

INSTRUMENTS FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE RESOURCES

PREDAREA LIMBILOR STRĂINE – INSTRUMENTE DE CERTIFICARE A CALITĂȚII

*COLIBABA Anca*¹, *VLAD Monica*², *PETRESCU Lucia*³

¹“Grigore T. Popa” University of Medicine and Pharmacy Iasi, Romania

²EuroEd Foundation Iasi, Romania

³EuroEd Foundation Iasi, ”Al. I. Cuza” University Iași, Romania

Abstract. *Faced with a lack of innovative language teaching materials in the past decades, language teaching staff and institutions must face nowadays yet another challenge: how to select the adequate, high-quality resources for their learners from a multitude of resources available. This article focuses on several instruments (such as linguistic audits or quality checklists) developed for quality assurance in the area of linguistic materials. Moreover, the methodology of employing these instruments shall be presented, with guidelines for university language departments, language centres, teachers and learners. This is a result of the research undertaken on three main instruments of ensuring quality in language learning*

Key words: foreign language teaching, quality assurance, online learning

Rezumat. *Pentru profesorii de limbi străine, până acum un deceniu, provocarea era să identifice materiale inovative de predare - învățare. Acum, provocarea se constituie din alte realități, specifice ultimilor ani: profesorii, dar și studenții sau departamentele de predare a limbilor străine din universități, trebuie să aleagă materiale corespunzătoare din punct de vedere calitativ, dintr-o multitudine de resurse disponibile. Acest articol abordează problema asigurării calității în cazul resurselor de predare-învățare a limbilor străine, axându-se pe prezentarea câtorva instrumente dezvoltate în acest scop. De la audituri lingvistice până la indicații cu privire la selectarea resurselor de calitate, vom prezenta aceste instrumente, incluzând indicații de implementare pentru catedre de limbi străine, pentru centre de predare, pentru profesori și studenți. Această prezentare constiuie rezultatul unei cercetări întreprinse pe trei instrumente principale de asigurare a calității în zona resurselor de învățare a limbilor străine.*

Cuvinte cheie: predarea limbilor străine, asigurarea calității, învățarea online

INTRODUCTION

The article dwells on the particular strategies implemented in three European projects focusing on quality assurance in teaching foreign languages. EuroEd Foundation is a partner in two of these projects (Lingu@net and TOOL Tipls) and the coordinating institution in the IN-CLASS partnership. The quality assurance intruments for the selection of

language resources that have been developed under the aegis of the three projects provide the main research focus for the purposes of the present article. As such, we will present a number of results that clearly indicate the possibility of transferring the afore-mentioned instruments to other foreign language teaching/learning contexts.

The three projects tackle various dimensions of the linguistic instruments under discussion. For instance, the first project - Lingu@net World Wide - aims at promoting quality in the area of online learning instruments. The second, In-Class, promotes quality assurance for linguistic instruments mainly used in SMEs, while the third, TOOL Tipls, undertakes to design foreign language quality assurance instruments in the area of professional and vocational education, and, by extrapolation, in the hospitality industry. By approaching this highly topical field of study, the authors address directly the needs for support and orientation of foreign language teachers and students as to how quality study materials should be selected. In addition, the article is also of interest for institutions that deliver language courses or plan to hire providers of language services that can guarantee a good level of language performance for their staff.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The three projects under study are concerned with quality assurance at various levels of foreign language learning. We shall therefore analyse in turn the strategies as well as the particular instruments used in each of them. On that basis, we shall propose a series of transferable instruments and methods for quality assurance in foreign language learning.

Lingu@net World Wide project, which has been implemented since 1998, has so far uploaded on the dedicated project platform a number of 3,700 online resources for the learning of 20 foreign languages. All in all, till the end of 2012, this project will provide guided access and support for accessing over 5,000 resources for 32 languages (of which five new languages of international circulation: arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese and Russian).

