INNOVATIVE APPROACHES IN LANGUAGE TEACHING INITIATIVES

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Abstract

Starting from the recommendations of the European Commission stating that a promotion strategy should be built on three main coordinates – dissemination, exploitation and sustainability – we shall in turn refer to each of these three types of actions. We will present the goals of each action, the instruments they use, and how they are in turn planned for in the course of a project. The stages of the envisaged strategy and the examples used for illustrating processes and successful methodologies rely on best practices collected from projects that have been awarded the European Language Label and are recorded in the NELLIP database of awarded initiatives.

The NELLIP project, Network of European Language Labelled Initiatives, is funded by the European Commission in the framework of the Lifelong Learning Programme – Key Activity 2 Languages and aim to promote quality in language learning through the application of the quality criteria used to award the European Language Label. We intend to highlight that the teaching and learning processes should be comprehensive in their approach, should provide an added value, should motivate students and be creative and original, should have a European emphasis and be transferable.

This article will act as a guideline on how to plan, implement, manage, exploit and network quality initiatives for language learning based on the capitalization of the best practices developed in the framework of European language labeled projects and initiatives.

Key words: ELL, innovation, languages, quality, teaching, learning

Whether a project is considered a success or not depends on the extent to which it complies with a set of criteria which cover all the processes involved in designing and running it, as well in ensuring its sustainability after the funding of the project has officially ended. The development and performance indicators, such as the input and the output, the project outcomes and impact should also be measured in order to establish whether or not they have been achieved. At the same time, one should not overlook the notable contribution that project promoters make in order to transform the project into a success story. Their enthusiasm, innovative spirit, leadership and team-work abilities, motivational techniques and resourcefulness in difficult times are also some of the ingredients for the success of a project.

Successful project managers should be able to create and implement a number of mechanisms to help them design, monitor, evaluate and assure the quality of the project and its compliance with the original goals and work plan. Quality assurance (QA) should be based on systematic activities which have the purpose to ensure that the quality requirements for a certain project will be met.

Nowadays project management has become a regular type of activity in numerous industries and a very wide range of project management tools and specific software are readily available, including budget spreadsheets, time flowcharts, questionnaires, report forms, to mention only a few. Although many of these could also prove to be very useful in the case of language projects, we will be referring strictly to some of the tools which apply directly to this field of activity.

The complexity of the project areas to be planned, managed and assessed calls for a variety of procedures and tools which can be used for each purpose.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The NELLIP project has the aim to promote quality in language learning through the application of the quality criteria used to award the European Language Label by developing a Guidelines on

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how to plan, implement, manage, exploit and network quality initiatives for language learning.

The European Language Label is intended to highlight and reward innovative initiatives in the field of language teaching and learning as best practice to be disseminated at European level. The Label is open to all forms of education and training and aims to promote innovation in language teaching. By supporting innovative projects, the Label seeks to raise the standards of language teaching across Europe.

One of the main criteria set by the European Commission for financing a language project is the innovation that the project brings to the educational landscape of the European Union in terms of language learning. This criterion is also one of the six used for evaluating whether a project is awarded the European Lanuage Label (stated in the form of originality and creativity): "Initiatives should be original and creative. They should introduce previously unknown approaches to language learning, but also make sure they are appropriate to the students concerned."

Developing projects that are both innovative and successful is a great challenge for their creators as in any field of human activity there is a natural resistance to change (i.e. innovation). A successful strategy for dissemination, exploitation and sustainability of the project should thus mainly be about a successful process of managing change and introducing innovation with appropriate tools and at an appropriate pace in order to be able to encounter resistance and enable the targeted beneficiaries to adopt the innovation.

Dissemination and exploitation (with direct influence on sustainability) must facilitate change and innovation by overcoming the critical mass of change, testing the limits of the comfort zone, finding the balance between promoting innovation and ensuring mainstreaming and facilitating the implementation of good practice that needs promotion, multiplication and mainstreaming.

