

## ENCOURAGING QUALITY IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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### Abstract

The NELLIP (Network of European Language Labeled Initiatives) project is funded by the European Commission in the framework of the Lifelong Learning Programme – Key Activity 2 Languages. The NELLIP project is coordinated by Pixel, Florence and the partners are: KU TU Ltd. (Bulgaria), Omnia (Finland), Universal Learning Systems (Ireland), Connectis (Italy), Public Service Language Centre (Lithuania), EuroEd Foundation (Romania), Prosper-Ase (Romania), Universidad de Extremadura (Spain), Fageskolan (Sweden), EAQUALS (United Kingdom). The NELLIP Network has the aim to promote quality in language learning and teaching through the application of the quality criteria used to award the European Language Label (ELL). Within this network, relevant language learning initiatives having received the ELL will be selected. An initial database consisting of projects that have been awarded the ELL has been set up. The projects in the database will be analyzed against a series of quality criteria and a number of case studies and good practices will be identified. National Reports as well as a Transnational Report are also produced in order to raise the quality of language learning initiatives that are being developed in Europe. This article is an overview of the criteria used in identifying quality language learning and teaching initiatives. These criteria will be analyzed and exemplified with the selected ELL initiatives while their transferability to the evaluation of other learning and teaching activities will be considered.

**Key words:** quality in language learning and teaching, evaluation criteria for language resources, language policies, multilingualism

Since 1998 successful language learning initiatives have been awarded a quality label: the European Language Label, assigned to the best initiatives promoting language learning. ELL is awarded on the basis of specific quality criteria. These criteria should be exploited so that language learning providers take them into account when developing future language learning initiatives. Applying the ELL quality criteria to the development of language learning initiatives will contribute to an improvement of their quality. The aim of the NELLIP project is the promotion of quality in language learning through the

application of the quality criteria used to award the European Language Label.

The NELLIP project has three main objectives: networking of language learning initiatives having received the ELL, the development of a methodology for the planning of quality language learning initiatives based on the quality criteria adopted by the ELL and spreading the information about the ELL initiative among language learning providers. The target groups of the NELLIP project are schools, universities, adult education institutions and vocational education and training providers.

### MATERIALS AND METHOD

Within the NELLIP project, an initial database of projects that have received the ELL has been set up. In every partner country a research has been carried out whose result was to record on the NELLIP project website 50 quality ELL initiatives awarded in each country. In every project country, the partners have aimed at recording ideally the same number of initiatives

from the following four educational sectors: school education, vocational education and training, higher education and adult education in order to get an overview of how the policies and strategies of the European Commission are represented across all educational sectors. Every initiative recorded in the data base has been researched based on a common template developed within the partnership. This template contains the following compulsory information that has to be collected for each project: title of the project, country and year

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of selection, a brief project description, link to the website of the project, targeted languages for learning (or specification of the fact that the project was not specific for one language), the educational sector in which the project has been developed (school, vocational, higher or adult education, transversal), and consistency with the European policies in the field (enhancement of quality of language teaching, focus on evaluation of performance of language teaching and learning, focus on teacher training, promotion of new approaches to language teaching and learning, supporting mobility for language learning, promotion of multilingualism, promotion of language learning for specific purposes, focus on the development of tools for monitoring progresses in the field of language learning, promotion of recognition and validation of language skills acquired through non formal and informal education, implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), focus on linking between VET qualifications that include language skills and the CEFR, promotion of the development of teaching material for the learning of less widely spoken languages). After this initial database has been compiled, it has been made available publicly on the NELLIP project website. There are now a few hundreds of projects available. They can be browsed through based on several search criteria collected from the template such as: country in which the project has been awarded, target languages, main policies of the European Commission addressed by the project.

The next stage of the research that has only begun and will be finalized at the end of August is to go a step further with the analysis of the awarded projects and select, out of the 50 initiatives collected in every country, 24 for which a case study will be put together. The case study is written by the project partner after an interview with the project promoter and its main aim is to collect more detailed information on the project and on its impact. The case studies will also be collected based on a template and there will be a database of case studies publicly available on the NELLIP website. The template designed for the project partnership for the case study will facilitate the collection of the following information: background of the project (description of the context and of the needs the initiative responds to as well as the reasons for selecting the specific thematic area, target group and target language(s)), project results and deliverables (consistency of the results with initial plans and with the expectation of the end users, nature of the assessment of the quality of results that has been carried out, indicators adopted in this process, originality and innovative aspects of the results reached, potential transferability of the initiative, impact of the project), motivation for applying for the Label (motivations leading to the application for the European Language Label, methodology for applying for the European Language Label, initial

