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Common Evaluation Frameworks for Language Teachers – Rationale and a case study on teachers' perceptions

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Abstracts

The issue of evaluation frameworks for language teachers is tackled from the perspective of professional learning as well as of quality assurance and quality management. Evaluation frameworks based on competencies and skills can be a useful guide for teacher development and a transparent evaluation tool. Although generic frameworks of teacher competencies have shaped teacher education programmes, it is still difficult to define the range of competencies that underpin teaching as a social activity. The way practitioners conceptualise the idea of quality is of prime importance and the paper will argue that evaluation frameworks can usefully incorporate teachers' own understanding of the competencies and skills that they need to develop. A research study on language teachers' perceptions of the competencies that underpin their professional activities will be reported as an example of how teachers can be consulted in the process of drafting common evaluation frameworks. The research was conducted at the English and Business Communication department in the University of Economics, in Bucharest.

Die Frage eines gemeinsamen Evaluationsrahmens für Fremdsprachenlehrkräfte wird aus der Sicht der beruflichen Entwicklung wie auch der Qualitätssicherung und des Qualitatsmanagements behandelt. Dieser gemeinsame Rahmen kann sowohl als berufliches Entwicklungs- als auch als Bewertungsmittel fungieren. Die Auffassungen der Lehrkräfte vom Department für Englisch und Wirtschaftskommunikation über die der Berufstätigkeit zugrunde liegenden Kompetenzen sind Thema einer Studie, die im vorliegenden Artikel behandelt wird. Die Ergebnisse weisen auf eine Reihe von spezifischen sowie allgemeinen Kompetenzen hin, die für berufliche Tätigkeiten der Fremdsprachenlehrkraft als relevant betrachtet werden. Weiterhin zeigt die Studie, dass Lehrkräfte bei der Ausarbeitung von Bewertungsrahmen mit einbezogen werden können.

Le problème d'un cadre européen commun pour les professeurs des langues étrangères est traité de la perspective du développement professionnel d'un côté et de l'assurance du management de la qualité de l'autre. Les instruments d'évaluation basés sur la description des compétences peuvent être des repères utiles pour le développement professionnel des enseignants et les outils d'évaluation. Les perceptions des professeurs concernant les compétences qui constituent la base de leur activité professionnelle ont fait l'objet d'une étude de recherche qui était mise en place à l'Université des Sciences Economiques à Bucarest. Les résultas de cette étude mettent en lien les compétences spécifiques des enseignants de langues étrangères et les compétences générales. Les résultats de l'analyse des représentations des enseignants ayant participé à l'étude peuvent être intégrés lorsqu'il s'agit d'élaborer des documents de cadre d'évaluation pour enseignants de langues.

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Introduction

This paper will examine the complex issue of teacher evaluation frameworks by taking a two-pronged approach. To start with, the wider context that generated the need for evaluation frameworks will be briefly examined by highlighting issues of professional learning and quality assurance that underpin the drafting of such frameworks. While contextualizing the topic against the backdrop of educational improvement efforts, the paper will argue that evaluation frameworks can usefully incorporate teachers' own understanding of the competencies and skills that they need to develop. The results of a small-scale piece of research on definition of competencies by Romanian higher education lecturers will be reported.

The need for continuous professional learning has been emphasised in many attempts to discuss the implications for teachers with regards to living and working in a knowledge-based society. The notion of knowledge is widening to be recognized as an integrative ability. Such developments are creating new expectations as far as learning and learning provisions are concerned. New career standards are emerging, which tend to be accompanied by a set of broader competencies. Defining such competencies underpins the drafting of evaluation frameworks and the voice of teachers should not be ignored in this process.

The role of evaluation frameworks in professional development

In my approach, professional learning is one of the key concepts underlying the process of conceptualising and drafting evaluation frameworks. Therefore, evaluation frameworks may be usefully regarded as a development instrument.

Although generic frameworks of teacher competencies have shaped teacher education programmes, it is still difficult to define the range of competencies that underpin teaching as a social activity. The European Profile for Language Teacher Education (Kelly et al. 2004) proposes a wide base for teacher education programmes and a very comprehensive frame of reference, which acknowledges the need to enhance teacher education with new competencies and skills. It acknowledges the widening range of competencies teachers are expected to develop in order to respond to and cater for the complex needs of their students. What is more, the framework proposes appropriate activities meant to develop the desirable competencies and skills.

