

A SHARED COMMITMENT TO QUALITY CULTURE

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Abstract

Quality culture in pre-university education should be understood in the context of the whole educational system and at the same time of every school, focussed on student outcomes and equal with success of every learner.

Processes that produce quality outcomes, setting quality standards that can be verified, are the main concern of today's decision-making factors in Romanian educational system.

This article refers to the organisational values of the Romanian Ministry of Education as reflected through the national curricula, the mission statement, the systems and procedures for quality assurance introduced at various levels, with special reference to English language teaching and teacher training. The Ministry's mission is to observe quality, assess it and stimulate professional development. The examples given in this paper are intended to illustrate how the teaching of English as a modern and international language in Romania implies an institutional culture committed to continuous improvement.

Key-words: commitment, quality assurance, *QualiTraining*, research, professional development, student, teachers.

1.' Quality culture' is not a simple association of words. These words bring to mind requirements and expectations, vision and values that are developed by a whole society, in search for effective qualification and competitiveness.'Quality culture' should show what quality is and how it can be achieved. Questions on quality work target the human resources involved in teaching, the legal framework teaching is performed in, the teaching resources used and definitely the beneficiaries that are supposed to achieve their full potential.

A quality culture means commitment to continuous improvement, distributed leadership, transparent management, a positive working climate. Last but not least, the activities within a quality culture should be people-centred.

The quality of pre-university language education programmes is based on criteria, standard and performance indicators. The national curriculum has undergone major changes, focussing on students' acquiring competences and imposing a needed balance between theoretical knowledge acquisitions and the development of skills. The attempt for a real educational effectiveness is related to content standards of the teaching and learning process.

Quality assurance and professional development imply:

- individual self-reflection;
- partnership for mutual class observation and peer review;
- personal SWOT analysis;
- rank of priorities and action taking;
- training needs analysis for long term development education.

2. Quality assurance imposes a common goal and a specific terminology, even if there are several groups of partners involved in the process: teachers, teacher trainers, mentors, school managers, and inspectors.

According to each group, the terms used when referring to quality assurance and quality control may differ but still collocate with: assessment, curriculum, observation, appraisal, capacity, building, standards, and performance. The types of evaluation, specific to institutions like the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports or the school inspectorates, can be external or process-oriented, and they are always standard-oriented.

The representatives of the above mentioned institutions should make the difference between evaluation and assessment. While the former term implies more programmes, materials, institutions and projects, searching for effectiveness and efficiency, the latter is definitely , centred on competences and skills, abilities, performance, aptitudes and tests.

The main directions for implementing good practices in the Romanian educational system, for an effective language teachers' education are:

- pre-service and in-service training;
- teaching modern languages at a very young age;
- teaching contents through modern languages;
- developing linguistic competences through academic teaching;

The modern languages taught in the Romanian educational system are: English, French, German, Russian, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Greek, Japanese, and Chinese.

Students' evaluation, in pre-university education is not only internal, formative, and summative, but also process-oriented. Besides everyday evaluation performed at a school level, there are several national and international contests. For English as a modern or second language, the English Olympiad is organized at all levels (school, town, county and at national level). The format of the subjects and the evaluation are envisaged according to the *CEFR* and taking into account the national curriculum for English. Still, this contest is meant to motivate the best students (at a high school level) and allows the winners to enter a university without passing an entrance exam. Other contests, very much appreciated and enjoying a large number of participants, are the Kangaroo contest, Speak Out, and ESU- Public Discourse contest. The last contest has an international stage as a final one.

The 2010 baccalaureate brought a new format of assessment and evaluation. The students entered a holistic type of assessment, targeting skills and competences, through written and oral tests. From a total number of 166831 students who enrolled for the baccalaureate exam in 2010, 151640 students passed the written test. 154623 students passed the listening comprehension and 154626 passed the speaking test (3836 students being absent). 130091 students obtained a B2 level in reading and only 44241 students obtained a B2 in writing. 138847 students obtained a B2 in listening and 67210 students had a B2 in speaking.

