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Beyond the CEFR: towards standardization of language competence recognition in Europe

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Abstract

The creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has evidenced the need for the development of language policies at universities. University-based language centres have made a great contribution to the development of language learning since their emergence and have played a major role in the development and implementation of language policies and language education.

In addition to teaching and training Language Centres have another important function as university students are now required to prove their language competence at different stages during their university studies for mobility, graduating, entrance to master programmes, etc., as well as for better job opportunities in the international market. This new function of language centres can be defined as the need for the development of more reliable systems for the accreditation or certification of language competence which will provide a basis for comparability of levels of assessment at European level.

As a consequence, national language associations throughout Europe are immersed in a process for the design of a common model for the accreditation of language competence in higher education institutions that allows for comparability in achievement across languages and institutions, but which at the same time, allows for degrees of variation and the possibility to reflect the specific needs and aims of the different institutions.

In the present work we describe the evolution of the accreditation process in Europe, with special attention to the model developed by the Spanish Association of Higher Education Language Centres (ACLES).

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1. Introduction

The creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the Bologna process have dramatically affected the teaching and learning of foreign languages and have evidenced the need for the development of language policies at universities (Crystal, 1997, Graddol, 1997, Van Damme, 2001, Ruane 2003). University-based language centres have greatly contributed to meet the challenges of the Bologna Process and the emerging multilingual Europe and have played a major role in the development and implementation of language policies and language education in higher education institutions (Ingram, 2001, Ruane, 2003, Grainger, 2009, Poljaković, 2011).

The increased growth of language centres led to a need for more cooperation among them; as a result, a confederation of independent associations from 22 countries in Europe (the *European Confederation of Language Centres in Higher Education* or CercleS) was founded in Strasbourg in 1991. It has brought together some 290 language centres, departments, institutes, faculties or schools in Higher Education whose main responsibility is the teaching of foreign languages to university students. Its members have several thousand academic, administrative and technical staff, and some 250,000 students who are learning the world's main languages (CercleS website).

Despite the diversity of language centres, some common characteristics can be identified. The main function of a language centre is to provide language education and training for non-specialist language learners in a university context. CercleS members reached consensus on the core functions of a language centre. They agreed “that there were three types of activity common to all language centres, whatever their name or institution framework and however diverse their missions” (Aub-Buscher & Bickerton, 2002: 206). These were:

- practical language training especially for learners not specialising in languages,
- the use of appropriate technology for language learning,
- research and development in the field of language teaching and learning.

More recently language centres are being asked by their home institution to certify language levels as university students need to prove their language competence at different stages and for many purposes such as mobility, graduating, entrance to master programmes, etc (Orduna, 2013). This new function of language centres can be defined as the need for the development of more reliable systems for the accreditation or certification of language competence which will provide a basis for comparability of levels of assessment at European level, i.e. to standardise the different language competence levels according to what the CEFR stated and to homogenise the corresponding evaluation systems.

2. General Overview of National HE Accreditation systems in Europe

Most European associations of language centres are currently working on the development of accreditation systems that can meet their university demands and that can be recognised at a national and international level. The following paragraphs present a general overview of some European national accreditation models.

UNICert® 1992 (Germany): In the early nineties, the German Association of Language Centres, Language Teaching Institutes and Institutes of Foreign Languages (Arbeitskreis der Sprachenzentren, Sprachlehrinstitute und Fremdspracheninstitute, AKS), which operates as the professional organisation of all bodies and employees teaching languages at the tertiary level of education throughout Germany, developed UNICert®, a testing, certification and accreditation system for non-specialist language learners in higher education (Voss, 1996, 1997, 2002). It was based on a consensus about general aims, an agreed system of levels of language competence and a common code of practice. It encouraged degrees of comparability in achievement across languages and institutions but at the same time, it allowed for degrees of variation and the possibility to reflect the specific needs, aims, working modes and styles of the institutions (Ruane, 2003). The main goal of UNICert is to support language education at universities and to provide an accepted certificate that proves language knowledge outside universities. This system is not limited to German speaking countries as any individual institution may submit for accreditation its own language programs following UNICert guidelines.

NCLP 1994 (Finland): The *National Certificate of Language Proficiency* (NCPL) was a joint project between the Finnish National Board of Education and the University of Jyväskylä. Language proficiency assessments are made using a six-point proficiency level scale. The NCLP is a test system designed for adults which measures language skills in practical situations at home or abroad. The NCLP is governed by the Finnish National Board of Education

(FNBE) which, together with the Centre for Applied Language Studies (University of Jyväskylä), develops and assures the quality of the test (NCLP website).

CLES 2000 (France): The *Certificat de Compétences en Langues de l'Enseignement Supérieur* (CLES) is the language certification accredited by the French Ministry for Higher Education since 2000 and developed jointly with French Universities. This certification is available in 9 different languages (English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Arabic, Polish, Modern Greek and Russian) and assesses five language skills: listening, reading, writing, speaking and interacting.

KPG 2003 (Greece): The *State Certificate of Language Proficiency* (Kratiko Pistopiitiko Glossomathias- KPG) is an examination system aiming at the certification of different levels of proficiency in the use of a European language in various social contexts, in which a person has to speak, comprehend spoken and written discourse, and produce written discourse in the relevant foreign language, within or out of one's place of work or studies. It tests communicative performance in different European languages focusing on the use and the users of the language. The Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs administers the exams in four languages twice a year on the basis of a common theoretical framework and linguistic performance outcomes, in the form of "can-do" statements. The KPG certificate is viewed as work qualification and professional credential, as attestation to multiliteracy, instrument for lifelong learning, and a passport for educational and professional mobility inside and outside the E.U. (KPG website).

