The European Profiling Grid: Using the e-Grid

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Abstract

'Competence' can be defined as the dynamic combination of knowledge, values and practical skills. Teaching competences and professional development are key factors in assuring the quality of education, including language education. Effective quality assurance and professional development imply that teachers, including English language teachers and those employing and training them, have a shared appreciation of their current levels of competence and of teacher development needs.

EAQUALS, an international association focused on the 'Evaluation and Accreditation of Quality in Language Services', has developed a tool for describing the key competences of language teachers. The descriptors it contains have now been validated through the EU-funded Leonardo da Vinci 'transfer of innovation' initiative, the European Profiling Grid Project, which came to an end in October 2013. The result of the project is that the Grid can now be used effectively by managers, teacher trainers, and by teachers themselves for self-assessment purposes.

This paper explains the principles and uses of the Grid, and outlines the aims of the EPG Project. In particular, it focuses on the electronic version of the Grid, the e-Grid, which is designed to be used by teachers to periodically assess their language teaching competences, and by trainers and managers who are responsible for assisting teachers with ongoing professional development.

Key background issues

High quality is crucial in any kind of education and at the centre of all formal education is teaching and the teacher. Teachers are the ones who can do most to maintain and raise quality standards in education. For this reason among others teachers need to be empowered to ensure that the ways in which they support learning through their teaching are of consistently high quality and continually improving. Meanwhile, those who train, mentor and manage teachers need ways and means of helping them to do this.

Teacher development

Mann [4] identifies some key features of 'teacher development' in his state-of-the-art article:
  - It is in principle a bottom–up process, and so can be contrasted with staff development that is organised by the institution 'top-down'
  - It values the view of the teacher as an insider rather than the view of outsiders such as inspectors
  - It is independent of the organisation but often functions more successfully with the institution's support and recognition
  - It is a continuing process and can never be finished, i.e. teachers however experienced can always develop further
  - It is a process of articulating and reflecting on inner conscious choices in response to the outer world of the teaching context
  - It is wider than 'professional development' as it includes personal, moral and value dimensions.

Assessment of teaching and self-assessment by teachers can play a very important role in identifying teacher development priorities at an individual and team level. However, valid and appropriate tools and simple procedures for assessment and self-assessment are needed for this.

Why assess language teaching competence, and who can do it?

Various people may assess teaching competences for different reasons. However, as indicated in Rossner (2009 [6], the most important reasons are:
  1. as support for professional development (including the professional development of the person doing the assessment)
  2. as part of quality assurance, that is to check whether the teaching being assessed is up to the standard agreed within a school and is adequately supporting the learning that students are engaged in.

Quite often in practice these two assessment aims are not clearly separated: in particular, heads of department managing a team of teachers and responsible for checking quality quite often observe teachers with both objectives in mind.

Other people that may assess teaching competences include:
- trainers and mentors, whose concern is mainly individual development and training, but may be related to the standards required to meet the demands of, for example, an in-service training course
- colleagues wishing to compare their own practice with that of the teacher they are observing (and implicitly assessing) and to learn from her/him
- students, who make instinctive and usually private assessments of the teaching they experience, and are frequently asked to give an opinion at the end of a course
- crucially, the teacher herself/himself thinking about her/his own work and development needs. self-assessment can play a big part in that most valuable element of teacher development: reflection (c.f. Wallace [7])

Describing language teaching competences

Various descriptions of teaching competences and specifications of teaching standards have been developed at national level (for example AITSL 2011 [1], LLUK 2007 [3]), and two or three descriptions of language teaching competences have been developed as part of European projects, for example, Kelly, Grenfell, Allen, Krisza and McEvoy ([2], Newby, Allan, Fenner, Jones, Komorowska and Soghikyan [5]. Both of these – the first as a 'profile' for teacher education, the second in the form of a portfolio for student teachers – were initially developed with trainee teachers in mind, not experienced teachers. The European Profiling Grid (EPG), on the other hand, is a tool that was designed to support the assessment and self assessment of language teaching competences among practising language teachers who have varying degrees of experience ranging from a few weeks as trainees to many years.

The European Profiling Grid – scope and contents

The descriptors that the EPG contains, which are mostly in the form of 'can do' statements, cover the following key areas:
- As background, qualifications and experience: proficiency in the target language, educational qualification, teaching qualifications, and teaching experience
- key teaching competencies: methodology – knowledge & skills, planning, interaction management & monitoring, and assessment
- enabling competences: intercultural competence, language awareness, and use of digital media
- professionalism: professional conduct, including participation in professional development, contributions to the institution, collegiality etc, and dealing with administrative tasks

13 categories altogether are covered in these four main areas. The descriptors in each category are organised over six 'phases of professional development' ranging from trainee to 'very experienced', yielding a total of 78 descriptor 'cells'. Each cell in the Grid contains between 1 and 5 descriptors depending on the category and phase of development. The layout and the categories of the Grid are summarised in figure 1.

