MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF EVALUATING THE QUALITY OF A PROFESSIONAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDY COURSE

Dr.Sci.admin. Rudzinska, Ieva
Latvian Academy of Sport Education
e-mail: Ieva.Rudzinska@lspa.lv

“Urban Education”, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany, September 12 -16, 2011

Introduction

Quality management in the space of European education has been a topical issue since Bologna process. Its introduction helps to bring about the following changes:

- promotes orientation towards learning outcomes;
- enables reducing education costs;
- secures better response to the needs of the state, region and professional sphere;
- helps raising awareness about present situation, evaluation of strong and weak sides; identifying possibilities for improvement, thus promoting sustainable development;
- promotes lecturer professional development.

Quality management (QM) is usually applied on the level of the whole higher education institution or tertiary education Program, since such aspects of QM as policy and strategy development, as well as people and resources management are usually conducted on higher structural level than that of one study course. However QM could be beneficial also in the level of one study course, since it:

- promotes orientation towards learning outcomes in definite study course in correspondence with that of the whole Program;
- allows every lecturer raise awareness about contribution to securing quality in her study course.
Ideas of QM can be instilled in each and every study course, among them also in professional foreign language courses. In such EU documents as White paper (“White Paper”, 1996); Bologna declaration (Bologna Declaration, 1999); Lisbon strategy (Lisbon Strategy, 2000); renewed Lisbon strategy, ratified in 2005; Berlin Conference (Berlin, 2003), Key Competencies for Life Long Learning (Key Competencies for Life-long Learning, 2006) is emphasized the necessity to be able to communicate in foreign languages, thus facilitating not only international communication and increasing competitiveness in European united labor market, but also enabling oneself to increase the quality of life in European multinational society, developing such for survival in contemporary world necessary characteristics as tolerance and better understanding of one’s own and other cultures. However foreign language competence is among the weakest key competences both on European and state levels (Tuning Project 2, 2004; Profesionālās 2007). QM could help to increase the quality of the course, and first step in this direction is evaluating quality, developing special instrument for this purpose.

**Aim of the research:** evaluate quality of professional foreign language courses in LR higher education institutions (HEIs), developing for it special instrument.

**Methods of the research:** qualitative literature studies about quality in professional foreign language course, student and lecturer survey with the help of a questionnaire, questionnaire processing with SPSS 17.

**Sample of the research:** a convenience sample (Geske/Grinfelds, 2006), representing 5 of 6 types of LR HEIs: state universities, state institutions of higher education, juridical persons established institutions of higher education, state colleges, and juridical persons established colleges. From 57 LR HEIs in the sample have been included 13, from study Programs: 18. Student professional foreign language competence is developed, in three languages: English, German and Latvian. Altogether in the sample are 210 students and 68 lecturers

**Theoretical foundations:**
- competencies as one of the objectives of learning and one of learning results are characterized by elastic combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes (Bachman, 1990; Baxter, 1997; Combe/Barlow, 2004);
• professional foreign language competence (Celce-Murcia, 1995) is treated as a dynamic process, involving the development of language skills and communicative and intercultural competences. Communicative competence (Threshold level, 1990) is an elastic combination of language competence together with sociolinguistic competence: appropriate language use in social context. Intercultural competence (Stiers, 2004; Korhonen, 2004) is a communicative competence together with ability to act in intercultural context and experience of international work. Professional foreign language competence is a combination of communicative and intercultural competence, as well as professional competence, which includes professional experience (Luka, 2005).

• study process is characterized by cognitive processing: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, creating (Bloom, 1992; Anderson/Kratwohl, 2001);

• beneficial study environment is characterized by balance of challenge and boredom (Goleman, 1995; Knoop/Gardner, 2001), as well as student engagement versus alienation (Case, 2007);

• quality evaluation and management systems in one study course, developed by other European researchers:
  - “A Quality Guide for the Evaluation and Design of Language Learning and Teaching Programs and Materials” (Lasnier, 2003);
    - Physical education quality evaluation model for Flemish secondary schools (Huts, 2008);
    - relational model for evaluating the quality of on-line study courses (Iske/Meder, 2009);

• reliability or construct validity of the developed instrument was evaluated with the help of Cronbach alpha, which should be more than 0.7; non-parametric Spearman’s quality system inter-constituent (blocks or criteria) correlations (0.3 to 0.5) and their point-biserial correlations, which should be higher the former, (>0.5), since whole instrument is more general measuring instrument than its constituents (Alderson, 1995).

• such LR education management documents as:
  - LR Standard of Professions.
In Standard of Professions are outlined knowledge, skills and competences, needed for particular professions. They are formulated as learning outcomes of all study Program. Moreover, in Standard are described professional tasks, which representatives of particular professions should carry out. In IQE PFLC instrument these tasks are included in Language Practice Activities block.

- LR Higher Professional Education Standard.

In Professional Education Standard is determined compulsory content of study Program. It determines that in the study program should be study courses and professional practice.

The abovementioned education Standards are worked out by LR Cabinet of Ministers. In their turn they conform to “LR Education policy basic aim: Education policy basic regulations for years 2007-2013”.

