-do' criteria such as those used in language portfolios to help them decide for themselves how well their language skills are developing, but also get them to reflect on the tasks they have done. How easy or difficult was it and why? Did they find it useful for their language learning? Did they find it motivating? Why/why not? Here are some suggested sentences that learners can complete in their own language or the language they are learning after a lesson (or a week of lessons):
 - a. The thing(s) I enjoyed most about last lesson:
 - b. The thing(s) I learned last lesson that I didn't know:
 - c. The thing(s) I am going to do to remember and use what I learned:
 - d. The thing(s) I found most difficult in the last lesson:

(adapted from Harmer 2007:397)

Another respondent to our survey wrote:

I personally use “learner autonomy” in my language classes. My students are used to taking responsibility for their work and to doing work that is project oriented. They are also used to keeping a logbook (a diary of their learning) which they maintain digitally, and which I have access to, so I have a good insight into each student’s work.

Conclusion

The suggestions above can help schools, teachers and parents to create circumstances where learner autonomy becomes normal in language learning. But other factors are also critical, such as how learner wellbeing is nurtured; the quality and suitability of the resources that are available to schools, teachers, and learners; whether students have equal access to education, including online teaching and learning; and how disadvantaged groups are supported in the educational process.

Autonomous learning also needs to be carefully balanced with ‘input’, guidance and whole-class activities led by the teacher in which the work done autonomously is explored and reviewed, any difficulties arising are dealt with, and follow-up work is planned. Teachers and learners can then become accustomed to a cycle in which work done autonomously is built on by the teacher, and work with the teacher is followed up by more autonomous work.

One thing is certain: the experience of teaching during the Covid pandemic has highlighted how crucial training in learning strategies and learner autonomy are for successful language learning, as highlighted in a concluding quotation from the responses to the surveys:

My experience has strengthened my belief in the necessity to promote learner autonomy and to focus on language learning strategies. It has become very obvious that good language learners can more easily cope with remote and hybrid learning, and autonomous learners understand that the tasks help them to develop their competences. Things

that are important in classroom teaching – establishing a relationship, communicating/ discussing/ agreeing on objectives, ensuring variation, giving effective feedback etc. are just as important or even more important in remote or hybrid teaching.

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Language teacher support and professional learning: the role of networks and action research

Christine Lechner

Introduction

This paper will consider aspects of language teacher support and professional learning. When schools closed down across Europe in spring 2020, teachers were asked to give online classes and to keep contact through e-learning, and then often left alone to cope with the situation. Thus, the starting point for this paper will be an examination of indicators from the surveys carried out by the 'The future of language education in the light of Covid' initiative, with a focus on perceived needs, language teacher support and professional learning. Both in the pilot and main surveys, there are strong indications of teacher learning, not only in such concrete areas as online teaching and the discovery of useful teaching and learning materials, but also with regard to social aspects such as individualisation and learner support, teacher flexibility and willingness to learn about new methods and approaches. Survey results reveal teacher capacities, dedication and needs rather than providing direct evidence of networking structures exploited by teachers. The final section of the paper will consider opportunities for language teacher support through establishing networks, and concepts and frameworks of characteristic educational networks will be proposed.

Teachers within support systems

Traditionally teaching has been a solitary occupation, teachers work alone and negotiate mutual survival with learners. As a young teacher arriving from the chumminess of a 1970's university campus it was an awful jolt to find that I was suddenly alone. I was amazed and shocked to discover that there were well-established colleagues who were observing with detached interest and amusement my efforts to find my way, and there was no one around in the profession to whom I could speak honestly about my worries and pedagogical questions.

In Austria where I was working it was only in the late 1980s that bottom-up movements began to create the supportive atmosphere in which frameworks for action research and other opportunities for professional learning could begin to develop. It was at this time that teachers began to meet in professional groups to discuss teaching issues in an objective way, to talk about teaching in a supportive atmosphere and to work on the common goals of enhancing classroom practice and the experience of language learners.

This was also the period when a broad range of in-service training sessions were offered to teachers Europe-wide, encouraging the use of new methods and showing innovative approaches.

Inspiration came, for example, from the British Council and was spread from teachers of English to teachers of other languages. For many teachers in many countries, the decades around the turn of the century were very exciting. This was an age when everything seemed possible, funding for continuing professional development was available and teachers across Europe suddenly had opportunities to exchange on their practice and develop teaching strategies together.

In the 1990s international, national and local networks offering mutual support and visions for teacher empowerment began to take shape (see Rauch, 2013, p.313-4), although knowledge of and engagement with these networks was limited to those who sought networks or stumbled across them. Even in the early years of this century student teachers appeared to have little concept of the benefits of working together for mutual support. Some future teachers, participating in international exchange programmes to gain classroom experience whom I met, appeared to regard supervision by school mentors and university tutors as a superfluous evil during training and not something a practising teacher would want to engage in. On their return from one such exchange, a group of students remarked in amazement: "In Iceland teachers don't hide in their classrooms!"