At present many other European Language associations are developing their national schemes for the accreditation of language competence in higher education contexts. In Spain, the Association of Higher Education Language Centres (ACLES) has recently launched a certification, called *CertAcles*, based on a consensus among its members. In the following section we describe the *CertAcles* accreditation model in more detail.

3. The Spanish National HE Accreditation system: *CertAcles*

The Spanish Association of Higher Education Language Centres (ACLES) was born in 2001 after a meeting held in Salamanca in which experts working at different universities gathered and shared their concerns about their professional activity in Spain. ACLES has now 60 members from public and private universities and is primarily concerned with language education at a tertiary level and with promoting language teaching methodologies following the guidelines established by the Council of Europe and the CEFR.

ACLES has recently launched a certification, called *CertAcles* based on a consensus about general aims and which has been approved by the national Committee of University Rectors (CRUE) and has gained national recognition (CRUE Decree 8 Sept 2011) and international recognition by CercleS since 2014.

CertAcles is an agreed system of levels of language competence and a common code of practice which allows comparability in achievement across languages and institutions, but which at the same time, allows for degrees of variation among institutions.

3.1. Background of the *CertAcles* model: Needs analysis and conclusions

A preliminary study among member universities on language skill accreditations was conducted with the following conclusions:

- The accreditation of language skills for different purposes is a reality that directly affects all universities; therefore, in response to these needs, accreditation should be harmonised in order to avoid a wide disparity between institutions while ensuring that university autonomy is respected.
- Accredited languages and levels not only vary according to the needs of each university but also with the ultimate purpose of accreditation.
- Accreditation should be plurilingual, i.e. covering different languages, and highly flexible with regard to the levels accredited.
- A great variation in accreditation periods, depending on the needs of each university.

The greatest disparity between Centres was found in the forms of accreditation. It was observed that the procedures for recognising language skill levels lay within the policy field of each university, in terms of student

numbers and recognition by other institutions, for example. While accreditation should respect the autonomy of each university, it was essential that consensus on accreditation based on specific examinations was reached.

To conclude this preliminary analysis, the working group proposed the creation of a model of accreditation in linguistic proficiency based on a testing system developed and conducted by HE language centres but independent of language training courses.

3.2. Principles governing CertAcles

After analysing the needs of universities with respect to the accreditation of foreign language skills and the pros and cons of already existing certification models in other European universities, the principles governing the proposal for joint certification were specified (CertAcles Modelo, 2014):

- *Usefulness*: That is, any type of examination-based accreditation should respond to the needs of individual universities. This cannot be done with a single centralised examination; rather it is a guarantee by the Association of the quality of the examination-based evaluations and certifications offered by each university through its language centre.
- *Respect to university autonomy*: The procedure for examination-based accreditation must respect university autonomy with regard to when and how examinations are conducted, what languages are examined and what fees are charged.
- *Respect to diversity*: The model should aim to integrate the Centres, not segregate them, i.e., it should be valid for both members and non-members of the Association alike but provide the necessary infrastructure for testing in accordance with the Association guidelines.
- *Sustainability*: Implementation of the accreditation system should not involve a great financial cost for the universities concerned. By making use of existing resources, university language centres with the right experience and suitable human skills can reduce the cost of accreditation or even make it pay for itself.
- *Transparency*: The accreditation model should be totally transparent and governed by parameters common to those of other European universities and in accordance with European Community guidelines laid down in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.
- *Efficiency*: The ultimate aim is for the model to be recognised by other European centres so that it can contribute to international mobility and cooperation between universities. *CertAcles* has recently been recognised by CercleS as one of the official national language accreditation systems with acceptance by all CercleS member institutions.

3.3. CertAcles Model: Quality assurance

CertAcles is not a national common exam, but rather a set of guidelines for evaluation that, on the one hand, are to be followed by all centres but, at the same time, are to respect certain level of autonomy to each university. This means that ACLES' model is to allow each university language centre to organise their own exams with their own staff and facilities but, at the same time, requires them to follow a specific framework for the skills involved, exam duration, type of exam, marks, student's registration procedure, marking process, etc. This demanded the development of a high quality guarantee system for certification that ensured transparency in the process of accreditations and certification and the accomplishment of *CertAcles* standards:

‘In parallel with the ACLES accreditation model, the quality and veracity of certificates issued by the Centres are regulated and guaranteed by the ACLES Accreditation Commission, which accredits Centres wishing to be ACLES certifying centres and verifies that the requirements of the Association with regard to examinations are being met’ (ACLES 2012).

For the sake of quality, institutions are accredited as examining centres only for two years, after which they have to apply again for accreditation. Similarly, the institutions that wish to be accredited have to send the Commission their model of exams before and after administration, and then the commission audits all certification exams with the seal *CertAcles*.

CertAcles Certificates will be issued by the Centre itself and endorsed by ACLES. They will indicate the level attained and, where applicable, include a breakdown of skills according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. They have also to include the date and place the exam.

4. Challenges and conclusions

The Spanish National Accreditation model, apart from guaranteeing the quality of the examination-based evaluations and certifications issued by each university under the *CertAcles* seal through their language centres, has supposed an optimisation of the resources existing in the different institutions and a way of promoting the collaboration between members of the National Association in order to get international mutual recognition.

The ultimate aim is for the model to be recognised by other European centres, thus significantly contributing to international mobility and cooperation between universities and promoting the internationalisation of the institutions.

The new challenge of HE language centres is to develop national accreditation systems and come to a consensus on the standardisation of language competence recognition through their national associations, which will bring direct benefits to all stakeholders involved in the process, not only students but also institutions, policy makers, employers and employees and, in a broader sense, to our society.

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