QUALITY ASSURANCE: FROM ANCIENT TIMES TO TODAY'S LANGUAGE CENTRES

SALOMI PAPADIMA-SOPHOCLEOUS
Cyprus University of Technology

ABSTRACT

All domains of our society are currently concerned with quality: quality of services, quality of processes and quality of products. Historically, mechanisms for quality control have existed since the beginning of time. This paper, originating from a workshop on Language Centre Quality Assurance in the ACLES conference (Girona, 2013), takes the reader for a diachronic journey in order to discover the origins of quality assurance and develop an understanding of its presence and importance through the centuries. Then it briefly describes current mechanisms of quality management in different areas. It then focuses on the area of LC quality assurance practices to concentrate on the description of a specific scheme of LC internal quality self-assessment checklist and its piloting in a specific context. Finally it describes a number of external mechanisms for language learning provision. The aim is to acquaint LC practitioners with the notion of LC quality assessment, and LC quality assessment tools in order to assist them in implementing QA in their LC contexts.

1. THE NEED TO IMPROVE LANGUAGE LEARNING PROVISION AND TO IMPLEMENT QUALITY ASSURANCE FROM LEARNING TO COMMUNICATING

In the area of language learning, different types of processes and expected outcomes evaluation schemes have been implemented; as a result, language learning and its provision is constantly improving. However, although such evaluations have been regarded as sufficient to guarantee good language learning and language learning provision in modern times, new approaches to language learning and language learning provision quality management and monitoring are becoming necessary and are being more and more put to practice. There are five major reasons for this need:

1. Despite the generally recognised achievements in language teaching and learning in modern times with the abundance of theories, methodologies, techniques, tools and materials, there are still students who come out of language learning courses without the expected level of competence.
2. There are many types of language learning providers who claim to provide the best language learning with the best of methods. One would say that there is a world industry in this domain. However, there is also the feeling in society that, even though people study languages for many years in these agencies, when it comes to communicating in those languages in authentic real-life situations, their language learning proves inadequate.
3. There are language-providing agencies which do not comply with the most current theories and practice in the area in order to facilitate the expected outcomes.
4. There are providers who believe they are doing what is expected but do not go through systematic quality assurance and control mechanisms to not only evidence that but also to assure themselves of that.
5. The society's confidence in language learning systems is still not at satisfactory levels. It is true that language teaching and learning has never been as developed before as it is today, but the perception of inadequate language competence due to inadequate language learning provision is still evident. With globalisation and the current mobility of people and the need to communicate effectively in multilingual and plurilingual settings, there are more reasons to ensure satisfactory language learning than ever before. This general recognition is highly supported by people

communicating with each other in all domains of today's society locally and over-seas.

6. Aspects of language learning provision such as the use of new technologies, modern facilities and the most updated materials as well as results in examinations recognised worldwidely are increasingly used as marketing tools, nationally and internationally. It is obvious that advertisements promoting these aspects create new 'consumer' demands and increase the distrust in language learning provision without, for example, the use of the newest new technologies or high-level 'label'.

7. The traditional mandatory inspections or evaluations are indispensable, but unable to assess and control quality in a systematic way.

It is therefore important to reassure the quality in language learning in more systematic ways and adequately evidence it. It is important for language-learning providers to intro-duce quality management mechanisms in order to assure quality.

2.1. Origins of Quality

The notion, the value and the importance of assessment and quality of products or specific expected outcomes have preoccupied not only people since ancient times, but even God himself:

> "In the beginning, God created... And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good."
> Genesis, The Creation of the World

In the history of mankind, product quality and process control preoccupation can be traced as far back as 3,000 B.C. in Babylonia. In the code of Hammurabi, ruler of Babylonia, there are many references to quality. One of them is indicative of the importance quality was attributed and the severe consequences which were imposed in the case of such lack of quality. Here is an example:

> "The mason who builds a house which falls down and kills the inmate shall be put to death."
> *The Code of Hammurabi*, translated by L. W. King

Similar instances can be found during the building of the pyramids of Egypt, around 2,200 B.C. This is evidenced in the system designed for quarrying and dressing stone and in end-products of the time such as the pyramids at Cheops.