	DEVELOPMENT PHASE					
	1.1	1.2	2.1	2.2	3.1	3.2
Qualifications & experience - Language proficiency - Education & training - Assessed teaching - Teaching experience						
Key teaching competences: - Methodology - Lesson & course planning - Interaction management & monitoring - Assessment						
Enabling competences:						

- Intercultural competence - Language awareness - Digital competence						
Professionalism: - Professional conduct - Administration						

Figure 1: layout and categories of the European Profiling Grid

Descriptors at different phases in a given category are cumulative: it is assumed that a teacher at phase 2.1 will have acquired the competences indicated at 1.1 and 1.2, so these are not repeated. The differences between descriptors across the phases indicate increasing competence either through incremental changes in wording relating to a subtopic, or the addition of new descriptors or elements.

The EPG Project

The EPG Project, which was co-funded by the EU's Leonardo da Vinci programme, involved EAQUALS and ten other partners in ten European countries, including the British Council, the Goethe Institut, a French research agency, CIEP, and Instituto Cervantes. As part of the project, the Grid (in five language versions) was tested with over 2000 teachers, over 60 managers and 100 trainers. The Grid has now been finalised and translated into 9 languages on the basis of the research that was done, and a User Guide has been prepared. the Grid and User Guide and more information on the project can be found at http://www.epg-project.eu/the-epg-project/. An electronic version of the Grid, the e-Grid, is also available via the same website.

The main intended uses of the Grid and e-Grid

the Grid and e-Grid have three main groups of intended users: language teachers themselves, trainers and mentors working with language teachers, and coordinators or heads of language departments. As stated above, the main intention is that the Grid should be used to support professional development, but it also has a role to play in quality management and in determining whether the goals of a teacher training/development programme have been attained.
The main potential uses can be summarised as follows:
Teachers can use all or part of the e-Grid (or printed Grid) periodically (e.g. at least annually):
  - for self-assessment and as a stimulus for reflection
  - for thinking about their own development needs
  - for preparing review meetings with their managers.
Trainers and mentors can use the Grid and e-Grid:
  - prepare profiles of their trainees in order to plan training courses or a programme of workshops
  - as a source for observation criteria and discussion of an individual's teaching
  - as a way of raising trainees' awareness about the specific competences they need to be working on.
Managers can use the Grid to:
  - prepare profiles for review or appraisal meetings with teachers, comparing their assessments with teachers' self assessments
  - discuss professional development needs
  - help prepare observation sheets for lesson observation with a quality assurance focus
  - review the profile of their whole teaching team, for example to decide what the profile of newly recruited teachers should be.

Profiles of teachers' competences

When using the whole Grid or sections of the Grid, it should be borne in mind that the profile of any given teacher's competences will not fall neatly into one phase vertically. For example, it is extremely unlikely that a very experienced teacher will consider that she or he is equally competent in all areas. They will be stronger in some competences than in others. For example, a teacher may be less confident about her competence in the area of assessment of students' learning than she is in her lesson planning. Similarly novice teachers will be more competent in certain areas of teaching than in others. It is this feature which shows clearly where, depending on the context and the job requirements, further development work in a given area might be needed.

Features of the e-Grid

The e-Grid has separate entries for teachers, trainers and managers each with a different kind of access to the Grid. Teachers can enter their section to carry out new self-assessments or to import their previous self-assessments. With new self-assessments, after filling in a few personal details, they can go through all the categories on the Grid, or they can select certain categories skipping others. In order to select their current level of competence they scroll through the groups of descriptors, which are organised according to phase of development. When they identify the group of descriptors that best applies to them in that category (for example, 'methodology – knowledge and skills' or 'language awareness), they click on it and the assessment is added to a summary list on the right. When they reach the end of the categories they wish to assess themselves in, they validate their choices and a screen appears containing their current 'profile' illustrated in the form of a bar graph across the six phases of development, preceded by the personal information that they provided. This can be printed, exported as a PDF, or sent by e-mail, but it is not stored on the website. When the self-assessment is finished, all the data is cleared.

For managers and trainers, the access is different but the process of assessment is basically the same as that used by teachers for self-assessment. Again, none of the data is retained on the website.

Conclusion

Defining and describing language teaching competences is not a simple matter. It is clear that, whether using a tool such as the Grid/e-Grid or not, the assessment of teaching needs to be done with care, and must be valid, transparent and fair. Encouraging teachers to regularly assess their own teaching competences and reflect on these self-assessments should be an integral part of teacher development. Managers and trainers are sure to find that comparing and discussing the similarities and differences between their assessments of a teacher's competences and the teacher's own self assessment will make for a richer interactive process if handled well, and will lead to more informed support for teachers' individual professional development. *The European Profiling Grid,* whether in electronic or printed form, is intended to be a useful aid to this process, and its User Guide offers advice to managers, trainers and teachers as to how it can best be used for the purposes for which it has been designed,

References

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