Institutional evaluation of English language writing challenged

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Abstract

The English language written examinations carried out and graded at the Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj have followed the norms set forth by institutional conventions. However, the 90s set the scene for major changes in the once established evaluation system in all Europe, including the Romanian university examination system. The study surveys the Council of Europe instruments, which have called for a reconsideration of the evaluation system and the adoption of new strategies.

INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION BACKGROUND

The written English language examinations carried out at the Romanian Babes-Bolyai University, particularly at the Faculty of Letters have been prevailingly marked by institutional norms and relied on: written entrance examinations, progress examinations, one-term/one-year final examinations. Oral examinations were the preferred instruments for the assessment of oral communication competences in the 70s and 80s. Against this institutional background, the trainers started choosing their own forms of evaluation in compliance with the kind of competences they intended to form, and henceforth, to assess. In time, particularly in the 90s, the general interest moved towards written examinations and the adoption of European standards.

EUROPEAN STANDARDS. FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF EVALUATION

Evaluation has grown into an area of consistent research drawing on the advent of applied linguistics, the tremendous development of English for Specific Purposes and the impetus coming from other branches of linguistics, like EFL and ESL.

Any attempt to create a feasible and instrumental evaluation system must examine the general linguistic theories and take into account the experiments and experiences reached.

From the scientific perspective, an approach to writing evaluation should incorporate the language theories and theoretic approaches on language teaching/learning promoted by native linguists and language theoreticians. In this respect, the influence exerted by the linguistic theories ranging from Firth to Holiday, McIntosh, Strevens, Mackey and others, and later on by the *communicative approach in language teaching*, served as landmarks for the evaluation agenda of many academic/training institutions, including the Romanian Babes-Bolyai University. Any research on evaluation must be further indebted to the studies and developments that emerged from pragmatics, *applied linguistics*, ESP and *functional linguistics.*

Assumably, the most accurate evaluation models have come from *performance tests, proficiency tests,* and from *standard language tests.*

The outcome of all teaching and learning has been termed, proficiency'. Since writing is part of a FL training process, a construct of writing assessment must be inclusive of the process of learning and the concept of proficiency as process outcome.

These findings must necessarily inspire the teachers and testers in building a corpus of evaluation principles, which should further reconcile the transnational models and requirements with local needs and traditions, while observing the specific communication medium, the general discourse type, the particular needs of the academic curriculum, the general and particular learner's needs, etc.

CHALLENGES

Alongside the historical evolution of written english evaluation, however, during the nineties a few novel factors have impacted evaluation: 1) the Common European Framework of Reference for language learning, teaching and assessment, 2) the European Language Portfolio, 3) the European principles of validation of non-formal and informal learning and 4) the institutional experience acquired from the implementation of European linguistic and vocational training projects.

The Council of Europe has devised and orchestrated a dual action intended to facilitate the learning of foreign languages in Europe and to create a common reference system of recognizable certificates and diplomas. These concerns were aimed at the recognition of professional and linguistic competences and skills of European citizens and the facilitation of the free movement of professionals throughout Europe.

In the past decade, the Council of Europe began its four-fold influence through: the creation of a *theoretic framework for foreign language teaching,* the creation of institutions for the promotion of *language theories*, and 'good practices', the initiative of *standardizing the evaluation criteria* of vocational and linguistic competences, the initiative to devise and carry out training and placement *activities* under the umbrella of community programmes like: Tempus, Minerva, Leonardo da Vinci and Socrates.

The Common European Framework of Reference for language learning, teaching and assessment is a document that provides a set of common criteria against which the assessment of modern language attainment in different educational sectors, target languages, linguistic regions and states can be referenced.

The Framework, based on *criterion-referenced assessment*, defines six levels or standards of proficiency through *descriptors or indicators (criteria),* that express the extent to which someone has met the referenced standards.

In spite of the rigorous selection of the descriptors, Brian North (1999) admits that the Framework provides a, hard core' of descriptors around which *teachers may add descriptors of their own.*

The European Council Framework represents a preliminary contribution to other breakthrough EC endeavours and has become a standard-setting normalisation instrument adopted by many European institutions, including the Romanian departments and centres for linguistic training of academic institutions.

The European Language Portfolio is another European document, closely related to the Frame, whose aim is to record qualifications and other significant linguistic and cultural experiences in an internationally transparent and acknowledged manner.

The present educational era calls for a reconsideration of the former vocational training policies and the promotion of integrated policies of lifelong learning, the implementation of standardised methods for skill and/or competence evaluation, and for the European recognition of qualifications. These concerns yielded the single European framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences, i.e. the 5-compenent EUROPASS, embracing the European Language Portfolio as a sub-component.

The impact of the adoption of the ELP by the Romanian EFL departments and training centres is three-fold:

1. the institutional departments, which formerly awarded nationally and locally recognised FL certificates, have adopted the ELP as a measurement instrument, a certification formula and a skills' record;
2. the use of the Language Portfolio, along with the other EURO-certification documents has also become common place practice and mandatory in the case of Socrates and particularly Leonardo da Vinci vocational and linguistic training projects, where the beneficiaries needed to certify their competences Europe-wide;
3. an impressive number of English language trainers have turned to the document and use it as a competence-setting norm whose indicators impose course content changes, methodological improvements and reconsidered linguistic targets.