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They are also found in ancient Greek architecture in the area of military applications, in China in construction, in education and in the military (1,800 years B.C.) and later on in Venetian shipbuilding.

Total Quality Management History, September 2010

In modern times, the concepts of quality control, quality assurance, total quality management (TQM) originated in industrial contexts, initially after the Industrial Revolution and then during the First and Second World Wars. During World War I, quality assurance was needed due to the large-scale manufacturing required for war activities to ensure quality products. Inspectors were assigned to inspect the quality at assembly lines. Poor quality products were sent back for fixing. This practice continued even after World War I and quality assurance practices gradually improved.

This concept was further developed in the post-war renaissance of Japanese industry led by Americans, such as Deming 1990-1993, considered one of the best known people in the field of quality control), Juran and Feigenbaum in the 1940s. The focus widened from quality of products to quality of all issues within an organisation. This was the start of total quality management (TQM) (1970s), a management strategy, which aims at embedding awareness of quality in all organisational processes (History of Quality).

2.2 Today

Today quality has entered all domains of life. Quality measurement terms are used in people's daily lives. People seem to demand more and more 'value for their money'. Busy people often talk about spending 'quality time' with their children and their partners. When shopping, people look for the 'quality label' on the products they intend to buy as a re-assurance for the quality of the product. Charters and guarantees influence many of the choices people make when acquiring goods or services. Companies give 'guarantees' to customers for the product they sell to them. Companies have mechanisms to ensure their 'customer satisfaction'. During economic recession, people talk about 'spending their money and time wisely'. More and more quality measurement mechanisms are incorporated in all different domains of human endeavours: business, industry, and education, including language education (Brown & Heyworth, n.d.)

3. QUALITY MANAGEMENT

3.1 Some existing quality management mechanisms

Today, there are various mechanisms, which help in auditing, or controlling the quality of an organisation. Some are generic, and some are specific. ISO, for example, is used in different business and other domains, and *HACCP* (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points) establishes and audits safe food production practices in food industry. Some are used for internal self-assessment / quality assurance, and others for external quality control.

3.2 Quality continuum / Mechanisms for quality assurance

There are three main quality processes or mechanisms:

1. Quality assurance / internal assessment / self-assessment
2. Quality control, from within or from outside: external assessment
3. Accreditation, in other words, the action taken after an external assessment

4. QUALITY IN EDUCATION AND LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Quality has become a very important component of many European governments' policies and organisations. Article 126 of The Maastricht Treaty, for example, deals with developing quality education by all Member States (1992, page 28). The 1996 (Unspecified, 1995) on education and training is another example. It focuses on the specific area of language teaching and learning: "*Teaching and Learning – Towards the Learning Society*" and refers to quality as an instrumental component in future language learning and teaching (for example, giving European Quality Label awards to schools meeting certain criteria regarding the promotion of community language learning (page 48, 49).

It is therefore of vital importance for the language learning providers to ensure quality in their language teaching contexts for two reasons: to assure and control their quality, first for themselves, and then for their learners and the society in general. Quality of language learning provision and the results of such learning in its use in society need to be assured and continuously controlled.

5. QUALITY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING PROVIDING AGENCIES / LANGUAGE CENTRES

5.1 Internal quality assurance

In language centre internal quality assurance, the following measurement tools are used:

- Self-assessment checklists – using quality checklists as a means of analysing the institution's performance.
- Peer observation – setting up regular programmes of peer observation of class teaching with clear criteria for what is to be observed and how feedback is to be given.
- Quality circles – a measure borrowed from industry. A quality circle is a small group of, say, teachers, who meet regularly to analyse how they are working and to propose and implement improvements.
- Learner feedback – using questionnaires and focus groups of learners to get feedback on how the teaching and the institution is perceived by the learners and how satisfactory they find these.
- Trends - are we getting better? – using the information from self-analysis and questionnaires over a period of time to identify progress.
- Identification of best practice – either internally or with knowledge of other institutions, trying to identify best practice in specific areas of activity and to adopt this.

