IMPLEMENTING "QUALITRAINING" IN THE BUSINESS WRITING CLASS AT THE ACADEMY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES IN BUCHAREST - A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Set against the background of the ECML "QualiTraining" projects, the current case study illustrates the process of introducing change in the area of testing in a business English context, on the example of advanced ESP-courses at the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest. It builds on the endeavours of a team of teachers trying to introduce common assessment criteria, standardizing the Writing item of the achievement test, in line with the CEFR and ELP-approach, while also facilitating the students' improving their self-assessment and peer-cooperation skills. The article reflects the teachers' preoccupation of enhancing the students' learning outcomes through a focus on making transparent assessment criteria during the teaching process. It includes examples of instruments designed and implemented for this purpose, and concludes with an evaluative section, comparing outcomes with initial expectations, as well as lessons that can be learned from this experience.

Key-words: quality assurance, standardising testing, assessment criteria, self-assessment, Business English, report writing

Introduction

Quality assurance is no longer solely the realm of institutional top management. It is increasingly important that all the participants in the educational process - e.g. teacher trainers, teachers, learners - understand their role within the system and contribute to enhancing the quality of educational processes and learning outcomes. Therefore, the main aim of the "QualiTraining" projects, developed within the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) of the Council of Europe, was to provide both the framework and the tools for facilitating the implementation of quality principles and procedures at grassroots level. The main project outcomes consist of a book with CD-ROM, available in English and German (Muresan, L., Heyworth, F., Mateva, G. and Rose, M., 2007), and a web site

(http://qualitraining2.ecml.at), relevant both for individual professional development and for team / institutional contexts focusing on consolidating a "quality culture" in education.

In addition, in order to pilot and disseminate the project outcomes, "QualiTraining" events were organised in various educational contexts, e.g. at European level, at the ECML (in Graz, Austria), in regional settings (e.g. in Sofia, Bulgaria and Bath, UK), or at local/national level (e.g. for an academic target audience in Grenoble, France, for project evaluators coming from the primary and secondary school sector in Austria, for representatives of language schools and the national quality assurance association in Prague, the Czech Republic, for academics and FL-practitioners in Bucharest, Romania).

To illustrate the "QualiTraining" approach "in action" in a real-life context, we shall describe a case study focusing on "Standardising Testing", designed and implemented as a mini-project by a group of Business English teachers, drawing inspiration from the "QualiTraining Guide" (Muresan et al., 2007) and the ECML Workshop organised in January 2010 at the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest, in co-operation with PROSPER-ASE Language Centre and QUEST Romania.

Brief outline of the context

All the members of our project group[1] teach ESP (English for Business Purposes) at the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest, and in addition, several of them are also involved in academic management and adult education activities at the PROSPER-ASE Language Centre in Bucharest. In most of the faculties of our University, the students' level of English is relatively high (B2-C1), and the main purpose of the foreign language classes is to help them improve their communication skills, with a focus on both speaking and writing for business and academic purposes. The proposed change is targeted at 2nd year students at the Faculty of International Business and Economics, distributed in 10-12 groups (of 20-25 students each).

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[1] Liliana Dellevoet, Monica Marin, Roxana Marinescu, Laura Muresan, Adina Panait, and Anca Codreanu, who joined the team in the second phase of stage 1.

What we wanted to innovate/introduce/deal with in our context

Our group has discussed the possibility of introducing a change in the area of testing, namely designing, administering and marking in a standardized way one of the test items of the achievement test at the end of the second semester of the 2009-2010 academic year. The test item we have chosen to standardize is *Writing* (for business purposes).

Main purpose and why?

In our university, the learning objectives are the same for each faculty and year of study, there is an approved syllabus and each teacher has the freedom to cover the proposed topics using materials they select themselves from a variety of Business English textbooks indicated in the bibliography. Due to the relatively high number of groups, the lessons are taught by several teachers who pursue the same objectives but, inevitably, the teachers choose to use different teaching materials and may have different criteria for evaluating the students' performance. We have, therefore, considered that it would be useful to attempt to standardize at least one test component of the final test. This way we could increase the reliability of testing and we would end up with an objective view on how the learning objectives have been achieved.