An important aspect to be considered when designing a project (and implicitly the promotion strategy for it) is why does innovation fail. In language related projects, the most frequently met blocking points are unclear requirements for stakeholders / unclear expectations from them, the staff implementing the innovation is not properly trained in the new skills required, the project is under-resourced in terms of money, time and staff, the beneficiaries are unsupported during their attempts to implement the innovation (lack of feedback from project promoters). Innovation is prone to failing in settings where the morale is low, the change agents are not respected, there is a track record of failede innovation, risk-taking is discouraged and leaders are inflexible in their attitudes. Some change strategies' characteristics also make change unsuccessful: if the change strategies are not accompanied by practial training and on-the-job support, if they do not adapt to developing circumstances, if they don't recognize

local needs or offer no sense of collective ownership.

Moreover, people are reluctant to adopting innovations which are not seen as beneficial, cannot be understood, are at odds with the people's professional beliefs or are inadequately resourced.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Dissemination is about providing information on results in a planned way to relevant audiences, exploitation about multiplication and mainstreaming (multiplication: end-users adopting or applying results and mainstreaming: using results as part of a policy), while sustainability is the capacity of the project to exist and function beyond its funded life (period in which a grant was given by the European Commission for project implementation).

These deffinitions imply that dissemination and exploitation are distinct but closely related to one another as exploitation provides the link to policy (which means that successful exploitation means producing relevant results from projects to satislfy the demands of providers, policy makers and – ultimately – the societly at large).

In comparison to exploitation, sustainability means that the project results are used and exploited continuously, it is the exploitation of results in the long term.

A. Planning

Several language projects have found that lack of time is one of the big challenges of promotion. It often takes longer than people anticipate and this needs to be factored in at the planning stage. Project coordinators sometimes find they end up doing most of the promotional work because other partners are too busy. The successful promotion of your project depends on planning and distributing the tasks among your partners.

Making an action plan

There are many possible ways of promoting a project. It needs to be thought through at the beginning of the project and all the partners need to be involved. Brainstorming at the first project meeting can be very useful to get ideas and to prioritise. Make sure that promotion doesn't get left as an afterthought. Remember the five key questions: why?, what? who?, when?, how? It's worth testing how good an idea is by asking, 'Would it matter if we did not do this?'

Look at the expertise of people within the partners and identify who has the most relevant experience to lead implementation of the promotion plan. You may need to bring in external expertise. Don't be discouraged by the idea of yet

another plan. Any plan is better than no plan. Promotion requires coordination between partners and across countries, so a plan is very useful.

Most projects only have a small budget for promotion, so much will depend on ingenuity. Not all target groups are huge and so do not need huge promotion. But don't let this deter you from thinking ambitiously and imaginatively – there are always organisations which may be able to give your project help and support.

B. Ensuring impact

Always put yourself in the position of the end-users, think why they would be interested, how to engage this potential interest and talk in their language. Never assume that the benefits of your project are self-evident.

Organisations which can contribute to the project's impact indirectly, in areas other than the end users.

These may be organisations whose policies would benefit from the contribution your project could make to them. They may be able to help by including details of your project in newsletters, websites and brochures and contribute in some way to launch events, seminars or exhibitions. They could have an important role to play as multipliers if they are in a position to spread information about your project and its end results through a network.

Use the support of the National Agency and the European Commission where appropriate to help achieve maximum publicity. One way of involving important agencies and policy makers is to invite them to project events as key speakers. If they have a high profile, they may also attract media attention.

Measuring impact

It is essential to establish ways of measuring how successful the project has been in achieving its objectives. This will be required by the sponsors and could be invaluable in planning future projects. Positive feedback can also be used to further disseminate and exploit the project results. So it is important to plan for ways of measuring impact at the start of the project.

C. Qualitative and quantitative data

Qualitative data

It is not easy to interpret qualitative data in an objective way. But it may be possible to quantify the feedback to some degree, for instance, to state that x% of respondents gave positive feedback, y% gave negative feedback. It is also possible to state any clear general trends in the responses. A sample range of quotes can be useful to give a 'feel' for the feedback – and they can help promote the project at a later date, for instance in bids for further funding or commercialisation.

Quantitative data

- The number of enquiries about a product
- The number of orders for a product
- The number of brochures, DVDs etc. Distributed
- The number of visitors to a website and/or the number of page impressions
- The number of visitors to an exhibition stand or attending a conference, seminar or workshop
- The amount of press coverage – for example, the number of articles in local/ national press or items on local or national radio or TV. The size of the audience reached through mass media is useful, but not always easy to obtain.

