

National Leveling of ELT Educational Programs and Their Harmonization with European Requirements for Competitiveness on the Market - Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

The poor international competitiveness and the debatable language competences of the English language teaching staff educated in the Republic of Macedonia impose the need to revise the framework of higher education requirements for this profession and educational programs implemented by higher education institutions in the first place, as well as the professionalization of already existing staff. In this process, the main challenge resides in raising the operational level and standardization of the profession, followed by harmonization of national descriptors with the Common European Framework of Languages.

Keywords: ELT, Modern English Language, educational programs levelling

Introduction

„At any point in language teaching history there are always items of faith which nobody questions...“

Guy Cook

In the context of existing technology and the extent of today's communication, it is unnecessary to speak about the importance of English in the world. This tendency, except for the last thirty years with the emergence and the flickering development of the Internet, in the R. Macedonia has been recognized since the state's mere beginnings.

Having only the Department of English Language and Literature at the state university in the last century kept things quite simple – one higher education institution with limited number of options: staff, students, native speakers, and funds; limited options for students to stay in English speaking countries in order to practice and upgrade their proficiency in the language. The preset proficiency levels theoretically reached up to C1 (CEFR), but realistically, the average operational level was about B2¹².

Today in R. Macedonia there are several higher education institutions offering educational programs for future English language teachers. With the existence of English as subject (course) in primary, secondary and tertiary education, the need for such staff is obvious, but the demand, which was particularly rising 10-15 years ago, failed to maintain the level due to the influence of various factors. One of these factors is the lack of competitiveness of Macedonian English language teachers on the international labor market. At first glance, the reasons for this failure are in the classical dogma that there is no better teacher for a particular language than a native speaker of that language. We will leave this debate for a further

¹ Personal unofficial view of foreign native speakers language instructors

² "Since 2012 France requires primary and secondary teachers to obtain a certificate¹⁴⁷ which proves that the teacher masters a modern foreign language at level B2 of the CEFR" – as mentioned in the Study "The implementation of CEFR in European Education Systems"

occasion because the purpose of our research is another. The main reason for the inability of Macedonian English language teachers to teach in other countries is the lack of international recognition of Macedonian English language teaching programs' diplomas. The reasons for this reality are of a different nature, the most important ones (supposedly) including international accreditation of the ELT programs and vague and non-formal harmonization with the CEFR levels required for ELT program in the EU¹.

For the purpose of this paper, we set out to do the following:

1. Obtain an approximate view on predefined proficiency levels of students – we have conducted interviews with MEL² instructors from ELT programs at private universities in Macedonia. Our goal in this paper is to examine higher education ELT MEL practitioners' view on the realistic situation with adherence to CEFR levels and whether students do reach the expected predefined proficiency levels with the given class hours and (non)existence of prerequisite entry level.
2. Review the ELT requirements of accreditation organizations in the EU for accrediting ELT programs

1. Case study – interviews with MEL instructors

MEL instructor 1:

"During the creation of our MEL levels, we relied mostly on the CEFR levels and the given literature supporting them. Of course, most of the text books are actually specially designed for preparation of international EL exams, like the Cambridge Assessment ones – FCE and CAE. The expected level of high school EL courses in gymnasiums in the fourth year completes the cycle with FCE, but since we doubted that most of the children reach that level, we have dedicated the ELT program study year 1 to the FCE level (B2), and within the next two years students are supposed to master the C1 level. This is sometimes very difficult to achieve because of the limited number of MEL classes (as defined by requirements of domestic and foreign accreditations) and the lack of entry test producing mixed ability groups. Up to now, there has been no correlation between a given high school, generation, ethnicity or other factors with students' levels – they are very individual for individual students. The mostly productive has shown to be executing individual extra assignments with students to improve their weaknesses. The native speaker factor is locally present, but more emphasis should be put on the chances for students to travel and stay in an English speaking country for at least 6 months to improve their communication skills."

MEL instructor 2:

"We devote special attention to developing language skills separately, although some of the skills are largely neglected/different from the English language tradition, e.g. writing. Macedonian writing follows the Slavic languages culture, where a lot is written, but little is conveyed due to the use of a lot of figures of speech, evasion of direct expression of crucial topics and general use of a number of unnecessary words. Even though we have tried to foster writing by the introduction of special English writing courses, not much has been achieved in the line of writing though with students."

MEL instructor 3:

"From my international experience with teacher's conferences, I can say that the EL proficiency of out ELT staff in schools and ELT students is more or less the same. Macedonian EL teachers can be quite competitive on the international labor market if our teachers in-training have the right opportunities and the ELT programs have the necessary accreditations on board."

2. Case study 2 - Research of EU accredited ELT programs

We have investigated the offer of EU accreditations given out to EU ELT programs to find out their requirements. Since most of them cover multiple disciplines, the general criteria go in the same line for all higher education institutions. ENQA³ accredits associations for accrediting higher education programs, and they have translated their Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

¹ MoE's view, as presented by the higher education official at the workgroup meeting for harmonization of national ELT programs and standardization levelling of language proficiency requirements.