What needed to be done? Stages and steps involved

Important ingredients of introducing and managing change as a dimension of quality assurance in language education in this academic environment were consultation and reaching common decisions among the members of the teaching team, familiarising students with the (self-)assessment criteria, encouraging peer-review and co-operation, consolidating an open atmosphere, based on mutual trust, conducive to multi-directional feedback-giving and allowing for the transparent comparison of self-/peer-/teacher assessment outcomes. In a nutshell, a quality culture based on open communication and everybody's willingness to learn from each other - teachers and students alike.

The process as such spread over a whole semester, i.e. four months, and included several stages and steps.

The first stage started already during the "QualiTraining" event and involved identifying the area to focus on, formulating the main objectives and planning the whole process, designing the time frame and outlining the expected outcomes.

First stage: Planning the "Standardising Testing" project , within the framework of the ECML Workshop at the Academy of Economic Studies: "QualiTraining at grassroots level" (Bucharest, 28-29 January 2010) Facilitator: Dr. Galya Mateva

This was followed by a meeting with all the teachers involved in teaching the targeted 2nd-year groups at the Faculty of International Business and Economics. The main purpose of the meeting was threefold:

1. to choose one type of writing for business included in the agreed syllabus for the second semester of the current academic year to become the focus of the teaching/learning process;

2. to make a selection of relevant materials which could be used in the teaching process

3. to agree on specific evaluation criteria for writing, to be used in the standardized test.

The second stage involved designing a first draft of a standardised item for the Writing test, as well as a "(Self-)Evaluation Grid for Report Writing (App. 1) . In parallel, in order to ensure the transparency of the testing process, students were informed in due time, during the teaching activities, about the evaluation criteria to be used in order to assess their achievement in writing. Student self-evaluation and peer-evaluation activities were introduced in class by all teachers involved in implementing the change, in order to raise the students' awareness about the required standards. Besides these activities, teachers also provided students with on-going feedback on their performance, so that throughout the semester the students became fully aware of the areas in which they had to improve before the final test.

The third stage involved piloting the test with three of the groups by different teachers, followed by exchange of experience and perceptions of how it went, consulting and revising it.

The fourth stage consisted in:

- administering the test and marking it according to the agreed evaluation criteria;

- student self- and peer-assessment;
- multi-perspective evaluation of the process.

The final stage included analyzing the results and drawing conclusions, with a view to preparing the ground for more extensive implementation in the next academic year. To round-up the process, a synthesis was prepared for presentation to the international project partnership of the LLP-project "Innovative Practice in Adult Language Education" (2nd IPALE Project Meeting, Bucharest, 20-21 May 2010).

Multidirectional evaluation of the process

Student responses on the feedback forms revealed their appreciation of the fact that they had been given the assessment criteria beforehand, the usefulness being ranked by the majority as 4 on a scale from 1 (least useful) to 5 (most useful).

The teacher's feedback was considered as essential, and it ranked higher (mostly 4 and 5) than peer assessment (3 and 4).

As proof of the fact that the students were made aware of their own role in improving the process, many of them made pertinent suggestions which are indeed worth taking into account. Most of the comments referred to the necessity of insisting on the preliminary activities to writing a report, such as analyzing several models together with the teacher, whom they expected to point out the main aspects to be considered. Choosing an adequate case study and understanding all the details of the situation was also pointed out by the students as essential for writing a good report. (see also App. 2 with sample evaluation forms filled in by students).

Outcomes vs initial expectations

From the outset, it was expected that this complex process of involving different actors, over a loger span of time, would bear fruit at various levels, among both teachers and students. An analysis of the outcomes achieved confirms the initial expectations. Here are the main aspects reported by teachers, on the basis of their own perceptions, as well as on an analysis of student work and feedback on the process:

(a) Outcomes for teachers:

- A positive effect on teaching
- A common understanding and standardized application of evaluation criteria
- Better cooperation among the teachers involved in this mini-project

(b) Outcomes for students:

- Transparency regarding evaluation criteria
- More focused learning / improving writing skills for business purposes
- Practicing self- and peer-evaluation
- Receiving standardized feedback on their writing skills from the teacher at least once during the semester
- Better results in the final test.