One framework for professional development is action research. The term has been in use from 1945 and became specifically relevant for education in the 1980s. A useful definition is as follows:

Action research is a name given to a particular way of looking at your practice to check whether it is as you feel it should be. [...] If you feel that your practice is satisfactory, you will be able to explain how and why you believe this to be the case and produce authenticated evidence to ground your claims that you are doing well. If you feel your practice needs attention in some way, you will be able to take action to improve it and produce evidence to show how your practice has improved. (McNiff 2013: 23).

Inherent to action research is the concept of starting with strengths: "[Action researchers] are committed to building on their strengths and to overcoming their weaknesses [...]". (Altrichter et al. 1993: 4). The idea of action research broke down barriers hidden in the classroom and gave inspiration to dare to think about and draw attention to one's own classroom successes and fortitude and to look in an objective way at areas where development would be beneficial. One of John Elliott's core concepts was the idea that action research is "the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it" (Elliott 1991: 69). This is at the heart of teacher empowerment - teachers daring to see themselves as experts basing their expertise on the knowledge about their own achievements and their awareness of areas of expertise that they need to develop, on their capacity to establish their own networks and the strength to deal with external pressures in an objective evidence-based way. Practical guides described the steps.⁷

Current stressors and need for support

Thinking back over the past three years of Covid emergency, the feeling of shock persists. Suddenly, our lives and expectations slowed down and for many people came to a halt. As schools closed in Europe in spring 2020 the implications became clear. The horror vision of children left alone, sitting at home, isolated from their friends was becoming reality. Families struggled to facilitate children's participation in online learning whilst coping with their own adult work-related problems. The situation of families became a regular news feature, but it was disappointing that there was not more focus on the situation of teachers. During periods of school closures there was bewilderment and resignation, and there were conversations about these lucky teachers who now no longer even needed to leave their homes in the mornings. Everyone sees themselves as an expert on teaching, as we have all been to school and our children go to school, and therefore everyone feels competent to air

⁷ For example, in Elliott, 1991 and Altrichter et al. 1993

views on the subject of education. In contrast to these generalising ideas, the surveys carried out during the ECML/PNF initiative and reported on in Part 1 provide a serious and first-hand collection of teacher experiences. There were statements clearly expressing the difficulties encountered, included in the section on “The most important lessons you have learned from your experiences”:

I learned that no technology can make up for the live contact that I have with students, I can easily follow them in the live classroom and “read” them, whereas in on-line classes it is almost impossible to see how they are doing.

The differences between successful pupils and pupils with learning difficulties have grown bigger during the pandemic.....We all spent a lot more time sitting and staring at a computer so we also experienced different kinds of physical pains.

At the same time teachers expressed their own discomfort and showed concern for the learners and offered ideas about what could have improved the situation.

What the learners said the teachers are up against

In the first months of the pandemic there was rightly a focus on student wellbeing. Gossiping voices were heard in city parks and village greens about teachers not bothering, learners being left alone, teachers not being capable of using technology. These sentiments are also to be found in some learners’ comments in the learners’ voices’ survey:

There was very little interaction with teachers. Most of the time they just put notes and homework in communications. We did have meetings online, but it wasn’t the same as the real lessons.

We did not like that most lessons were online with teachers using Microsoft Teams, the explanation was not so precise, we did not have motivation, each day was the same, we did not have enough computers (in big families with 3 or more kids).

Teachers did not care about us.

A focus group of ERASMUS students from seven different European countries, ranging from Poland to the west of Ireland, discussed their experiences at secondary school during the lockdowns and brought up similar points. Their conclusions were that the organisation was bad, the technology was badly organised, the teachers did not adjust, there was a lack of interaction and attention, they were left alone, and little attention was paid to them, and all the while they were feeling low and missing their friends. Examples were given showing that many teachers across Europe were left to work out how to cope with the new situation on their own, often in isolation, without professional support. But this was only one side of the coin - there were diverse storylines.

Professional learning

As indicated above, even during very difficult times teachers are aware of various possibilities and opportunities. As Klagenfurt academics have pointed out when writing about educational networks, “...professional learning happens in practical situations, which in turn are seen to require reflection and further development, knowledge and skill development.” (Zehetmeier et al. 2015 p.163). This is exactly what we can learn from the responses to the ECML/PNF surveys. Both the pilot and the main ‘learners’ voices’ surveys demonstrate the learning capacities of language teachers. One of the features of teacher learning referred to was flexibility. A second feature was their open-mindedness (Pollard, 1997, p. 14) and teachers’ willingness to learn.

Direct learning

As expected, during the Covid pandemic there was a focus on digital competences; teachers learnt a lot about using technology during lockdowns, and there was absolute consensus in the survey responses that technology is and will continue to be useful in language learning. It is encouraging to note that, in the responses to the surveys from language teachers, technical aspects are often regarded as ingredients of methodology rather than as a separate area. This is reflected in some of the comments:

Also, I have realized that lessons can be organized in very interesting ways using online tools. Carrying out various online projects is pretty motivating too.

I learned a great deal of useful tools and techniques which I hadn't been prompted to use before the pandemic, but all of this was secondary to a renewed appreciation for my role as a trusted adult in children and teenagers' lives, particularly in a subject which encourages students to work on their communication and social skills (in any language).