The Common European Principles for recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning seek to "support a voluntary process leading towards more coherent and comparable validation practices in Europe". The areas of validation encompass learning taking place: a) in formal education and training settings, b) in relation to the labour market (enterprises, public organizations and economic sectors), c) in relation to voluntary and civil society activities as well as in community learning. With a view to accomplishing the principles, the institutions and stakeholders acquire major responsibilities, including the responsibility to provide a **legal and practical basis that enables the individuals to have their learning validated.**

In more recent years, an unprecedented research undertaken by commissions of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) in the area of NFL/IFL has shed light on further-reaching concerns, including the European Credit Transfer System and has stimulated the development of proposals for a European Credit Transfer System for VET (ECVET). This attempt to link the ECVET to the ECTS in

HE has generated new insights into the conceptual framework for the recognition of knowledge, skills and competences (KSC).

All these accomplishments indicate that on the basis of the previous endeavours (institutional, national, departmental) and on the on-hand European documents, the training institutions must further work out widely acceptable evaluation and recognition strategies.

The **linguistic and vocational exchange projects under the auspices of Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci EU programmes** aimed at consolidating and developing vocational and linguistic competences have impacted learning in several ways: first, they called for the creation of new training environments in host institutions or the adjustment of placement settings to respond to training needs; second, they called for the setting up of a mentoring system, of a reporting or on-hand evaluation system, and finally, the recognition of acquired or consolidated skills.

INSTITUTIONAL EVALUATION CHANGES

The best way to survey the evaluation changes undergone by the institutional system is to look closer at the impact of LdV projects thereon, since the implementation of these projects utilised at least two of the European 'challenges' mentioned: the European documents and the principles of validation of non-formal learning.

The BBU has devised and implemented 5 Leonardo da Vinci projects having as partners prestigious European institutions, such as: the Chamber of Commerce and Industry Marseille-Provence, France, the University of Ulster, UK, etc.

Apart from the proposed aims, i.e. the improvement of vocational skills and competencies, and the improvement of vocational communication skills (both oral and written) in a foreign language, the projects focused on the recognition of competences and skills acquired or developed in placement or work settings. Against this background, the **evaluation of performance/ proficiency** in writing was thoroughly carried out and monitored. The reason for the special attention devoted to evaluation was the need to formally acknowledge the activity carried out at the host institution and in work settings.

The procedure of validation and recognition was facilitated by several factors: validation-oriented project planning, effective progress monitoring, focus on evaluation criteria and conditions, on comparability and mutual recognition of skills and competences.

First, all project activities in the host institution were tailored to the training needs of the beneficiaries and were viewed as complementary vocational and linguistic training activities that diversified and enriched the training programme offered to the beneficiaries by the home institution.

Second, evaluation was a permanent activity and was carried out through *overall evaluation of results* and *vocational progress reports* (including: coordinators' general reports, partners' reports, placement mentors' reports, trainers'/tutors' reports, beneficiaries' self-assessment reports). This process involved both host and home institutions alike. The final *evaluation of linguistic progress*, incorporating *writing skills,* was carried out by home trainers/tutors through evaluation of student progress vis-à-vis the performance (competence and skills) prior to departure, who also acknowledged recognition of host institution evaluation and transferred the earned credits.

The formal, institutional recognition agreed on both by the home institution and the host institution referred to two aspects: 1) course attendance and individual performances materialised in *diplomas, certificates, reports,* and *2)* completed placement activity materialised in *evaluations* and *certificates.*

The linguistic component of the project was achieved through: *institutional training* offered at the training institution or in placement enterprises and *immersion in a native language environment.*

The evaluation procedure used by the host institutions varied in accordance with the domain, institutional norms and situational circumstances. Thus, some host institutions awarded course **attendance certificates**, **standard certificates of linguistic competences** including the "Test Francaise Internationale" "issued by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry Marseille", and general evaluative recognition certificates of competences.

The home institution has recognised the qualifications and has converted all credits, awards and certificates into the home evaluation system. In doing so, the home course tutors headed by the project coordinator indexed all qualification certificates, evaluation reports and certifying documents, compared the training and work conditions in the host country with the ones in the home institution, compared the resulting performances and graded the progress according to the home institution's standards. This was carried out further through: considering targeted competences, comparing course content, comparing teaching methodologies, teaching activities, forms of examination, and finally, grading criteria. For example, in the case of written communication, the activities envisaged by the host institution coincided with the ones addressed by the home institution curriculum, i.e. *business correspondence*, written assignments including: *form-filling, report-writing, drawing up advertising leaflets, brochures, questionnaires, various business/trade documents*, etc. In some rare cases, where the home tutors insisted on a particular course content and specific evaluation criteria, supplementary reports certifying the activities performed were required, and/or the beneficiaries were re-examined.

The competence recognition process has run smoothly, given the alignment of the BBU training policy with the institutional policies promoted by the Council of Europe and its collaboration with European universities on the comparability of studies and evaluation systems.

CONCLUSION

The experience of the vocational and linguistic projects has confirmed the validity of the two latter challenges brought to evaluation: the recognition of learning acquired in non-formal settings and the contribution of European projects to re-shaping institutional evaluation.

The European experiences have broadened and refined the home institution evaluation system. In addition, they have set forth the prerequisites for further improvements regarding the creation of more synergies among European training institutions.

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