The role of evaluation frameworks may be justifiably connected with the attempt to improve quality in education. Quality improvement generates the need to manage quality, which may represent a considerable challenge to educational institutions. The institutions themselves need to become learning organisations while teachers are expected to be constantly learning. Therefore, evaluation frameworks based on competencies and skills can be a useful development guide for teachers, as well as a transparent evaluation tool.

Evaluation tends to be associated with some externally imposed judgemental processes. However, one can justifiably argue that these evaluation frameworks serve self-development purposes through encouraging reflection on one's own abilities as well as on the wider context of teaching. As pointed out by the European Profile for language teacher education, they also serve as a means of ensuring quality in language teaching.

Focus on quality

The need to enhance, diversify and consolidate professional learning at all levels brings to the fore the issue of quality. Usually associated with assessment and evaluation, quality assurance, both as a concept and a set of practices, has many practical implications. Therefore, I will argue that quality assurance should be analysed in connection with the process of managing quality. A process approach to managing quality is recommended recognizing the fact that such an approach has both personal and institutional implications.

Quality assurance and enhancement are essential processes in all learning environments. As Kelly et al. (2004) point out, European-level evaluation frameworks are developed in order to increase mobility and to promote higher quality levels in foreign language teacher education in Europe.

A lot of work has already been done on quality assurance in language teaching.

The following section outline some of the key issues of quality assurance processes and will argue that any work on quality assurance needs to start from teachers' own perceptions and opinions about what quality means in their specific teaching contexts.

Quality assurance processes

Quality assurance can be regarded as a combination of two main processes:

1. a process of evaluation and assessment of quality, externally or internally driven;
2. a process of quality management, involving institutions and individuals.

The need to manage quality justifies taking a process approach to quality assurance. Such a process equally involves individuals and institutions, covering various levels Several approaches to defining and managing quality coexist. Following the work of the Council of Europe in the field of quality assurance (Heyworth, Mateva, Muresan & Rose 2007), certain aspects stand out as relevant in terms of the relation between quality assurance and evaluation frameworks.

Quality can be regarded in terms of measurable results whereby student performance is an indicator of teaching quality. Although this may seem a straightforward approach, teaching has started to be understood more in terms of teachers' thinking and therefore more space is now given to teachers' voices and understanding of their profession. This recent development emphasizes the complex nature of teaching which cannot always be understood and valued in terms of student results.

Client satisfaction as a result of all needs and expectations of clients having been met is another way of looking at quality. This may seem more appropriate in private teaching contexts but not exclusively. Learners can be considered as clients in most educational settings.

A personal development model of quality

A process approach to quality undertakes an analysis of quality at all stages in delivering a service. Such an approach requires awareness of the main components of particular services and should look at individual and institutional aspects of the process.

In line with the new concern for teachers' voices and perspectives on teaching, there is a personal development model of quality based on the motivation and perceptions of the people involved. Whatever framework we take, quality assurance needs to include a personal development component. What is more, quality assurance that is responsively undertaken cannot avoid to address the personal development level.

A main step is to define criteria to be applied to quality in our context of activity. That is essentially a reflective process that starts, as pointed out by Heyworth (2007) with questions like:

▶ Are we teaching effectively?
▶ Does the curriculum provide the right framework?
▶ Are we using resources efficiently?
▶ Do we enable each student to achieve his/her full potential? (Heyworth 2007: 18)

The participants' understanding of the features of effective/good language teaching is essential in all situations that involve evaluation and enhancement of quality, especially as regards the process of quality assurance.

Quality management relevance for common evaluation frameworks

Whatever view we take of quality assurance, we need to regard it as a complex and dynamic phenomenon, which is influenced by changes in the environment as well as by individual perceptions and attitudes. Any successful attempt to endure quality of educational processes needs to take into account both the wider framework (policies, systems, institutional priorities) and the perceptions of the individuals involved. The range of potential stakeholders is vast because quality assurance processes also affect individuals, institutions and the wider environment. There are complex implications at work as any commitment to quality relates to personal and institutional values as well as to practical managerial processes.