Moreover, applying technology was not the only area in which teachers learnt. Social aspects were very important too, and there was enormous learning about this, indicating teachers' capacity for development and their depth of reflection. The surveys show clearly that, on their return to school, language teachers had learnt much about supporting individual learners and that they were ready to find ways to implement individualisation in their classrooms.

For me as a language teacher it was great to see how some of the quietest students (in face-to-face classes) were becoming more and more independent in their studying.

I have understood how important it is, especially while teaching online, to assist individual students, not only the ones with learning difficulties.

Learning to be flexible

Despite a view often articulated that teachers were not performing well, it must be stressed how well many language teachers coped with professional aspects of their job during the Covid pandemic, such as keeping the balance between productive and receptive skills. The results of the surveys show that most managed to do this in a situation that was suddenly completely different. As the report in Part 1 states:

"A majority (54%) considered that the balance had been about the same as in 'normal' classrooms, but 31% felt there was more

attention paid to receptive skills in socially distanced classrooms, while 15% thought there was more emphasis on productive skills. I would propose that the choice of emphasis shows teacher flexibility and awareness depending on the technology available. It was also interesting to note that some teachers used the opportunity to increase students' talking time."

A further aspect of flexibility was adapting to using technology. This is reflected in comments such as:

I've learned how to use google classroom and prepare material for pupils in google slides. I found a lot of useful pages on the internet with interactive exercises that helped to develop speaking, listening, reading, writing during distance learning. I've experienced how it is to teach a language in online classes. - Singing and saying chants with all the pupils at the same time, is impossible.

Through the ability to be flexible teachers were able to learn to use the technology in the best way "in the practical situation"

L'enseignement en ligne a apporté des « bénéfiques » surtout aux professeurs qui voulaient transmettre les informations dans une autre manière. Ils ont dû apprendre savoir manier des outils qu'ils utilisaient rarement jusqu'alors, chercher la meilleure plate-forme en ce qui concerne les exercices qui mettent mieux en évidence l'information et qui pourraient plaire aux enfants.

It is remarkable how language teachers kept the social aspects in the foreground:

I have learnt that the most important thing is to keep the contact going, show learners you care, set challenging but fun activities, and do more action research to improve teaching and learning. Digital technology, 21st century skills, and emotional intelligence are crucial for the future, and I am very excited at being involved and helping to drive such if I can. Loved this initiative and would like to become more involved in other such subjects at the European level.

Networking experiences and needs - looking forward

The teacher perceptions described above point to a way forward. One particularly significant teacher's comment was, "You are not alone, but you need to reach out". Going further, another teacher described an ideal situation in which teachers collaborated to give mutual support and enhance learning in the new situation:

I was lucky to work with two other language teachers and we had daily meetings where we discussed what to prepare for the following lesson, how to motivate our pupils. We listened to each other and gave advice. I think it is very important to collaborate, express your worries and share new ideas with other teachers.

The question is how to reach out, where to start to find support and how to structure peer support if it is not already in place. Wenger has referred to communities of practice as "the basic building blocks of a social learning system" (Wenger, 2000: 229) and later expounded:

Since the beginning of history, human beings have formed communities that share cultural practices reflecting their collective learning [...]. Participating in these 'communities of practice' is essential to our learning. It is at the very core of what makes us human beings capable of meaningful knowing (ibid: 229).

A question to be asked here is whether teachers can find such communities and participate actively in them.

Teaching is a social activity but, as indicated above, teaching can also be a lonely profession, at worst leading to isolation. During periods of lockdown this became more evident than ever: "You need to reach out!". Some type of community is a necessity for survival, and it seems important to note that "communities" can take many different forms. Educational communities may simply be an informal group of like-minded colleagues at a school, possibly connected through the subjects they teach. The size of the group may vary and the period of time during which the community functions may also vary from weeks to years

depending on circumstances. The groups may work in a fairly informal way, or there may be a formal structure. In some cases, members of the group share their working environment; in other cases, they may work in different institutions and be connected through other channels.

Groups of teachers sometimes choose to attend supervisions together working on specific issues with a qualified leader. Such groups may become 'communities of practice'. For language teachers in many contexts there are offers of subject-based continuing professional development (CPD), which can give reassurance through sharing new methods, language training, specific IT-skills etc. Furthermore, such CPD groups often form communities that persist over a period of time.

Action research in language education

Action research is one form of CPD which has been found useful as a framework to organise reflection and to track professional development. It is a form of consistent classroom research which starts from strengths and then looks at areas to be improved. Some of the working principles can be summarised as follows:

- It is a cyclical activity organised in cycles including reflection, data collection - action, data collection - reflection, data collection - reflection and discussion
- Each cycle should reach a satisfactory point of conclusion, but there should be perspectives for a future cycle
- Findings are based on evidence or data, for example from classroom observation, focus groups, teacher diaries
- It can be useful to look at theory, and theories can lead to the development of practice
- Practitioners are the owners of their own research and decide with whom they wish to share what they have learnt
- It makes a lot of sense to carry out action research within a community or support group, which may be limited to one or two critical friends

- It does not need to be a lengthy or complicated process (although in some situations it may be); action research may be done over one or two lessons, as was the case with the discussion activities used in the 'learners' voices' survey reported on in Part 1.

