

Graz – Workshop 1/2003: ‘The status of language educators’

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Motto

„Don't talk to me like that, I am NOT your teacher!“ (says the caretaker in school)

„Look granpa, this bird has got a broken leg. What shall we do with it?“

„...Hmm, ...I know what, let's take it to the teacher.“

(I learned these stories from Frank Heyworth)

Background

In February 2003, a 5-day workshop called ‘The status of language educators’ was held in Graz, Austria. Participants (from 28 European countries and 1 from Canada) met to discuss issues related to the topic of the workshop. I was supported by the Czech Ministry of Education to attend.

As this was my first visit to Graz, I did not quite know what to expect. The workshop was held at ECML/CELV in Graz (European Centre for Modern Languages/ Centre Européen pour les Langues Vivantes). I really appreciated the care, professional approach and technological equipment enabling simultaneous interpreting from English into French and vice versa. The coordinator, Peter Rádai, and the TEAM – Gabriela Matei, Mercedes Bernaus and Derk Sassen, together with a plenary speaker, Frank Heyworth, concentrated our activities and tasks towards investigating some of the important needs of foreign language teachers nowadays, and how these have developed recently in response to the dynamic changes of society in general. Despite different situations and conditions in our respective countries, we tried to concentrate on what we have in common so as to promote changes which would be beneficial for the status of language teachers in general. In order to do so, we first needed to establish where the „new point of departure“ is. Hence, a „new paradigm“ presented by Frank Heyworth.

New paradigm - What's in it for language teachers?

The paradigm shift described by Frank Heyworth means amongst others, a shift from language teaching focused mainly on linguistic goals towards language teaching which has a strong cultural element and includes intercultural awareness. It also represents a shift towards language learning which explores links between languages and promotes language awareness in general. In practice it also means that even low levels of language competence are valuable and add to communicative repertoire (and intercultural understanding). What is important, language competences can be built on throughout life. In order to feel confident about new approaches, teachers need to engage in life-long learning. This in the long run, is a prerequisite for promoting the status of language teachers.

Other topics related to the status of foreign language teachers

Relationship between self-esteem and status, between self-esteem and assertiveness, the importance of interpersonal communication skills for language teachers were explored by G. Matei. M. Bernaus spoke about ways of coping with stress and avoiding burnout. Some of our own presentation skills (D. Sassen set an example first) were tried out in practice when presenting our group projects. The final activities were focused on drafting the ‘Expression of Intent’. This could/should be delivered to the Council of Europe to consider in their plans concerning language education and its most valuable resource – language teachers.

Expression of Intent

Here are some of the ideas/recommendations/ suggestions/ we came up with for the future:

1. To provide **means** (financial, time allocated, support) **for in-service training** including home and study visits to the countries whose languages teachers teach. Again, one might hesitate to support a claim like that thinking of Socrates (Comenius, Lingua) and other existing projects. However, usually down-to-earth concerns of „who will replace a teacher in the class“ still prevent many teachers from taking an active part in Socrates projects. Further, it was mentioned that a **career ladder** similar to that of e.g. doctors, should be introduced as a „**must**“ rather than a voluntary thing, if we really intend to raise teacher’s status.
2. To continue and/or to extend the provision of **information services** for teachers, e.g. with a view to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, European Language Portfolio, etc., so as to **reach teachers in schools**. One might argue that this is not an issue any more, with the Internet facilities spread across Europe. However, the experience of participants spoke about quite a lot of uncertainty and lack of information among teachers in schools.
3. Another interesting idea about „harmonising“ programmes of language education across Europe brought some discussion about whether it would be desirable at all. In the end, however, the understanding was that the **Common European Framework of Reference** is already a practical example of clarifying philosophy of language policies. It also provides framework for measuring standards of language education in various European countries. This was seen as a positive example to elaborate on.
4. Last but not least, it is necessary to mention the idea of a **European Studies module/course** of education where language teachers from various European countries could study together at a European institution. This would be a practical example of multicultural studies in their true sense.

Of course, it is impossible to present everything that we talked (and sometimes argued) about. I am sure that many of the issues will be followed by the TEAM themselves, and that the network which we have created will go on being nourished by individual participants and their perceptions of their own countries. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the whole TEAM and to Graz ECML office, as well as to our Ministry for supporting such inspiring activities in the field of language education.

I hope that my personal attempt at sharing my impressions from Graz has thrown some light on the visions springing up from the workshop.

Let me finish with Peter Rádai’s gem about the essence of dissemination:

*„Those
involved
involve
the
uninvolved“* (Rádai, 2002)

If you now feel more involved than uninvolved, why not look into a website and learn more?
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