expectations and whether these expectations were met), activities following the award of the European Language Label (dissemination and exploitation / valorization activities carried out, any other measures), assessment of the award of the European Language Label (benefits for the initiative having received the ELL, impact of the initiative following the awarding of the ELL, consistency of the impact with initial expectations), recommendations for future applicants for the ELL (advice on how to plan and develop quality language learning initiatives that can successfully apply for the ELL, advice on how to exploit the awarded ELL initiatives). The case study also considers the perspective of the NELLIP network and contains the following information as far as these coordinates are concerned: consistency with European Policies in the field of Language Learning (description of how the project is consistent with the current policies, evaluation and comments on this topic), consistency with European, National and yearly priorities (description of how the project is consistent with the priorities, evaluation and comments on this topic). The case study template will also collect the perspective of the National Agency which has awarded the label to the respective project (mainly for explaining the motivation for choosing the project and for identifying good practice examples that could be taken over by other project coordinators). This information will be collected in an interview with a representative of the National Agency dealing with the award of the European Language Label. Each of the project partners will identify, for each of the 4 thematic Areas (i.e. School education, University, Adult Education, Vocational Oriented Language Learning) in each of the 2 European countries (theirs and a neighboring one), 1 success story that will be selected out of the case studies produced. Therefore a total of 8 success stories will be produced by each partner involved. On the basis of the information collected, through the previous activities, each project partner will produce two National Reports, the first one on their own country and the second one on the neighboring country they carried out the previous research work on. The Reports will be presented and discussed among the project Network, in order to share information at transnational level. The national and transnational reports analyzing the impact of the European Language Label on quality improvement in language learning will be published after the case studies have been collected and analyzed for good practice examples. Moreover, any interesting issues arising during the interviews for the case study collection will be mentioned in the national report. The national reports will be developed in close cooperation with the National Agencies responsible for awarding the European Language Label in every partner country and in the countries that are additionally included in the research (as every project partner researches the initiatives also

in one more country besides its own). The transnational report will be produced centrally by the project coordinator, Pixel and the data collection for it will start from the national reports.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The research and collection of information within the NELLIP project being only at its beginnings, the main results observed so far are related to the challenges met by the project partners in the countries where they are performing their research. While there is a high number of ELL initiatives awarded at European level, little information on these projects can be accessed once the project has been finalized. It has been noticed that, mainly for projects ended before 2008 it is very difficult to find data on activities carried out and on the impact of the project. One of the main reasons for this lack of information is due to the fact that, although most of the projects had developed a website, this is no longer running or updated. Another reason is that staff working at the time of project implementation for the institution receiving the award is no longer employed there. As far as the nature of projects being awarded the label is concerned, EuroEd Foundation, the partner performing the research on projects awarded in Romania and Belgium, has noticed that most of them are developed and implemented by schools. Most of these projects (about two thirds) have been developed based on funding received from the European Union within the framework of the Lifelong Learning Programme, the Comenius sub-programme. These projects mainly cover the following areas: encouraging the learning of a foreign language through pupil exchange, through project work carried out on interculturality and multilingualism topics within multinational teams, increasing cultural awareness and sensitivity through activities based on getting to know the culture of the other partners or experiencing hands-on another culture through student exchange. These projects have contributed significantly also to the development of learning activities carried out in a foreign language such as theater, sports, poster making etc. One area identified by the EuroEd Foundation as in need of improvement is the participation of language learning initiatives from the higher education sector to the selection. Another group of educational institutions less represented in the ELL selection is that of adult education institutions. The adult learners target group is however covered to some extent by projects developed by public local authorities (such as local councils, city halls or county administrative bodies. In our research, we could not find any evidence of the ELL being awarded to

NGOs or other private bodies (such as companies) for projects destined to adult learners. The vocational education and training segment is covered mainly by projects developed – as in the case of schools – within the Lifelong Learning Programme (Leonardo da Vinci sub-programme or transversal key activities). This is explained by the fact that in Romania, most of the vocational training and education takes place in the secondary education system. In Belgium on the other hand, of the 25 projects researched, there are around 10 in the adult education and vocational education sectors. These projects have been developed not only by schools and public bodies but also by NGOs and businesses. These preliminary results do not indicate however entirely where quality language learning initiatives come from. In this distribution of results, a great role is played by the mechanisms through which the ELL distinctions is disseminated in every country.

The main result of the research that has been identified so far is that most European Language Learning initiatives have a reduced visibility (e.g. to the institutions that have promoted it and the direct beneficiaries and promoters). Moreover, this reduced visibility decreases with time as project websites are no longer available or projects are no longer valorized in the institutions that have promoted them.

What the project hopes to achieve – through the instruments developed for project dissemination and the analysis of the data collected – is a network of stakeholders that can raise awareness on quality initiatives for language learning throughout Europe and a framework that potential project promoters can use in order to make their Language Label initiatives more visible. The main benefit of the increased visibility is that the project practices or products can be made available to a larger target group.

## CONCLUSIONS

At this stage, the research carried out so far in the NELLIP project shows that while initiatives receiving the ELL are well-aligned to the priorities and policies set by the European Commission in the areas of language learning, promotion of multilingualism and increase of the quality of language learning, more needs to be done for enabling these projects to have a greater impact on potential target groups and for transferring the best practice examples that can be drawn from these initiatives to other contexts (e.g. other countries, other institutions or other sectors of education). During the following two years of project development, the NELLIP project will draw up

national and transnational reports whose aim will be to define concrete measures that make up a framework for promotion of quality ELL initiatives, success stories that will become a model for other project promoters to encourage them – on one hand to apply for the ELL distinctions – and on the other hand – to develop more quality language learning activities.

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