The link between professional learning opportunities such as action research and communities of practice has often been pointed out by academic action researchers:

The problems that face teachers in the 21st century are complex and beyond the scope of individual teachers to solve. Teams of teachers have the potential to be 'more responsive to the changing environment' than a teacher working alone. (Richardson 2022:310).

Professional development (PD) and professional learning communities (PLC) are widely accepted as contributing factors for the improvement of teaching practices and the transformation of student learning (Johannesson 2022: 411).

Indeed, over the years we have seen that action research and networking go hand-in-hand to support teachers working on their classroom practice; teachers have testified to the professional learning and enhancement of classroom practice that results from doing action research, and academics have pointed out the strengthening power of action research within communities.

Learning how to carry out action research is important, as exemplified by the two-year postgraduate courses on action-research offered in Austria. Course participants learn together how to develop action research projects that focus on their current work in the classroom; they give peer support and are guided by a team with a range of expertise from the field of education. "The participants are not only supported by the PFL (Pädagogik und Fachdidaktik für Lehrer:innen) team; they also learn from each other and support each other in their peer groups and often take on the role of critical friends". (Hanfstingl et al. 2020, p.73).

What follows is an account of how action research contributed to the professional development of a group of language teachers in a town in central Lithuania who attended a short series of online sessions during the Covid pandemic on learning about the approach. They then carried out their own small action research projects in teams focusing on their most urgent needs at the time: how to support their learners. Projects focused, for example, on how to encourage learners to speak in online scenarios, on essay writing and, in particular, on giving feedback online. These issues were at the heart of the teachers' ongoing concerns. Moreover, the experience showed how teachers who have learnt how to do action research and have been accompanied in their work for a short period of time can continue to work on their practice by carrying out further action research. They also established their own communities of learning and practice, as illustrated in the following extract from personal correspondence with participants:

We have acquired much knowledge about AR and gained invaluable experience each carrying out an individual AR and constantly sharing and discussing our progress as a PLC (professional learning community). We have shared our AR project results with pedagogical staff of our "Gimnazija" and with participants of a regional language teachers' conference. Next school year, we will be implementing a professional development program "Action Research: Enabling Students in My Lessons" tailored for our "Gymnasium" pedagogical staff and led by a national educational consultant. We, the AR project group members, will be raising new AR questions and looking for ways to help our students succeed. At the same time, we will be supporting our other colleagues in their individual journeys of AR in different aspects concerning pressing issues for classroom development. I will continue and strengthen the dialogue with my students.

This is a good example of how action research can benefit a professional community, and it is worthwhile considering how such practices might be emulated.

Professional learning and peer support outside formalised communities

Formal structures with resources for communities of teachers can be ideal. However, such settings are not always possible, and resources have become limited in many contexts. It seems appropriate at this point to come back to what teachers said in the surveys, where needs were perceived and how needs might lead to positive action. As mentioned above, one very striking comment was “You are not alone, but you need to reach out”. As has been pointed out by academics (see Elliott 1991), teacher isolation poses a threat, and some learners also noted that there was very little interaction with teachers.

This could be a starting point for teachers to reflect upon what was important about their meetings, what worked and how meetings might be structured to ensure maximum benefit. Learning to listen to each other, to have the confidence to share worries and ideas and the ability to learn from peers are very useful skills and can provide knowledge to be valued and kept in a treasure chest for the future. Above all, what was learnt in the pandemic should not be forgotten.

Another teacher mentioned the importance of seeing learners as individuals.

I wish I had spent more time focused on individuals. I wish our school would put more emphasis on individual students, especially those who simply “disappeared” from our reach during the pandemic. We did that once we were back in school, but it would make a great difference, I feel, if the school was more involved with these individuals during the pandemic. Not just our school, but the Ministry of Education in our country as the first one who’d show some care for these individuals.

Finding efficient and sustainable ways to support individual learners is a considerable task, beyond the capacities of a single teacher, but, again, the issue could be a starting point for teacher collaboration and mutual learning, as exemplified by the Lithuanian teachers mentioned above.

When hard-working and busy teachers hold meetings, the purpose must be clear; finding ways to support individual learners and ensure that no one is left behind is a vital task, especially in circumstances like those experienced during the Covid pandemic.

How can institutions help with professional learning?

Schools and other organisations have an important role to play, both in emergency situations such as were caused by the Covid pandemic and in more normal contexts. They can run structured training sessions, as happened in many cases where teachers needed quickly to learn how to use online communication platforms and specific digital resources during lockdowns; they can initiate and stimulate fruitful exchanges among groups of teachers, or provide time and spaces for them to do this independently; they can organise short talks and video-discussions with experts and authors of resources; they can promote problem sharing and the pooling of ideas and materials. They can provide a framework for collaboration on short-term action research projects to test out specific pedagogic and/or technological options, such as different approaches to questioning and other forms of elicitation or the provision of feedback to learners, as in the case of the Lithuanian teachers. Key provisos, however, are that teachers themselves need to be consulted when deciding about the focus of CPD and professional learning opportunities, and that teachers should also be encouraged to organise and lead sessions themselves.