In order to point out the link between issues of quality assurance and the process of drafting evaluation frameworks for teachers, we need to mention that evaluation frameworks are standard-setting and therefore need to be underpinned by common understandings and acceptance of core values. Quality is one of these values. While quality can be approached and discussed according to the concepts outlined above, the issue of how teachers define quality continues to be paramount. Teachers should be called on to conceptualise and articulate their own understanding of quality.

Quality management needs to start from a personal definition of quality of all teachers in a certain educational context, which is hopefully blended into an institutional vision. If we are talking about coherent quality management and assurance, then personal and institutional definitions will have to meet somehow. If there is a big divide between them, then management of quality is unlikely to be successful. A lot of negotiation and communication will be involved among all stakeholders, which brings me to the conclusion that quality assurance is a process rather than a state we reach at a certain moment in time. And if it is a process, the management of that process is essential.

Formative character of evaluation frameworks

The final idea in the previous section brings out yet again the importance of research. All the approaches discussed above need to be informed by data, be it data on student exam results, students' perception of their learning experience, use and relevance of resources, management of service provision, personal perceptions and development plans.

If we have in view the need to develop common evaluation frameworks for language teachers as a means of describing quality in language teaching, then teachers need to be consulted in the process of developing evaluation criteria. Any attempt at developing quality assurance standards and drafting evaluation frameworks needs to be preceded by extensive research on teachers' perceptions about their own professional life. Moreover, teachers' direct involvement in the process of undertaking such research can be beneficial for their own development leading to a better understanding of their profession, of the role of such evaluation frameworks and finally to the acceptance of evaluation frameworks.

Data collection and analysis will inform the development of measurable indicators to enable us to decide on the need to improve or to understand where we stand in relation to other learning environments. Data analysis leads to setting standards. Standards, as defined by Hayworth represent "a definition of the operational objectives we set in order to meet the criteria and the ways in which we will assess our performance" (2007: 19). Standards need to be accepted and if possible 'owned' by key stakeholders. Here lie the complex implications of quality assurance at the level of institutional stakeholders.

Achieving ownership

In terms of management, quality entails a process of setting standards based on data collection and analysis. If we agree that quality assurance is dynamic as it takes account of changes in the environment and in turn generates changes, then the need to provide a strong research base is obvious. We need to record the key features of the learning environment in order to be able to manage and evaluate quality.

Another reason why quality assurance seems to be closely related to data collection and analysis is that we want teachers to 'own' the process of quality assurance and ownership is not easy to achieve. Teachers' perceptions of quality criteria and standards do matter and they will affect the chances of implementing successful quality assurance systems:

> Ownership cannot be achieved in advance of learning something new. Deep ownership comes through the learning that arises from full engagement in solving problems (…). Ownership is a process as well as a state. (Fullan 1993: 30-31)

My doctoral research (Bardi 2007) has shown that ownership comes from a) learning that arises from full engagement in solving professional tasks that are perceived as meaningful; b) participation in decision-making, c) the chance to use the results of new learning or innovation. Feelings of ownership generate the need to keep up established performance standards, therefore building ownership does matter from a quality assurance point of view.

If we speak about the role of people in building and maintaining quality, and about ownership then we speak about a quality culture, which can be defined as a reflective and self-critical learning culture in which all members of an institution are involved. Ownership is evidence of a quality culture.

Focus on research

Research informs both the setting of standards in quality assurance as well as the monitoring of quality in educational processes. As pointed out by Muresan (2007) research processes involve:

1. gathering evidence and data relevant in relation to the goals set;
2. analysing and interpreting the data so as to take informed decisions;
3. taking effective action for improvement and remedial work;
4. on-going monitoring of processes and checking on the effect of action taken;
5. revision of institutional goals and systems (Muresan 2007: 38-39).

Some of the recommended research instruments to be used in connection with analyzing quality comprise classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, surveys based on questionnaires, study of documentary evidence, diaries. I will only point out the value of classroom observation as a research instrument and a development tool.