As compared to the last five years, the baccalaureate 2010 brought the recognition of the certificates obtained at international exams, for the C test of the baccalaureate (evaluating the reading and writing, listening and speaking as linguistic competences. Out of a total number of 166831 students who enrolled for the baccalaureate 2010, 8270 students had their certificates recognised and equalized to the C test of the baccalaureate, representing 4,96%. Cambridge ESOL examinations, which enjoy the highest popularity in Romania as a proficiency assessment based on descriptors.

3. Modern language education involves:

- the construction of teaching;
- various policy settings, including decentralization;
- the teacher as a provider and a model, rather than a subject specialist;

All these elements are built at a micro-level, in class where the decisions are made and at a macro-level implying trends in professional development, textbooks creativity and innovation.

The provision factors in language teacher training involve national official bodies and institutions – British Council, the American Cultural Centre being examples of good practice in the domain, international and national agencies, universities and professional associations like AsMeRo or RATE.

Teacher development should be viewed as:

- an evolutionary process of self-discovery and self-renewal;
- an exploratory and refining process;

Language teacher education and quality assurance imply high standards in relation to curriculum design. If the standards and the curriculum design are still the responsibility of national institutions like the National Centre for Evaluation and Examinations and the Institute of Education Sciences, the strategic planning and teaching as well as the choice of teaching materials and the technical equipment are the teachers' responsibility.

Language teacher education is provided in direct context by local Teachers' Houses. There are also some other forms like open learning – on-line courses being more and more attended (a good example is the recent *E-Teacher* offered by the American Cultural Centre and the American Embassy). Blended learning has become a shared activity where teachers and students can work together – e.g. the INSAM project that is developing now under the coordination of the Ministry of Education focuses on evaluation and is addressed to teachers and students, displaying items and tests for all the subjects, including modern languages.

Language teachers have the opportunity to attend training courses of different types:

- 1-2 days seminars;
- conferences;
- short term courses for unqualified or beginner teachers;
- master courses;
- PhD degrees/theses.

There are, however, different other categories of language education receivers like student teachers, teachers educators, school managers, regional and national decision makers. Student teachers should receive knowledge and training both from universities (during their master courses) and from mentors that have the privilege to make them practise in front of pupils/students, in real classroom situations. School managers and decision making factors have their training during long life education programmes that prove the fact that the training process is an on-going one.

According to European Documents on language teachers education – *The European Profile for Foreign Language Teacher Education* (issued in 2004 under the supervision of Professor Michael Kelly from the University of Southampton, and translated into Romanian in 2007 by A-M Pegulescu, during a post-doctoral scholarship programme at the University of Southampton) and *The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* (issued in 2007 by a group of trainers coordinated by Professor David Newby – the document has been translated in Romanian as well by A-M Pegulescu during the above mentioned programme at the University of Southampton) teachers should be considered researchers as well as users of research.

Among the very useful European projects and materials targeting language teacher education, the *QualiTraining Guide for quality assurance in language education* (Muresan et al., 2007), put together principles and basic concepts, quality and people, systems for monitoring the quality of educational processes, benchmarking and validation. The team of authors gathered experienced university professors and trainers, who managed to obtain a perfect balance between theory and practice (including 6 case studies with examples of good practice from Spain, France, Germany, Bulgaria and UK).

Quality improvement in language teacher education asks for continued further training and real implementation of quality standards. Romania has shown its interest in standard setting in areas such as evaluation, quality control and management. The procedures and materials introduced by QUEST Romania and the materials for self-assessment for teachers - e.g. "the Profiling Grid for teachers" - developed by EAQUALS can help teachers in the process of identifying their strengths, as well as their needs and interests in professional development, so as to contribute to the ongoing improvement of language teaching in Romania.

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