Conclusion

This discussion paper has attempted to summarise some of the early developments leading to professional teacher support and learning, looking at recent dilemmas faced by teachers and learners and considering how teachers have learnt, grown and reacted during the Covid-19 crisis. This was followed by a section describing the usefulness of action research within communities illustrated

through teachers' practice as well as notes on professional learning and peer support outside formalised communities.

It is important that there is synergy between practising teachers and academic expertise. Practising teachers are knowledgeable about their day-to-day practice and are the 'owners' of their knowledge. Teacher wisdom points to ways forward. On the other hand, academics in the field of education can bring in a range of broader perspectives that can stimulate teachers to think beyond their day-to-day practice and encourage experimentation. Action research is one way of organising professional development and documenting a range of learning experiences and, whether small or large scale, it can be recommended as a way to empower teachers, to boost their confidence and enhance classroom practice. Once the techniques have been learned, action research can be useful for individual teachers and can lead to other types and areas of professional learning. Above all, in challenging times it is vital that teachers have opportunities to participate in continuing professional development and that they are at liberty to choose, individually and in their particular situations, what is useful for them to learn for the future.

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See also the references on the website of the ECML project [Action research communities for language teachers](#) and reports on '[success stories](#)' related to the project.

Part 4 – From crisis to sustainability: Policy Guidelines on supporting the development of language education

The Policy Guidelines below are based on the educational insights gained from surveys of language teachers and language learners about their experiences during the Covid pandemic reported on in Part 1 of the Rethinking language education after the experience of Covid publication. They arise from research and consultation activities carried out in 2021 and 2022 under the auspices of the European Centre for Modern Languages and members of its Professional Network Forum as part of the ‘Future of language education in the light of Covid’ initiative. The Guidelines are intended to assist and provide food for thought for policy makers in education authorities in the member states of the ECML and the European Union. They are also relevant for those at institutional level responsible for overseeing and managing language education and the provision of teacher education for future and practising language teachers.

The Guidelines concern not only contingency planning for adjusted face-to-face, remote and hybrid language learning in emergency situations, such as were experienced during the Covid pandemic, and which may well be necessary in future emergencies resulting from disease, natural disasters, or armed conflict. They also address opportunities to develop and enhance language education in non-emergency circumstances

which have flowed from insights and experience gained during the Covid emergency.

It needs to be borne in mind that, in many cases, the implications of the Covid emergency for language education are inseparable from its implications for education across the curriculum, and many of the Guidelines may be equally applicable to other subject areas. In the Guidelines below we have, where possible, taken account of the special nature of language education.

Policy Guidelines for teaching and learning: language education, a special case?

Language learning, whether in schools or in higher and further education, was seriously affected by lockdowns during the Covid emergency. During remote language teaching and learning, which poses different challenges for language teachers than for teachers of other non-language subjects (such as science or history), approaches had to be

adapted and a different and potentially wider and richer range of teaching and learning activities and resources was needed to maintain the oral interaction with and among learners that is essential to language learning.

Language learning involves the development of language skills as well as knowledge and awareness of how the language in question works. The Council of Europe's Common European Framework for Languages Companion Volume (CEFR CV) provides details of the spectrum of skills that need to be developed. For many language teachers, the opportunity to use in their teaching a range of mainly digital tools and resources that had not been part of their language teaching repertoire was an eye-opener. Comments made by language teachers and learners in the surveys showed that many believed the experience gained during the Covid emergency can and should be used to enrich language education in 'normal' times.

A. In order to ensure well organised, varied and effective language learning when there is a need to respond to emergency situations and when face-to-face teaching is unsafe or restricted, decision makers at all levels must plan for adaptability and flexibility by:

- i. defining at policy level a clear rationale for selecting remote or hybrid modes of learning and ensuring that the necessary practical and technical arrangements are made and are clearly communicated to all stakeholders;
- ii. being prepared to adjust the structure of the timetable and the curriculum at short notice in response to changing circumstances, and offering teachers two or more pathways where feasible, allowing them to diverge from the curriculum if necessitated by circumstances;
- iii. providing teachers at all educational levels with effective orientation, support and good digital and other resources to enable them to adapt to these changes and to plan flexibility and variety into their teaching; this also means rethinking initial and in-service teacher education;

- iv. investing in targeted professional learning and collaboration opportunities for language teachers and other teachers, whether they are working in schools or in higher or further education; these must enable them to set clear lesson objectives and to consider how best to respond effectively to mixed ability and individual needs among language learners, taking into account the different learning environments (e.g. remote or face-to-face);

Examples:

- *Teachers and future teachers should be guided in the use of descriptors in the CEFR and its CV for setting objectives and planning activities that focus on interaction and mediation suitable for the mode of teaching, whether face-to-face, restricted, remote, or hybrid.*
- *Where necessary, teachers should be able quickly to adapt or change the resources and activities they are using according to the context of learning, for example when they move from whole class teaching to work in small groups or breakout rooms, and/or to cater for learners with mixed ability.*

- v. supporting teachers in planning flexibility and variety into their teaching whether in remote, hybrid or face-to-face learning environments, and providing teachers with help in taking account of learners' real-world experiences in their teaching;

Example: *Teachers need to be able to devise and manage project-based language learning options involving both interaction during the lesson and individual work between lessons.*

- vi. developing a wider range of versatile language learning resources, including digital resources, and ensuring teachers and learners are able to use them effectively;

Example: *In their planning of remote or face-to-face lessons, teachers should find a balance between, on the one hand, using a variety of technological and other options and resources for doing collaborative work, and, on the other, the simplicity of selecting a standard*

preferred technology within a clearly defined methodological framework.