Classroom observation is indeed a powerful tool in language education, serving various purposes. In terms of strategic management, it can be carried out regularly in order to monitor professional practice in a certain department /school and identify areas for improvement. In terms of human resource management, classroom observation is linked to recruitment and induction processes, or the on-going monitoring of quality. It is also an important developmental tool when it is carried out collaboratively as part of action research projects.

Self-evaluation is a key element of quality assurance but also a key element of development and learning. The existence of self-evaluation tools at personal and institutional level is evidence of an organisation's self learning. It can be done with the help of a variety of instruments such as diaries and self-evaluation questionnaires but also with more dynamic tools like engaging in action-research. Any instrument or activity that involves reflection is essentially a self-evaluation instrument with a high potential to foster learning.

Teacher perceptions of professional competencies

The value of research on teacher perceptions about the range of competencies that underpin their profession and on teachers' understanding of quality was emphasised in previous sections. My contention is that evaluation frameworks have greater chances to work in practice if they are informed by teachers' opinions and as a consequence, teachers feel they 'own' such frameworks that can have considerable influence on their professional lives.

A piece of research carried out among lecturers in the Department of English and Business Communication at the University of Economics, Bucharest illustrates the approach I take in this paper. The aim of the study was to investigate lecturers' perceptions of the competencies they needed in order to fulfil their roles as members of an academic language teaching department. This particular aim required a study 'embedded' in a specific academic context as respondents were invited to reflect on their particular professional tasks and roles and not on a set of desirable competencies language teaching professionals might need.

Methodology

The study provides one small-scale attempt at practitioner consultation which, as I have argued, needs to inform the drafting of evaluation frameworks. The research process had two distinct stages. The first stage was a brainstorming session, which I carried out taking advantage of the presence of many department members who were attending the annual department conference. I organised part of my plenary talk on 'Language teaching in the knowledge-based society' as a brainstorming session asking participants – 40 department members – to identify the key competencies related to their activity as members of a university language department.

The second stage of the research involved the administration of a questionnaire (Appendix 1) that contained the original list and asked respondents to select the five competencies that were the most important for them. They were not asked to indicate those five competencies in order of importance but to select five out of a list of thirty such competencies and briefly explain their choice. The questionnaire included five other questions regarding the role of pre-service and in-service training in developing the competencies identified as most useful and the areas where the respondents felt they needed to develop further. Twelve respondents, lecturers in the department of foreign languages, were involved in this second stage and no specific sampling was carried out. The respondents were simply self-selected, i.e. lecturers who were willing to take part in the study and whom I met during the time devoted to this research. (The design of the teaching timetable is such that there are colleagues we meet every week and others we meet only occasionally or by chance).

The limitations of this methodological approach are to do with the use of a questionnaire for a rather small number of respondents. Interviews would have been more appropriate and would have probably yielded richer data but the questionnaire was chosen for reasons of convenience as the study was carried out at a time of the academic year when people were very busy teaching and less inclined to participate in other activities.

Findings and analysis

The data generated by the questionnaire was primarily qualitative and therefore it needed to be categorised in order to develop the final results. Question 1 yielded quantitative data whereby responses – in terms of the categories identified as most relevant – could be simply counted. For the other questions, categories were identified and wider themes were developed in order to obtain the results that could subsequently be interpreted.

The list of competencies that was developed through the brainstorming exercise was analysed by grouping the competencies according to themes. The range of competencies deemed necessary for teaching staff of a university language department was fairly wide, including language mastery and teaching methodology expertise, as

well as teacher training and research skills, critical thinking and people relationships management or educational management skills.

The competencies in the brainstormed list were grouped under several themes.

Theme 1: Language mastery
– knowledge of the language; confident use of the language.

Theme 2: Teaching expertise
– teaching methodology; ability to transmit knowledge to students; awareness of changes in the teaching environment (new methods, new developments in the field); student evaluation; course and materials design abilities; planning the teaching process; classroom management skills; ability to raise the students' level of motivation; ability to give constructive feedback.

Theme 3: Broader academic competencies
– teacher training skills; research abilities; interdisciplinarity and ability to tackle related fields; awareness of cultural issues/dimensions.

Theme 4: Broader general professional competencies
– inquisitive mind/analytical thinking; professional confidence; refined presentation and public speaking skills; time management; communication skills; prioritizing professional and personal actions; self-evaluation; team spirit; prioritizing professional and personal actions; be a good listener; skills for dealing with administration and bureaucracy.