- Setting of key indicators – using criteria or standardised information to measure progress in quality assurance – e.g. student satisfaction in questionnaires, the results in public examinations or standardised tests.
- Establishment of benchmarks – adopting measures of best practice as standards by which the institutions own activities are measured (Brown & Heyworth, n.d.).
- Use of LC self-assessment checklists such as the CERCLES Frascati list.

5.1.1 The CERCLES Frascati Self-assessment Checklist

The document entitled "Quality Assessment Criteria for Language Centres - Self-assessment Checklist" was produced at the Seminar "Guidelines for the Assessment of European Language Centres" held in Frascati, November 25-27, 2010, by a group of 27 participants from different LCs in Europe. It is intended to be used for LC internal self-assessment. It forms the basis of the Summary Self-evaluation Report. It is supposed to be accompanied by 'possible evidence'. It consists of a list of suggested evidence the centre should provide in order to justify its point. Where there is no evidence listed, it is suggested that the LC provide a written statement addressing the topic.

It is divided into 9 sections, each one consisting of sub-sections and each section consisting of a number of questions:

	Section	Sub-sections	No. of Questions
1	Statement of Principle	1. Mission/Vision: General Statement	4
		2. Needs identification & strategic planning	3
		3. Aims & more specific objectives	3
2	Organisational Structure	1. Stakeholders	3
		2. Structure	8
		3. Planning & Funding	5
		4. Orientation & Support of staff	5
3	Human Resources	1. Personnel	4
		2. Management tools	8
		3. Professional standards & quality mechanisms	3
		4. Communication	3
4	Facilities	1. Facilities for staff & students	4
		2. Technological infrastructure	5
5	Teaching, Learning and Assessment	1. Management of teaching & courses	8
		2. Teaching	8
		3. Assessment	11
		4. Students' evaluation of programmes & services	3
6	Other Language-Related Activities		9
7	Welfare and Student Services		5
8	Research		7
9	Results Analysis and Improvement		2

Table 1. Quality Assessment Criteria for Language Centres - Self-assessment Checklist.

A scale grid is provided to help complete the self-assessment checklist. There are three types of 5-point Likert scales, depending on the type of questions:
1. Scale of Importance (Imp)
2. Scale of Satisfaction (Sat) and
3. Scale of Agreement (Agr)

For each question, it is required to indicate on the scale either the level of satisfaction (Sat) with the topic or the level of agreement (Agr) with the statement. In addition, it is required to indicate the level of importance (Imp) of this topic to the LC. If the LC does not have the document/service/topic the question is asking about, it is required to circle "Not Applicable" (N/A).

Measurement Scales

Scale of Importance (Imp)	Scale of Satisfaction (Sat)	Scale of Agreement (Agr)
(1) not important to the LC	(1) very dissatisfied	(1) strongly disagree
(2) of little importance to the LC	(2) dissatisfied	(2) disagree
(3) moderately important to the LC	(3) could be improved	(3) undecided
(4) very important to the LC	(4) satisfied	(4) agree
(5) of utmost importance to the LC	(5) very satisfied	(5) strongly agree

Table 2. Measurement Scales.

On the basis of this checklist, a summary self-evaluation report is prepared.

The checklist looks like this:

Figure 1. Quality Assessment Criteria for Language Centres. Self-assessment Checklist. Frascati, 25-27 November 2010. Università degli studi di Roma "Foro Italico". CERCLES Seminar production.

Any language centre wishing or needing to go through self-assessment in order to assess the quality of its language provision can use this checklist to do so. The aim of the Frascati checklist was to include as many areas of a language centre to be assessed as possible. It is neither exhaustive nor prescriptive. Users can use what is relevant to their context and set self-assessment needs.