- vii. ensuring teachers define and explain to learners the role and purpose of each resource/tool/app used for remote or face-to-face learning.

Policy Guidelines for evaluation and assessment of language learning: adapting to different circumstances

During the Covid emergency normal procedures for evaluating learners' achievements during periods of learning, whether lasting one month, a trimester, a semester or a whole year, were disrupted. In many contexts, whether in schools or in higher and further education, it was decided that normal procedures involving secure, reliable and validated examinations or tests were not possible, except in some systems where online testing was already established for evaluating certain competences. Often teachers were asked to carry out alternative forms of assessment in the course of their teaching so that learners could be awarded a grade.

These situations were a challenge for institutions, teachers and learners, and parents were often concerned about a possible slippage of standards, including in national examination systems. In many instances teachers needed to devise activities and select or create resources that would enable them to regularly monitor learners' progress across the language skills and according to indicators (such as CEFR descriptors) that were specified in the syllabus. On the other hand, the emergency situation highlighted the important role that teachers have in carrying out continuous assessment and providing feedback to learners.

B. Increase and enhance the range of assessment procedures in all language learning by:

- i. ensuring that any reduction or suspension of formal examinations and testing is compensated for by valid, reliable and well-resourced alternative assessment measures;
- ii. specifying formative assessment (assessment for learning) in language education curricula and ensuring teachers carry out this kind of assessment to complement language exams and tests, also in normal circumstances;
- iii. giving teachers the skills to use these continuous assessment techniques effectively and to provide supportive feedback to learners;

Example: Peer and self-assessment, which serve as a means of enhancing learner autonomy, should also be regular features of formative assessment in foreign language teaching and learning.

- iv. ensuring that the methods of assessment used and the underlying principles are made transparent to all stakeholders;
- v. enhancing the validity and reliability of resources and techniques for continuous or alternative assessment of language learning.

Policy Guidelines on supporting language learners

The emergency arrangements made during the Covid pandemic, such as periodic lockdowns and mandatory mask-wearing, were difficult for learners and their parents. Many learners commented on the challenges of coping with sudden isolation from their classmates and being required to stay at home. Learners were greatly affected by the lack of opportunities for socialising with one another in the school environment. While authorities made every effort to put in

place arrangements for remote schooling, in larger and especially in disadvantaged families this presented difficulties due to lack of the necessary equipment, lack of study space etc. As a result, some learners were unable to participate regularly and were unable to keep up with their peers. These difficulties were especially significant for language education in which social interaction is normally an integral part of each lesson and a key means of developing skills in the spoken language as well as self-confidence, especially for learners whose ability to use the language of schooling is still limited and who need regular opportunities to use it with their peers.

Such challenges would apply in any emergency situation where face-to-face learning in the school environment is not possible and when individual learners are unable to attend school for a period due to illness or other difficulties. The experience of the Covid pandemic demonstrated the importance of putting in place effective measures to support learners at any time both in their learning and emotionally.

C. Promote social interaction as well as individualised learning by:

- i. ensuring teachers are conscious of the key role of 'social participation', especially in remote and hybrid language education, and make appropriate provision for it in their teaching;
- ii. supporting teachers in achieving an effective balance between whole class work and interactive sequences;

Example: *Teachers need to be able to set up regular smaller group activities and tasks, whether face-to-face or online, to encourage socialisation and peer language learning, and as a complement to whole class learning. Such activities may also enhance the wellbeing of learners who feel isolated or left out.*

D. Nurture language learners' wellbeing by:

- i. putting in place sound structures and measures for responding to the specific wellbeing needs of learners, including during periods of lockdown, for example by means of a communication platform;

- ii. making teachers and learners aware of the measures in D i. and ensuring that they are applied effectively;

Example: *In the case of online (as well as face-to-face) language learning, such measures can include making sure that some tasks are dedicated to maintaining social links and interaction among learners and organising catch-up or 'checking-in' sessions with sub-groups of learners, such as those who have not logged into online learning. These steps may help fill in gaps and encourage motivation and resilience.*

- iii. where feasible, providing additional individualised support for disadvantaged language learners and those who need extra help, especially those who are temporarily unable to attend school and those for whom the language of schooling is not their first language;
- iv. encouraging language teachers to take advantage of the special potential of language lessons (more so than other lessons) to serve as a forum where problems can be raised and discussed as part of learning activities.

E. Broaden learners' experience of language learning and learning in general by:

- i. encouraging all teachers to develop their learners' digital skills and to use and familiarise learners with a wider variety of language teaching/learning activities and resources including apps, games, video materials etc.;

Example: *Teachers may wish to use new apps, audio/video clips and language learning tasks, such as memory games, opinion polls, role plays and scenarios, which learners are unfamiliar with. Steps need to be taken to carefully introduce these, explain their purpose and demonstrate how they function.*

- ii. ensuring that, especially in online language education, teachers take steps to:
 - bridge the gaps in learning which may exist for some learners due to absence or inability to access the internet, or do certain tasks, or use important learning resources;

- through working individually or in small groups, enable these learners to hear and interact in the target language more intensively than is feasible in whole class lessons;
- ask learners to give their opinions on the language learning tasks and resources used and take their feedback into account when planning future online or face-to-face lessons.