² Modern English Language

³ European Association for Quality Assurance, <http://www.enqa.eu>

in quite a range of languages, including EU countries (such as Bulgarian and Croatian), non-EU countries (Albanian and Bosnian) as well as non-European countries (Japanese). AQAS¹ being one of ENQA's accredited associations, lists on its website that they have so far accredited two ELT programs in Europe – one in Moldova and one in Cyprus. By careful and in-depth examination of their accreditation reports officially available on the AQAS website, we have extracted the following paragraphs concerning proficiency levels/MEL and language in general:

The following points relevant for our discussion are taken directly from the accreditation report for the ELT program in Moldova²:

- The target level for English on the programme level must be defined clearly, e.g. by referring to the “Common European Framework for Languages” (p.1)
- The faculty should extend the amount of English practice courses and the English classes should be divided according to the level of proficiency. In addition, extra-curricular activities in English should be offered. (p.2)
- According to the mentioned regulations the admission is given based on a contest. The candidate selection happens according to their school marks and field abilities in the chosen professional field. (p.5)
- The faculty should extend the amount of English practice courses and the English classes should be divided according to the level of the students' English proficiency. In addition, extra-curricular activities in English should be offered (p. 7)
- The students complained that their ability to speak English is limited due to the fact that they learn Romanian, Russian and French in schools and that particularly the English classes in the first year of study do not support the improvement of skills properly. The panel of experts recommends including more oral activities in the English language classes. The development of pronunciation skills should be enhanced by using computer-based technology such as *Praat* (freely available scientific software package for the analysis of speech) or *Audacity* (free open source digital audio editor and recording software application) in the phonetics classes (p.7)
- From the experts' perspective, it is highly important for future teachers to develop a strong personality. That is why the experts recommend integrating more student-centred delivery methods in the programme in a way that the students are empowered in class to be more self-confident and to develop more learner autonomy (p.8)
- The target level for English must be clearly defined for each module, e.g. by referring to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (**Finding 8d**). The descriptions used hitherto are not comprehensible. (p.8)
- The structure the programme allows for international student mobility and contains well defined instruments to promote international mobility (ECTS, recognition of credits from abroad, diploma supplements, learning agreements). (p.8)

Relevant points from the ELT program in Cyprus³:

- The panel believes that further improvements could be reached if the programme could provide a larger variety of elective courses that are specifically geared towards the practicalities of (English) language teaching, thus providing an even better preparation for the 'reality in the classrooms' (p.4)
- On the level of the profile and general setup of the programme the panel of experts recognizes that the ELT department yet faces challenges to promote student exchange to US-American and British universities.... At the same time the panel believes that future English teachers should be provided with opportunities and incentives to study in an English-speaking country, immersing themselves in the English language as well as in Anglophone cultures. (p.4)
- It became obvious in the discussions with the staff of the programme that the importance of a student experience in an English speaking country is not disputed and that on an individual level students are supported once they show interest.

¹ Agentur für Qualitätssicherung durch Akkreditierung von Studiengängen, www.aqas.eu

² Decision of the Accreditation Commission of AQAS on the study programme “Romanian Language and literature and English Language” (B.Ed.) offered by Alecu Russo Bălți State University/Moldova

³ Decision of the Accreditation Commission of AQAS, On the degree programme „English Language Teaching” (B.A.) at the Eastern Mediterranean University (Turkish Republic North Cyprus)

These activities should be strengthened in the future and developed to short- to long-term strategies to foster student mobility to English-speaking countries. (p.4)

- Quite obviously, the transfer of knowledge is facilitated through a good atmosphere within the ELT department enabling a productive dialogue between students and teachers. This dialogue is apparently also used to discuss the workload with the students and adjust it if required. (p.6)

- With regards to the overall potential for further improvement of the curriculum, in particular, staff and students alike would welcome an elective course on learning and teaching technologies. (p.6)

- A possible short-term measure might be to promote the exchange of students and alumni of the ELT programme who currently work as teachers and use the options offered through electives. (p.6)

Discussion

By reviewing the extracted relevant points, we can conclude that the language proficiency levels are not mentioned at all apart from the first one, where it is stated that levels should be defined clearly according to the CEFR, but no specific level was mentioned. Both committees working on these separate reports agree that the most important things to pay attention to are:

- student exchange and stay in English speaking countries (repeated on several occasions in both reports)
- studying relevant (modern) teaching methodologies
- student-centered learning
- speaking activities and support by elective courses with English instruction
- implementing technologies
- fostering good atmosphere for teaching and learning

Conclusion

We can safely conclude from this small-scale research that as far as the accreditation framework is concerned, our ELT programs in general can obtain the relevant EU accreditations following the Cyprus and Moldova programs' examples. Macedonian MoE's standing during the workshop on this topic was one sort of "testing" of MEL instructors' general attitude and possible acceptance of this idea with little relevant referential background for acceptance of Macedonian universities diplomas for ELT programs.

Yet, the idea as such is not to be dismissed. Levelling and harmonization of the requirements and CEFR levels of students' EL proficiency will probably lead to unified proficiency across this profession, at least with the newer generations of EL and pre-service teachers. At the same time, PD of in-service teaching staff in the direction of proficiency and communication improvement might lead to bigger inclusion of communication in the classroom, refreshing of language knowledge and coming closer to the "native teacher" notion.

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