

QQI Case Study – Rethinking Assessment

Provider – Bridge Mills Galway Language Centre

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Authors: Julie Cuttance – Quality and Training Manager

Patrick Creed – School Director

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Provider:

Bridge Mills Galway Language Centre began its relationship with QQI in 2011 and reengaged with QQI in 2020. The school, a small private educator, primarily teaches English as a foreign language, teaches foreign languages to the local market and also runs short QQI awards in TESOL (Special Award Level 7) and Trainer Training (Level 5). The schools' courses are delivered face to face at its premises in Galway city where the school has been located since its formation in 1987.

Context / Introduction:

In March 2020 the school closed due to the Covid 19 pandemic for an initial period of two weeks. This of course was extended, and the school effectively remained closed regarding face-to-face delivery of programmes until into the next academic year, October 2021, when it reopened for face-to-face delivery of classes. During the period of closure the school had to move all programmes online and all classes were delivered via Zoom. In the initial phase the school had no experience of Zoom, teaching programmes online, completing assessment online and had to adapt quickly.

Challenges encountered and Impacts:

There were so many challenges to face at this time in relation to all aspects of the organisation. Financial issues stemming from the inability of students to travel to Ireland to study resulted in no income for the school. Some of the financial constraints were met by government assistance, restructuring of the organisation, and cutting staff numbers. To put it in context, when the school closed in March 2020 it had more than 330 enrolled students studying per week, which had reduced to 16 enrolled students when the school reopened in October 2021.

With regard to teaching and learning, the school moved its classes online to Zoom within ten days of closing. Moving to an online platform with no prior experience of this was immediately challenging and getting students to connect online, via phone, mobile devices, laptops and continuing their learning was difficult. Staff and management learned on the hoof what worked and what did not over the following months.

Language proficiency courses at the school are delivered face to face and are mapped to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001), and pedagogy is therefore heavily influenced by Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT). CBLT is “built around the notion of communicative competence and seeks to develop functional communication skills in learners (Richards and Rogers, 2001)”. Assessment and how it was conducted online needed to be evaluated. The schools Quality Assurance commitment to assessment and the methods it uses includes:

- supporting credible evaluations of the achievement of learning
- incorporating reasonable accommodations

Assessment for the schools' cohort of learners happens in three places. Firstly, at the beginning of a course, assessing the student's proficiency level so they can be placed in a class at the appropriate language learning level. Then follows weekly formative assessment, and finally summative assessment at the end of a course of study. The school uses the CEFRL scale for assessment of learners' language abilities. The CEFRL, is a guideline used to describe achievements of learners of foreign languages across Europe and makes it easier for educational institutions to evaluate the language qualifications of candidates for education admission. Its main aim is to provide a method of learning, teaching, and assessment. CEFRL scales can provide useful assessment tools for assessing language communication abilities including access for learners to assess themselves in their own communication skills (Council of Europe, 2022).

Support for developing assessment online was provided by webinar support from EAQUALS - Evaluation and Accreditation of Quality Language Services (EAQUALS , 2022) with whom the school holds Quality Assurance agreements and membership. Through the use of the CEFRL descriptors, speaking assessment could continue to be conducted in face to face interactions via Zoom. By structuring questions appropriately, and using topics that candidates could relate to, and focussing on components of communication that can be assessed more easily online (e.g. Understanding a Native Speaker Interlocutor, Being Interviewed, Information Exchange) this allowed candidates to be more comfortable being assessed online and allowed them generate enough language for assessors to be able to identify candidates CEFRL language level. Candidates were also offered a number of different topics to write a short piece of work on which allowed the school to complete assessment of writing abilities (e.g. Writing an email correspondence). Candidates were allowed to complete the writing using computer or other electronic device but were not allowed use spell check or other editor functions. Again CERFL assessment scales were used for assessment (Council of Europe, 2023ii) and the outcomes of assessment were accurate with regard to identifying the learners abilities.

Key Learning Outcomes:

There were so many different aspects of learning from this experience, including how technology can be used effectively when assessing learners. While the school returned to face-to-face lessons, the positive impacts of what were learned were, and are still, being used by the school, when it comes to assessment. The school has retained initial proficiency level assessment (Speaking and Writing Skills) using Zoom and email, before learners arrive in Ireland. The school also used (and still uses) assessment via Zoom when candidates are ill or may be absent from class for any reason, post enrolment. This has allowed learners to remain on track with learning and hit key assessment targets.

References:

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