By way of a conclusion

Correlating self-reflection with our peer teachers' feedback (all of us having a genuine interest in learning and in continuously improving educational processes), we may conclude that this mini-project resulted in better integrating teaching and learning, in enhanced marking objectivity, combined with a more comprehensive view of students' achievement. It also brought about closer co-operation at various levels: within the teaching team, among students, as well as between teacher and students. It definitely contributed to a sense of achievement.

The students' progress in all the groups introducing this approach has shown an increase in motivation for studying, a better understanding of test marking criteria through self- and peer-evaluation, an increased sense of responsibility (esp. with peer-evaluation) and a stronger sense of involvement (student feedback).

Lessons learned for the future include an even stronger awareness of the need to create and share a data bank (of activities and tasks for this advanced writing module), the need to learn from student feedback (e.g. to introduce more preliminary activities to writing

proper and to offer more models), as well as to systematically offer individual feedback to students, so as to help them improve their communication skills. As a process, it is definitely time-consuming, and, therefore, enough class time and individual study needs to be budgeted, while highlighting the benefits for all parties involved (esp. the students), so as to motivate them to take more responsibility for their own progress.

As a final conclusion, this approach has contributed to the personal development of all those participating in the project - teachers and students alike - and through this, it has also contributed to consolidating the quality culture of our academic environment.

References

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Appendix 1

(Self-)Evaluation Grid – Report Writing

Aspects to be evaluated	Description Corresponding to the *CEFR* - C1 level	Marks	Self-assessment	Peer assessment	Teacher Assessment
Structure and layout	The structure and layout are appropriate for a business report (title, headings, subheadings, organization of ideas into paragraphs)	2			
Content	All parts are appropriately covered. The text includes relevant facts, information and ideas. The ideas are sequenced in a logical way. The ideas are supported with adequate arguments. Factual information and opinions are kept separate from each other.	3			
Coherence and Cohesion	The message is easy to follow. Each paragraph has a clear central topic which is developed. The cohesive devices (connectors, reference, substitution) are used flexibly	2			
Lexical resource	A wide range of appropriate vocabulary is used. Correct spelling and word formation (although there may be minor, non-systematic errors)	1			
Grammatical resource	A wide range of grammatical structures, used flexibly, with a high degree of accuracy, which is maintained consistently. Although there are only non-systematic errors, they do not reduce the communicative effect.	1			
Register and style	The register (level of formality) is consistently appropriate for the intended readership. The text is written in a concise and clear manner (appropriate level of detail)	1			
Total		10			

Appendix 2

Sample student feedback

Student feedback – report writing module (April – May 2010)

The purpose of the business writing module focusing on report writing was:

    a. to raise awareness of:
- The structure, layout and style of business reports
- The appropriate range of vocabulary and grammatical structures for writing business reports

    b. to develop self-assessment and peer-evaluation skills

In order to help assess the effectiveness of the module, please answer the following questions. Use a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Encircle your option:

    1. The following have helped me become aware of the characteristics of a good business report:
- a. Analysing a model report   1………2………3………(4)………5
- b. The assessment criteria in the evaluation grid   1………2………3………(4)………5
- c. The teacher's feedback   1………2………3………4………(5)
- d. Assessing a colleague's report   1………2………(3)………4………5
- e. Other (please specify)

    2. In order to improve the effectiveness of this activity I would suggest: → at least 2 reports with different tasks
→ the existence of more steps in writing the report: what should/shouldn't be written in every part of the report and how (introduction, findings, etc)

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- b. The assessment criteria in the evaluation grid   1………2………(3)………4………5
- c. The teacher's feedback   1………2………3………4………(5)
- d. Assessing a colleague's report   1………2………3………(4)………5
- e. Other (please specify)

    2. In order to improve the effectiveness of this activity I would suggest:
– to discuss the information in details in order to understand that situation.