Theme 5: Sensitivity towards students and their needs
– foster independent thinking and learning with the students; be receptive to student evaluation; sensitivity towards learners' needs and learning context; enabling students to interact harmoniously with other cultures and appreciate their own culture; sensitivity towards learners and peers as persons; knowledge of the field where the students will use the language.

Indication of a fairly wide range of competencies was expected because the question required respondents to think of their role in an academic department. Much attention is given to students and their needs and several categories grouped under theme 5 indicate the lecturers' concern for their students' professional as well as personal needs.

The mixture of specific and general professional competencies is worth noting because it highlights the fact that language lecturers take a wide comprehensive view of their profession. They are right to do so and such an attitude suggests their ability to develop and learn new things. If we try to relate these findings to the issue of evaluation frameworks, then a discussion of how widely one can define teaching will naturally follow and is probably worth having.

Respondents were then asked to choose five competencies that they found particularly relevant to their role as members of an academic department. The results (ranked) obtained from 12 respondents are the following:

1. Foster independent thinking and learning with the students – 8 responses
2. Confident use of the language – 7 responses
3. Teaching methodology – ability to transmit knowledge to students – 7 responses
4. Awareness of changes in the teaching environment (new methods and developments in the field) – 7 responses
5. Knowledge of the language – 5 responses
6. Ability to motivate students – 4 responses
7. Communication skills – 4 responses

8.   Student evaluation – 4 responses
9.   Classroom management skills – 4 responses
10. Sensitivity towards learners' needs and learning context – 3 responses
11. Interdisciplinarity and ability to tackle related fields – 3 responses
12. Self-evaluation – 2 responses
13. Research abilities – 2 responses

This range of responses indicates the fact that lecturers perceive their role primarily in relation to their students and their classroom work. In the explanations respondents provide for their choices, the competencies are often related, as in the following example:

"Communication skills, when backed up by teaching methodology, classroom management and ability to motivate students, will ideally further language learning and independent thinking." (Responses, example 1)

Ability to motivate students is seen as vital in class and related to several other competencies' while the need for interdisciplinarity is considered as a key features in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (as is the case in the language department of a university of economics) and increasing student motivation.

Lecturers regard language teaching as moving beyond language to develop critical thinking abilities. This is facilitated by the fact that language classes provide scope for highlighting *"ways of using language to express ideas and to get your message across convincingly."* (Responses, example 2)

Although the university treats research activity as equally important to teaching (some of the leadership messages suggest that research is becoming more important than teaching), these results indicate that the lecturers in the language department regard teaching as their main role and seem much more preoccupied by meeting their students' needs. Such findings may inform discussions about teacher evaluation frameworks and more widely, about promotion criteria. The latter issue, although extremely relevant for lecturers, is beyond the scope of this paper.

Answers to questions 2 and 3 have been processed thematically and they indicate that teaching ability was mainly developed through in-service training and informal learning. Pre-service training was mostly devoted to language development and less so to teaching methodology and wider professional skills. It needs to be mentioned that pre-service teacher training was part of a Bachelor degree in language and literature study where linguistics and literature were preferred subject areas.

In-service training was much more relevant for development of teaching ability and wider professional skills/competencies such as teamwork, sensitivity to students' needs, course and materials' design, professional confidence in general. In-service training was delivered through in-house training courses and training delivered by UK trainers to lecturers who participated in British Council projects designed to upgrade the teaching of ESP in Romanian universities.

Responses to question 4 indicate a range of sources of informal learning or learning in contexts other than courses provided in the educational system. Participation in language teaching projects of various agencies was one main source of learning because it provided a coherent activity framework and the chance to work in collaboration with peers. Learning resulted from several other sources such as:

▶   previous professional capacity as a translator and contact with the language specific to various fields;
▶   personal interests/hobbies (e.g. film directing has contributed to the understanding how to manage role play and classes in general);
▶   travelling for study purposes (survival skills, informal meetings with local people, cultural events, library research);
▶   working together with more experienced peers;
▶   informal discussions with peers;

- ▶ observing other teachers' classes and being observed;
- ▶ learning from students (content knowledge, IT skills);
- ▶ preparing and delivering teacher training courses;
- ▶ writing language textbooks.