**Results and conclusions**

1. **The development of quality model**

   Literature studies enabled developing IQE PFLC instrument for evaluating the quality of professional foreign language course (Picture 1, Picture 2), consisting of 3 Parts: aims, process and results; and 7 Blocks: aims (AIM), language practicing activities (LPA), intellectual activities (INT), study microclimate (MIC), lecturer pedagogical activities (PED), assessment of study achievements (ASS) and results (RES). In these blocks quality is characterized with the help of 6 quality criteria: clarity (CLA), adequacy (ADE), deep approach (DEA), individual work (IND), cooperation (COO) and variety (VAR).

![Diagram](image)

Picture 1. Parts of IQE PFLC instrument
In EFQM model and self-evaluation instrument is included vision and mission of the HEI, in IQE PFLC model and instrument they are reduced to the aims of the study course, which are worked out in correspondence with the mission and vision of the HEI, and with the abovementioned LR education management Documents.

In IQE PFLC instrument study process comprises 5 blocks (Picture 2): language practicing activities (LPA), intellectual activities (INT), study microclimate (MIC), lecturer pedagogical activities (PED), assessment of study achievements (ASS).

![Diagram of IQE PFLC instrument blocks](image)

Picture 2. Blocks of the Process Part of IQE PFLC instrument.

In Aim block are included quality indicators, characterizing course aim connection with the ones of the study Program, and those of professional sphere (as reflected in Documents mentioned above), as well as adequacy to student present level of foreign language use. Since student learning is not merely cognitive process, but is influenced also by conative and affective factors, in aim block is included such quality indicators as common and individual study course aim setting.

Language practicing activities comprise knowledge acquisition (grammar, lexis and phonetics), language skill development (speaking, reading, writing, listening, translating), and competence formation (professional foreign language competence, communicative competence and intercultural competence).

Study microclimate is characterized by work organization (group work, pair work and individual work) and lecturer support.

Intellectual activities comprise cognitive processing activities, including high level ones, and social aspects of learning, e.g., cooperation and learning from others.
Lecturer pedagogical activities block is comprised of such activities as giving information, explaining, encouraging student learning, etc.

Assessment block includes knowledge, skill and competence assessment procedures, as well as self-assessment. Results comprise the development of professional foreign language competence and stakeholder satisfaction with the achieved results.

IQE ESP subjects are student groups, lecturers, base schools and employers. (Picture 3).

![Diagram](image)

Picture 3. Subjects of IQE PFLC instrument.

In quality blocks the quality of professional foreign language course is characterized with the help of the following quality criteria: clarity, adequacy, individual work, cooperation, deep approach, and variety. Each quality criteria is evaluated with 2-5 quality indicators; altogether IQE PFLC instrument comprises 103 quality indicators.

Quality in separate quality blocks and according to the mentioned criteria is evaluated by quality indicator mean values, standard deviations and median values.

2. Reliability or construct validity of IQE PFLC instrument

Internal reliability indices (Cronbach alphas) are above 0.70 for 4 blocks and 2 criteria, and above 0.50 for 4 criteria. Significant, strong correlations ($r = 0.3 - 0.5$) are between 5 blocks: LPA, INT, PED, ASS and RES, and 4 criteria: IND, COO, DEE and VAR. Point-biserial correlations exceed the level of 0.5 for 3 blocks: LPA,
INT, ASS and 4 criteria: IND, COO, DEA and VAR, and that of 0.7 for 2 blocks, and 2 criteria.

Therefore, IQE PFLC is a reliable instrument for reevaluating the quality of professional foreign language courses.

3. Quality of the researched LR professional foreign language courses

Although lecturers apply a wide variety of Pedagogical activities, it does not secure high quality of Language practicing activities and Assessment procedures. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test revealed that:

1) in student opinion Cooperation is more developed than Individual work (r=-0.19; Sig.=0.000; n=210; median score of COO MD=75, median score of IND MD=67);

2) in the opinion of all respondents Variety is more developed than Deep approach (r=-0.20; Sig.=0.000; n=264; median score of DEA MD=64, median score of VAR MD=73).

The conclusion can be drawn that present pedagogical activities are not sufficient for securing quality in professional foreign language courses. A solution might be lecturer emphasis not only on pedagogical activities, but more on student learning management activities, which include promoting student deeper involvement in study process through individual aim setting for study course, emphasis on individual work during the course in authentic professional environments, the development of higher order cognitive processing skills, and finally: self-assessment of learning outcomes.

4. Further use of the developed IQE PFLC instrument.

In future IQE ESP instrument can be widely used evaluating:

1) the quality of professional and general foreign language courses in HEIs and centres of life-long learning;

2) the quality of other courses offered at higher education institutions (by substituting LPA (language practicing activities) quality block with the activities used in particular course, which conform to given professional sphere).
References
P.N.
Personal address: Juglas iela 1 – 70, Rīga, LV – 1024, Latvia, mob.phone: +37129581654, e-mail: ieva.rudzinska@inbox.lv;
Institution address: Latvian Academy of Sport Education, Brīvības street 333, Rīga, Latvia, LV – 1006, phone: +37167543445, fax: +37167543480.

This document was added to the Education-line collection on 18 October 2011