5.1.2 The CERCLES Frascati Checklist Pilot

This set is currently piloted by different language centres. One of these is the CUT LC. During Spring 2013, the LC went through self-assessment. This was based on an internal set of guidelines used for all academic entities, provided by the university administration. Because this was a generic one for all academic entities and did not match all the aspects of the LC, the CERCLES LC Self-Assessment checklist (2010) was also used to support this self-assessment report. This report will be used during the LC external quality control/audit in October 2013, conducted by three external experts, members of CERCLES. The CERCLES Frascati checklist proved extremely useful as a LC self-assessment data collection tool/standards framework, as it incorporated specific areas to be assessed, pertinent to language centres. Although the CUT LC met most aspects included in the Frascati checklist, it was very useful to all LC staff because it worked as a reflective mechanism

for the people involved, a tool to celebrate achievements and a tool to identify areas of improvement. It also played a very important role for the rest of the university community to realise and appreciate the work produced in the language centre.

5.2 LC External quality assurance and control
Quality assurance can be achieved internally, but external control measures can also be used to verify that quality has been achieved and as a motivation for improvement. External systems include:

- Inspection by ministry inspectors – not usually voluntary, but increasingly conducted as constructive, co-operative aids to self-improvement.
- "Inspection schemes" such as the English in Britain scheme run by the British Council in Britain; or the EAQUALS (the European Association of Quality Language Services) scheme. There are also a number of national ones emerging and being used.

5.2.1 The European Association of Quality Language Services (EAQUALS)
EAQUALS accredits and enhances quality language education for language teaching institutions. Accreditation by EAQUALS is a means by which providers of language courses can demonstrate their compliance with high international standards designed specifically for language learning services. EAQUALS explore 12 areas:

> 1 Teaching and learning
> 2 Academic management – curriculum and course delivery
> 3 Academic management – assessment
> 4 Academic management – quality assurance
> 5 Educational resources
> 6 Other student services
> 7 Staff contracts and terms & conditions
> 8 Staff qualifications, training & expertise
> 9 Internal communications
> 10 Information, and promotional materials
> 11 Premises and facilities
> 12 Management, administration, legality

> Reference Guide to the Inspection Scheme for Institutions version 6.2

5.2.2 The British Council Accreditation Scheme
This scheme is the UK quality assurance scheme for the UK English Language Teaching (ELT) sector. The inspection of organisations offering English language courses aims to provide learners with a guarantee of quality.

The British Council inspection criteria fall into four broad areas:

> Management of teaching and course provision standard
> > Staff management
> > Student administration
> > Quality assurance
> > Publicity
> Learning resources and environment for students and teachers standard
> > Premises and facilities
> > Learning resources
> Teaching and learning standard
> > Academic staff profile
> > Academic management
> > Course design and implementation
> > Learner management
> > Classroom observation
>
> Welfare, support and student services standard
> > Care of students
> > Accommodation
> > Leisure opportunities

> Accreditation UK Handbook, 2012-2013

Through studying these types of schemes, both internal and external, one can notice that they deal with more or less the same aspects, some briefly other in more details. Another aspect is that such schemes include a broad spectrum of aspects, some of which may not apply to all language learning providers.

6. EPILOGUE

This paper presented a diachronic profile of quality assurance, described current theories and practices in quality assurance in general and in LL in LCs in particular. The aim was to provide a solid background and awareness of quality assurance and acquaint LC practitioners with LC QA tools in order to assist them in implementing QA in their LC contexts. In order to be able to understand the significance of quality assurance, we need to remember a line from one of Cavafy's poems:

Η Ιθάκη σ' έδωσε τ' ωραίο ταξείδι.
(Από τα *Ποιήματα* 1897-1933, Ίκαρος 1984)

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Translated by Edmund Keeley/Philip Sherrard
(C.P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*. Translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. Edited by George Savidis. Revised Edition. Princeton University Press, 1992)

In other words, quality is a continuous, exciting journey; it is not a destination.

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