F. Help language learners to develop greater autonomy by:

- highlighting in the curriculum the importance of learners taking responsibility for their language learning and of helping each other through peer learning;
- asking teachers to ensure that independent learning away from the screen or outside the classroom between sessions is built into their language courses.

Example: *Teachers need to become skilled at preparing learners to do independent practical language work alone or in pairs/groups between lessons. This can include researching a topic in the language, working on relevant vocabulary and expressions, preparing short presentations etc. Opportunities then need to be provided during whole class work for them to share their work and receive feedback on it.*

Policy Guidelines on supporting language teachers

During the Covid emergency, teachers, including language teachers, found themselves suddenly under greater pressure than their experience had so far prepared them for. They had to adapt quickly to teaching online, using technologies that many were unfamiliar with and to preparing lessons and resources that were viable for the required mode of teaching. In addition, they

needed to develop means of dealing with the difficulties some learners had in adjusting to the new learning environment. Many language teachers found it stressful to cope with the unfamiliarity of these pressures and the sense of being cut off from support. Given the social nature of language learning, they were especially concerned that remote language learning would result in some learners falling behind.

Teachers are likely to experience such pressures in any situation that necessitates sudden changes in their teaching routine. On the other hand, some teachers also found that remote teaching offered opportunities to experiment with a range of technological and organisational options that enriched their teaching and the language learning experience and decided to use these in their teaching after the Covid emergency. Moreover, the periods of lockdown gave teachers experience and insights that would be valuable in any future emergency situation when face-to-face teaching is not feasible.

G. Help individual teachers safeguard their own wellbeing by:

ensuring that good support is available to help individual teachers to deal with the demands on their personal mental resources during periods when remote teaching is necessary or when there is disruption.

Examples:

- *Individual counselling can be offered that allows teachers to express their concerns or specific needs for assistance.*
- *Where feasible, teachers can be offered a mix of teaching and non-teaching duties, such as materials development or student counselling, to alleviate pressure.*

H. Help teachers to prepare for and adjust to emergency or exceptional teaching circumstances by:

giving teachers guidance when the normal language syllabus cannot be followed. This should include guidance on how to relieve the strain on their wellbeing by prioritising language

learning objectives, reducing the volume of work to be covered and using appropriate and effective digital resources and activities.

I. Provide adaptive professional learning opportunities by:

offering language teachers targeted professional learning opportunities that address their specific individual and group needs, especially when teachers are unable to attend school and work in close cooperation with colleagues. Time should be allotted to enable teachers to take full advantage of these opportunities.

Example: School managers should make provision for and encourage language teachers to set up self-run interdisciplinary 'communities of practice' at institutional and, where feasible, at national and/or international level.

J. Consult language teachers about their professional needs by:

asking them to reflect on and give details of their most urgent individual teaching-related needs and to make suggestions about the focus of their professional learning opportunities.

Example: Language teachers should be invited to request training in the use of specific digital resources they wish to use and/or to suggest and share digital and other language learning materials and activities that they have researched and tried out, whether in remote or face-to-face teaching.

K. Ensure that specific orientation and support concerning the assessment of learners' progress and achievement is given to teachers by:

- i. providing them with full information about changes in the end of semester or end of year examination routine, and enabling them to prepare their learners for these changes;
- ii. guiding teachers in the use of effective alternative means of assessment throughout the year as a complement to formal testing or, where appropriate, as a replacement.

Policy Guidelines on developing educational adaptability, flexibility and versatility

At the outset of the initiative, the intention was to differentiate the research from other surveys concerning the impact of the Covid pandemic by focusing on its specific effects on language education, and this is still the primary aim. However, in the responses to the survey, especially in the open questions, more general views were expressed by both learners and teachers, as well as by participants in think tanks, workshops and colloquia organised by the ECML, concerning broader aspects of learning and teaching. These can be categorised in four main areas:

- the need to understand the educational processes and the competences required to learn and teach successfully
- the importance of digital skills and of being able to use a range of both general and specifically educational software and applications
- the ability to redesign or adapt approaches to and means of education in an agile and imaginative way in response to unexpected environmental or other changes
- the educational measures needed to safeguard and enhance the wellbeing of learners and teachers.

These concerns, which are implicit in many - perhaps most - of the Guidelines above, can be united in a general concept of 'educational adaptability', which may be helpful in defining strategies for education and for language education in the future. For the purposes of these Guidelines, 'educational adaptability' means the preparedness of educational authorities and institutions to put in place effective arrangements to cope with sudden or emerging emergency situations and to prepare teachers, especially

language teachers, to use effectively a very wide range of options in their teaching. It also means ensuring that learners can take full advantage of richer and more varied opportunities in their language learning and in learning how to learn.