These findings show that learning can result from pecific professional activities (teacher training or textbook writing) but also from personal events and endeavours whose relevance for the development of professional expertise is not immediately apparent.

The competencies that lecturers believe they need to develop further somehow reiterate the themes that were highlighted by the whole study. Not surprisingly, they refer to specific and general professional abilities, as responses to other questions have done.

The competencies that indicate specific categories are given below:

- ▶ research abilities;
- ▶ sensitivity towards learners' needs and future professional contexts;
- ▶ awareness of changes in the teaching environment (new methods, new developments in the field);
- ▶ critical thinking;
- ▶ ability to raise students' motivation;
- ▶ organising events.

The results of this study, however limited in scope, suggest that the range of professional competencies that can inform common evaluation frameworks is potentially broad and that teacher consultation prior to drafting such frameworks can only enrich the process and increase the chances of teachers 'owning' the content of such evaluation documents.

It is worth expanding this piece of research by increasing the number of respondents and by generating some more qualitative data (through semi-structured interviews or a group discussion) that might provide more insights into the thinking of participants.

Concluding remarks: value of evaluation frameworks

Based on the discussion so far, we can confidently point out that evaluation frameworks are powerful tools for monitoring quality and promoting professional learning. They offer:

- ▶ roadmap for novice teachers;
- ▶ guidance for experienced teachers;
- ▶ a institutional structure for focusing improvement efforts around shared purposes and mutual goals.

Evaluation frameworks encourage reflection and therefore have a strong learning function. They approach foreign language teacher development as an ongoing process in line with the prevailing themes in the teacher education discourses: teachers need to become lifelong learners themselves if they are to enable their students to become lifelong learners. Teachers need to be consulted in the process of developing evaluation criteria.

Any attempt at developing quality assurance standards and drafting evaluation frameworks needs to be preceded by extensive research on teachers' perceptions of their own professional life. Because research results need to be used to the benefit of the community that generated them, research results should to be fed back to teachers and subject to discussion.

The need for wide teacher consultation to underpin establishment of evaluation criteria results from the fact that such frameworks call for ownership by teachers and to be relevant for both individuals and institutions. Policy-makers and educational institutions will hopefully acknowledge the specific features of language teachers' work.

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Appendix 1 – Teacher perceptions of professional competencies

These competencies have emerged through a brainstorming exercise carried out with the participation of members of our department. The exercise requested participants to identify the competencies needed by professional activity in a university language department. Those competencies are given in the order in which they were collected.

In order to complete these exercise I need your support and I would be very grateful if you accepted to complete this questionnaire.

1. *Could you please choose the five competencies that you think are the most relevant (no order of priority is expected) and explain your choice in a short comment?*

1. knowledge of the language
2. confident use of the language
3. communication skills
4. teaching methodology, ability to transmit knowledge to students
5. awareness of changes in the teaching environment (new methods, new developments in the field)
6. self-evaluation
7. student evaluation
8. foster independent thinking and learning with the students
9. be receptive to student evaluation of us
10. research abilities
11. team spirit
12. inquisitive mind/analytical thinking
13. sensitivity towards learners' needs and learning context
14. course and materials design abilities
15. planning the teaching process
16. classroom management skills
17. professional confidence
18. be a good listener
19. refined presentation and public speaking skills
20. time management
21. interdisciplinarity in our profession
22. sensitivity towards learners and peers as persons
23. prioritizing professional and personal actions
24. skills for dealing with administration and bureaucracy
25. knowledge of the field where the students will use the language
26. awareness of cultural issues/dimensions
27. enabling students to interact harmoniously with other cultures and appreciate their own culture
28. teacher training skills
29. being able to raise the Ss' level of motivation
30. ability to give constructive feedback

2. *Has pre-service education helped you develop the skills/competencies that you need in your professional role?*

3. *Has in-service education and activity helped you develop the skills/competencies that you need in your professional role?*

4. *What other sources of learning apart from formal education and teaching environment have helped you improve professionally and personally?*

5. *What competencies do you still need to improve?*