EEPG Language Network meeting in Athens, 3-4 May 2007

Participants

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Thursday 3 May:

Morning session

Evaluation of levels in languages and methods to assess the competencies including self-assessment. Different approaches to standard assessment (national and international) e.g. PISA. Is there a relation between the PISA tests and the actual teaching and learning processes in the schools?

Tomas Hausner (Fraus Publishing House) presented the international assessment schemes that are at present in use in the Czech Republic [click here to download a Word file on International Standard Assessment]. As regards assessment and definition of levels in foreign languages the Common European Framework (CEF) is without doubt the most used assessment tool [click here to download a Word file on Accredited Language Exams in the Czech Republic]. The Ministry of Education has officially decided that the CEF should be governing the exam schemes in the country. Tomas Hausner also mentioned the role of the Institute for Information on Education (CZ) which is very active and supportive in all pedagogical issues. They also are behind the PISA surveys carried out in the Czech Republic [Please click here to see the presentation].
Mathias Grüter (Lehrmittelverlag des Kantons Zürich) discussed the problems in defining the levels and pointed to the fact that educational publishers when planning textbooks for foreign language learning would often have to differentiate, i.e. the individual textbook or course will seldom be able to target for example the CEF level B2 in all skills (listening could be B2, whereas writing skill could be between B1 and B2 and reading only B1 etc.).

Violeta Katiniené (Alma Littera/Šviesa) presented the school exam system in Lithuania including the important differentiation between local exams that are organised locally in the individual school and the centralised state exams. An interesting point which led to a relevant discussion was the fact that if a testing procedure (state exams) appears to be too difficult (so that very few students would pass the test) then the Ministry adapts the markings so that the required number of students will pass the test in the subject in question. This difference between so called absolute and relative evaluation plays a role in several countries [Please click here to see the presentation].

Katrin Kunze (Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó) presented the Hungarian language exam system in detail. In her presentation she also included accredited monolingual language exams in German (as they are defined and used in Austria and Germany) and pointed out how these exams influence the situation in Hungary. The tests from the Goethe Institute are now closely related to the CEF definitions of levels [Please click here to see the presentation].

In the following discussion it was among other things pointed out by Matthias Jost (Koolibri Publishers) that there can be (and in some cases actually is) a danger that the teaching and learning process (not only in foreign language acquisition) is being influenced by and oriented heavily towards the national tests (like PISA), so that the pupils learn with the specific goal to pass the PISA tests with as good results as possible.

Discussion of potential joint ventures among the members of the EEPG, i.e. adaptation of language textbooks from one country to the other(s) – what are the possibilities and what are the caveats? Are certain types of materials more relevant than others in this respect?

Tomas Hausner (Fraus Publishing House) suggested to differentiate between two types of ‘cooperation’: A) the situation where two or more publishing houses develop materials together from the start (a genuine joint venture); B) a project where one publisher adapts existing materials produced by another publishing house to his local situation in terms of language, culture etc. (licensing). Furthermore he pointed out some possible pitfalls when localising titles, for example the problems with the existing ‘foreign’ monolingual market (Heinemann, Cambridge etc.) His conclusion here was that the publisher has to base materials on the local mother tongue, e.g. by producing lists of vocabularies and bilingual dictionaries. In these cases they have to find and translate/adapt all items in the materials from the other publisher’s country to the local culture, in addition all recordings normally must be redone. So it is not half the work, but more to be done by localising. On the other hand the ‘simple’ co-operation can work like this: you produce together materials which can be used by all partners of the team (e.g. front cover is the same), often 80 % of the texts will be identical.
Francis Baker (Patakis Publishers) stated that on way of gaining success against the big players from the UK is to appeal to the teachers by giving the ‘good old’ grammar tasks and exercises in the textbooks – the teachers love this and feel confident with them. When you adapt material (as opposed to producing your own) the teachers will quickly find the adapted areas out.

Mathias Grüter (Lehrmittelverlag des Kantons Zürich) stressed that for whole textbooks adaptation is almost impossible. On the other hand he opted for the possibility to make language software which could probably be a better example of co-operation (than course books). On-line materials to be part of joint ventures could be exercises and specific skills oriented tasks, and dictionaries.

Aleksandra Maček (Rokus Klett Publishing House) mentioned that Rokus have good experience with adapting textbooks from other countries. A proof of this is the fact that most of their language books have been adapted from German publishers with big success.