L. Develop greater educational adaptability among language education professionals by:

- i. using a risk assessment procedure as preparation for contingency planning (a sample template for risk assessment and a worked example are [available here](#));
- ii. encouraging heads of department and directors of language studies to consult and work with teachers to explore why and how they have used various alternative language teaching techniques and resources, including digital resources, in situations such as the Covid emergency;
- iii. enabling teachers, through professional and peer learning and communities of practice:
 - to gain broader experience of the many options available in educational settings;
 - to compare and reflect on these experiences;
 - to discuss relevant theories as well as their practical implications;
 - to select wisely from a broader and deeper range of alternatives in their teaching and learning.

This would help to prepare teachers for eventualities such as emergencies in which they are required to adapt quickly and efficiently to new circumstances and would encourage them to contribute to the development of language education in the future.

Example: In organised sharing sessions, language teachers could be invited to give accounts and demonstrations of teaching activities and resources such as apps that they found especially effective and motivating for learners during the Covid emergency and beyond it. This could be supported by peer observation or simulated micro teaching within the group.

M. Give language learners experience of a much wider range of learning options by:

- i. asking learners to reflect on, compare and discuss various types of teaching and learning and different resources for learning that they have experienced directly in specially designed series of lessons or that they have observed in video clips of teaching;
- ii. taking advantage of the special characteristics of language education to promote discussion of and feedback on the reasons why certain activities and resources are selected for given purposes and are preferred and found to be more useful by given learners;

Example: The surveys carried out as part of this ECML-EU initiative indicate that, due to the importance of communication and collaboration in language education, language teachers used more varied digital tools and activities during lockdowns, and used them more frequently, than teachers of other subjects. Language teachers and learners themselves can play a role in developing learners' general digital competences alongside their language competences.

Conclusion

Frank Heyworth

The initiative described in this publication comprised almost two and a half years' work. It started out with a wish to find out how teachers were coping with an entirely new situation. Schools were closed for long periods, and, at very short notice, teachers had to provide remote lessons for their learners. This involved learning how to use new technologies and how to help learners to use them effectively. Teachers needed to find new applications and software, create or adapt testing and assessment procedures, and deal with the challenges of learners who were having difficulties coping with the situation or did not have the necessary equipment to be able to follow their courses successfully. When the schools eventually re-opened, there were additional problems to confront, such as mask wearing, which is particularly inhibiting in language learning, disinfecting hands, airing the classrooms, and in some cases dealing with the challenge of having half the class present and the other half accessing lessons remotely. Some of these difficulties had to be dealt with during the whole period of the pandemic.

The main lesson to be drawn from the 1765 respondents to the initial survey and the responses to the later learners' and teachers' surveys is how flexible and inventive teachers were in dealing with the challenges. For this reason, a major purpose of this publication is to

provide a record, often in survey respondents' own words, of their creativity and resilience, and to pay tribute to this.

As our work progressed, it became evident that the historical record was only the beginning. The experiences of teachers and learners also provided important and stimulating ideas for the future of language education and on aspects of practice during the pandemic that could be adapted for "normal" times. These included better defining the place and uses of technology in language education, reflecting on how valuable hybrid teaching and blended learning might be, and increased awareness of the importance of learners' and teachers' wellbeing as a key feature of education in general. It also led to thinking about whether language teachers might have a special role in these areas; they were quick to adapt to wider and imaginative use of digital resources in language teaching. Also, communication is at the centre of the language classroom, and it may therefore be the case that language education offers a privileged forum for raising issues related to individual and group wellbeing. The third part of the publication includes discussion papers on several of the issues arising from the research, such as aspects of support for teachers, alternative approaches to assessment, learner wellbeing and learner autonomy, and the use of digital resources in language education. The Guidelines

in Part 4, drawn up by the team in consultation with language education professionals, offer key pointers designed to help decision makers and educational authorities to set directions for the future of language education and to foster the “educational adaptability” needed to cope with the contingencies and unexpected challenges that are sure to arise.

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As an Enlarged Partial Agreement of the Council of Europe situated at the interface between policy, teacher education and classroom practice and in constant dialogue with ministries, national networks, individual experts and NGOs across Europe and beyond, the ECML is in a unique position to develop innovative, research-informed responses to challenges in language education. One such challenge, whose repercussions will continue for years to come, was the Covid pandemic; one such response is this publication, the final output of the initiative "Language education in the light of Covid: lessons learned and ways forward". The brainchild of Eaquals, one of the 16 member institutions of the ECML's Professional Network Forum which

brings together INGOs with common values and complementary expertise, and co-funded through the ECML's Cooperation Agreement with the European Commission, this initiative is a wonderful example of what can be achieved when we work together in the service of quality language education.

The publication arrives at an opportune moment for the Council of Europe and the European Commission as both organisations, in line with their respective missions, address the central question of education's role in strengthening our democracies and in building peaceful and cohesive societies.

For language education at the Council of Europe, this publication also coincides with the preparatory phase of new 4-year programmes, both for the ECML as an Enlarged Partial Agreement and for the language policy programme. If these new programmes are to be both responsive and relevant to current needs and at the same time future-oriented, characterised by what the authors of this publication refer to as "educational adaptability", then we would be wise to heed their key messages and to keep in mind the cautionary words of Benjamin Franklin – "By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail".

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