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So far, the internet page www.linguanet-europa.org has recorded 100,000 visitors monthly, and a further 400,000 visitors per month are estimated up until 2011. Owing to the large number of resources, languages and professionals involved in cataloguing all the online resources, quality assurance has been of the utmost importance for all the partners working in Lingu@net project. As definition of the appropriate instruments is a pre-requisite in quality assurance (Byram, M. - Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning), the partnership duly created an instrument meant to help standardise the process of introducing a resource onto the project platform. It is our intention to present this instrument here, while the results concerning the transferability of the quality assurance instrument to various foreign language teaching contexts will be discussed in the following section. Adding a resource to the Lingu@net World Wide project platform follows the steps of a standardised process strictly observed by each and every project member

involved in cataloguing. Figure 1 shows the stages a new resource follows towards platform uploading:

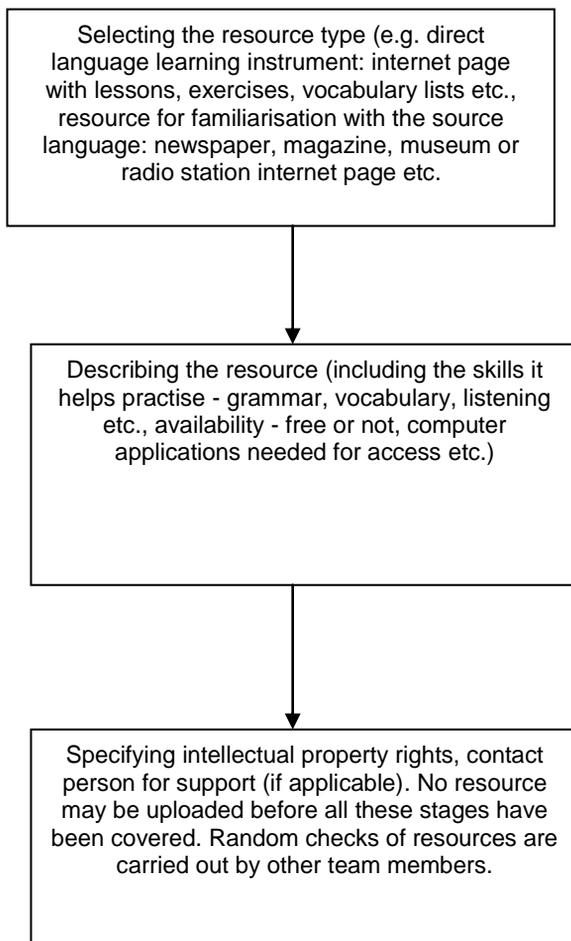


Fig.1. Adding resources onto the Lingu@net World Wide platform

The second project we consider here, similarly focusing on quality assurance of foreign language learning resources, is called IN CLASS (International Communication and Language Assessment). IN CLASS (LLP/LdV/Tol/2009/RO/010) is a transfer-of-innovation project funded by the European Commission, Directorate for Education and Culture, in the framework of the Lifelong Learning Programme. Beyond the aim of quality assurance for linguistic instruments, this project also has a more general goal: the quality assurance of the overall international, intercultural communication process in which SMEs take part. As a rule, SMEs are particularly vulnerable to difficulty arising from linguistic barriers (see the ELAN study, 2007: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lang/doc/multireport_en.pdf), which leads to the loss of potential partners for no less than 11% of the SMEs.

The main objectives of IN-CLASS project are piloting a communication audit on a European scale and a training pack for auditors. The audit programme will be piloted in 30 SMEs from the three beneficiary countries. The training programme incorporates an e-learning component for auditors of language materials for English, Romanian, Italian and Hungarian.

The following section gives a thorough presentation of our results, in particular the transferability potential of the audit programme, be it as a whole or partially, for institutions and professionals working in an intercultural context.