Elisabeth Reizer (Gyldendal Undervisning) suggested a possible pan-Nordic co-operation for the development of materials foreign language learning (e.g. Spanish). She stressed that many things are in common among the Nordic countries in terms of pedagogical approach in general, so a Scandinavian ‘joint venture’ might be a good idea.

Selja Saarialho (Otava Publishing Company) favoured the idea of an electronic bank of exercises or tasks which could be easily adaptable to different markets. In addition she mentioned that the content of a textbook in electronic form could be easily adapted and translated by other partners within a group like the EEPG provided that the ‘original’ publishers took this option into account when planning and producing the textbook.

Afternoon session

A Dictionary Software Project in Greece

Martin Doerr and Christos Georgis (Centre for Cultural Informatics, Crete) presented a Dictionary Software Project which may be used in bilateral dictionary projects between members of the EEPG. The presentation gave a detailed view of the system and the history of co-operation between the Institute and Patakis Publishers on several dictionary projects. The system is designed to be able to support bilingual dictionaries in any language, with minimum reconfiguration. The "Patakis-Lexicon" is a dictionary publishing system that is used to create dictionary databases for both printed and electronic products. It enables the lexicographers to focus on the creative process of lexicography and to work effectively and efficiently throughout the editorial cycle without being constrained by the mechanics of dictionary production [Please click here to see the presentation].
**Evening programme**

Departure for Sounio to visit the Temple of Poseidon followed by fish meal in a taverna by the sea.

**Friday 4 May:**

**Morning session**

*Visits to two large private schools where the participants were invited to sit in on language lessons.* The participants were divided into two groups and had the opportunity to attend 8 different language lessons for young learners (from grade 1 to grade 4). During the feedback session after the visits it became clear that the groups had had attended quite different classes in terms of the level acquired, the problems with discipline (some learners were only 7 years old), the example of teachers who motivated the pupils for learning the foreign language using various methods etc. In conclusion it can be said that such an experience is an excellent opportunity for editors to become aware of the interrelations between the textbooks they produce and the target groups who actually are using their products.

**Afternoon session**

*Multimedia in language learning – what are the connections between DVD/CD-ROM based learning and access to and use of on-line materials? What about the pedagogical consequences?*

Tomas Hausner (Fraus Publishing House) presented the white board (also known as Smart Board and Active Board) as a good example of combining multimedia and interactivity. These devices are very popular in Czech schools and the Ministry of Education supports the idea in many ways. With white boards it is easier to make things motivating and memorable; however, there are no ready made materials for these white boards. This was the situation at the start, i.e. teachers had to produce their own materials (as before). So with the advent of the white boards there is a great opportunity for publishers to make such materials for the teachers to be used with the white boards. By now Fraus Publishing House has produced materials for lower secondary, and very soon they will produce materials for primary and upper secondary. They intend to cover all subjects in all grades within the nearest future. The first phase has been to convert every page of existing textbooks into interactive PDF-files. As an example Tomas Hausner showed how some spots on the page can be magnified (so that they may be read by all students in the classroom). The students are supposed to have the book in front of them at the same time. It is not the intention that the pupils/students should acquire the DVD (with the white board versions of the books plus additional material) [Please click here to see the presentation].
Summary and looking ahead

All participants expressed their view that the professional and social aspects of this network meeting were very well balanced. As for the next meeting of this network (which will convene in Helsinki in May 2008) the following topics were suggested:

- Layout from language books to be compared next year (participants of next year’s meeting should send to Preben Spåth scanned versions of one or two spreads (left and right hand page) from their best foreign language textbook. At the meeting Preben Spåth will give a Semiotic (and cultural) point of view on the pages).

- Blended learning and multimedia (interactive white boards) in language learning (classroom and autonomous learning environments), also the use of on-line material for students and teachers.

- How to make profit or not to make profit with CD-ROMs, DVDs, on-line materials etc. and which platforms are being used?

Evening programme

In the evening the participants were invited to visit the IME Hellenistic World Virtual Reality show where they ‘disappeared’ in Ancient Athens and lived a day on the Agora.

On behalf of all participants I wish to express my warmest thanks to our hosts for the excellent and very generous organisation of the professional as well as the social sides of this network meeting.

May ???,
Preben Spåth