Bear in mind that readership of a newspaper is likely to be higher than the circulation figures, because more than one person may well read the same copy.

D. How to approach an organization

Contacts with policy makers and NGOs at regional and European level can strengthen the visibility of a language project because the fact that a project has their support or interest adds to its credibility and makes it more interesting to the media. Links with policy makers could lead to opportunities for further funding/sponsoring of project-related activities. Policy makers can also play the role of multipliers since they may give access to further networking with other NGOs, institutions, or local/national authorities.

Approaching these actors is an easy task provided that a clear strategy is followed. It is important to bear in mind that authorities and NGOs are very concerned with efficiency and the visibility of results and often have limited time to spare for issues that are not part of their usual agendas. Hence, the project's objectives should be presented in a way that makes it obvious why they are relevant to targeted policy makers' goals. The timing of the approach may also enhance the relevance of the project to political agendas (for example, periods close to electoral campaigns or debates on the adoption of important EC directives).

Be brief and focused, highlighting the project's potential contribution to the objectives of the organisation you are approaching. A short, clear explanatory letter/email is a good way to initiate a first contact, but it is important to be proactive and not to be disappointed if replies are delayed. Taking the initiative to call, reminding them of your message and proposing an appointment for a face-to-face discussion can often take you further than many long, well written reports. Remember that your counterpart has

limited time and is 'result-orientated'. Remain proactive during the follow-up period after the first meeting and make sure you remind your contact that the project is a win-win opportunity - without becoming too insistent.

E. What to promote?

Some of the most memorable promotion comes in unusual and original forms – objects with simple messages on that you can give away, like toys, calendars, badges, stamps, even individually-wrapped slices of cake. You can't use them to convey a complex message - maybe just the website address - but they help ensure that people remember your project and want to find out more. So think laterally!

The mission or message of the project

It is important to communicate that this is a project about languages and has a European/ international dimension – not just by the nature of the content but also sometimes in the way the project has been developed, with partners from different countries. In some cases, this will give the project a multicultural dimension and it may also contribute to intercultural dialogue. Much has been written about the importance of languages and there are many surveys carried out by the EC, national governments and Non- Governmental Organisations (NGOs). You may find facts, statistics or quotes from policy makers which can reinforce the importance and relevance of your particular project and help promote it to the appropriate organisation or end user. This may help you reach a partner who would be interested in joining your project or assisting with funding or providing facilities.

Deliverables

In designing your project you will already have decided what your deliverables are. You don't have to wait until all the final products are ready to send out some types of promotional materials such as leaflets or samples of the final products. But it is important not to raise people's interest in the final product if they won't be able to see it in the near future; this could give a negative impression.

The project process

It is not just the end result of the project that matters – it is also the process of doing it, the partnership, the skills and ideas brought by the partners – all these are valuable assets and can be promoted. It is easy to take the process for granted, so it's worth listing the key assets of the project – for instance, research carried out at the start of the project, meetings bringing together partners from different countries, interviews with important figures.

CONCLUSIONS

When developing a language project you should take into consideration the following criteria, promoted by the EU Comision:

• Initiatives should be comprehensive in their approach. Every element of the language project - from students to teachers, methods to materials - should ensure that the needs of the students are identified and met.

• Initiatives should provide an added value in their national context. This means a tangible improvement in teaching or learning of languages, either in terms of quantity or quality. "Quantity" might refer to the project stimulating the learning of several languages, particularly those that are less widely used, whereas "quality" might refer to the introduction of an improved methodology.

• Initiatives should motivate students and teachers to improve their language skills.

• Initiatives should be original and creative. They should introduce previously unknown approaches to language learning, but also make sure they are appropriate to the students concerned.

• Initiatives should have a European emphasis. They should be adapted to Europe's linguistic diversity and make use of this advantage - for example, by liaising with contacts across national borders. The initiatives should actively improve understanding between cultures by promoting language skills.

• Initiatives should be transferable. They might potentially be a source of inspiration for other language initiatives in different countries.

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