In its turn, TOOL Tipls project aims at increasing transparency in the evaluation of language competences through developing and using consistently things like levels of reference, common certification principles etc. This is again a transfer-of-innovation project funded by the European Commission, Directorate for Education and Culture, in the framework of the Lifelong Learning Programme. As such, the project will define the language skills level for English – used for professional purposes in the target group. As concerns the working approach, we will start from the existing curriculum for professional and vocational education in each of the participating countries: Lithuania, Finland, Romania, and Latvia. Having their roots in the CEFR (http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/CADRE_EN.asp) and ECVET (http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc50_en.htm), appropriate descriptors of professional language skills for English will be designed. The main instrument TOOL Tipls project undertakes to create is a framework – based on initial data regarding the teaching of a foreign language for specific purposes such as: level of competence, specific vocabulary, higher-order skills (Strevens P. - Special Purpose Language Learning: a perspective. Language teaching and linguistic abstracts) – that favours the development of instruments for the certification and validation of acquired competences which target clearly defined groups of professionals. The following section presents the results of our research with regard to the possibilities of successful transfer of the instrument to various teaching/learning contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of the quality assurance instruments in the three projects under study has to cover the main steps any individual or institution interested in foreign language learning has to take in order to make sure they select quality instruments, from merely checking out an internet page to the choice of a long-term strategy meant to boost the language performance of staff or students. All three projects, of which two are still at the beginning of implementation, undertake to develop transferable products, while also sensitising professionals in the field with regard to the importance of quality.

Having analysed the three main instruments developed in the three projects already described, we are now in a position to present the specific results of the research on the applicability and transferability of the instruments to various foreign language teaching contexts. Moreover, we will also share the results of our research on the integration of these instruments into the actual teaching process.

1. The instrument whereby a learning resource is uploaded onto the Lingu@net project platform can definitely be adapted to serve the cataloguing needs for foreign language learning online resources of different institutions:

foreign language teaching centres, internet pages of universities or foreign language chairs, gathering students' projects, cataloguing resources for libraries or distance education.

Systematic use of a model with mandatory components will necessarily help ensure standardisation and consistency all across the learning resources databank, without limiting user access to the resources in the process.

2. The specific activities in the audit programme developed by the IN-CLASS project are readily transferable to the punctual evaluation of staff skills or of a company's communication strategies. On top of the auditor training itself, we have found the following transferable products: quality assurance procedures, reference terms and notions, methods for a feasibility study as regards the optimum ratio amount of resource investment vs. results.

3. As concerns the certification instruments developed in TOOL Tipls project, we have found a high degree of methodological transferability to similar certification in areas of professional activity that require use of foreign languages for specific purposes. Accordingly, the model we created for vocational education and for the English language can be adapted to certification of competences in other foreign languages (widely or less widely used) on the basis of the Common European Framework of Reference and the specific instruments provided by specialised communities and institutions. In its turn, the vocational education certification model (hospitality services) can be readily adapted to meet certification needs in other areas of activity such as: business administration, agriculture, soil science, art and design, construction, the public sector etc.

CONCLUSIONS

The vast array of foreign language learning resources, particularly online, will naturally undergo a process of screening during which professionals in the field of quality assurance linguistic instruments have to assist the beneficiaries in selecting specific instruments and acquiring a set of personalised strategies and mechanisms for evaluating the quality of the resources they use. The goal of our study is to do with assessing the transferability of three quality assurance instruments used in foreign language learning.

1. We have found that the resource cataloguing process set up in Lingu@net project can be extrapolated to the indexing of foreign language learning online resources in various contexts.

2. Looking at the linguistic audit materials created in IN-CLASS project we can safely surmise that a number of components can be transferred to other areas of language and intercultural competence evaluation.

3. TOOL Tipls project looks to develop a system of language competence certification for vocational education. We have found that the instruments in use and the available frameworks in Europe can be successfully adapted to help elaborate similar certification systems for other languages and for other areas of study.

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