

Ditching the Practice of Insularity: The Benefits of Collaboration for a Small Language Association – Daniel Xerri

Some time ago I attended a workshop based on a multinational project entitled Language Associations and Collaborative Support. The main purpose of this project is that of increasing the collaboration between language associations based in different countries. It also aims to help with the dissemination of the work of the European Centre for Modern Languages. This article mainly discusses the benefits that can be reaped by a small ELT association when it collaborates with other language associations.

The ECML

The ECML was created by the Council of Europe with the express intention of promoting excellence and innovation in language teaching. This was done in the belief that for Europeans to overcome some of the obstacles that might hinder them from living in harmony together it is essential for each individual to be able to communicate in some of the wide variety of languages spoken on this continent. The ECML encourages the implementation of policies geared towards effective language teaching.

The LACS Project

The project is meant to disseminate the work of the ECML with all kinds of language associations and it will partly seek to achieve this by means of FIPLV networks. Gradually by means of this project it is hoped that many teachers and teacher educators will have access to innovative language teaching and learning methodologies. Moreover, the LACS project aims to empower teachers to hone their pedagogic skills even further by providing language associations with an opportunity to interact and collaborate.

I attended this workshop because as a member of the Malta Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (which is an associate member of IATEFL) I wanted to learn more about how language associations in Europe and the rest of the world can collaborate in order to improve their practices and hence help re-evaluate language teaching and learning. IATEFL already provides its associate members with help in trying to form partnerships with other teacher associations and these members are provided with an opportunity of publicizing their events in its newsletter and on its website. However, by also forming partnerships with associations that are not necessarily ELT oriented a small language association can achieve a wider sense of co-operation and thus attain further advantages.

During the workshop it was interesting to realise that many language associations all over Europe face similar challenges, especially with regards to membership numbers, financial support and the publication of newsletters and other materials. I found the opportunity to discuss the work of language associations with people coming from a wide variety of countries to be extremely useful and I came to realise how important it is for different associations to collaborate together for the benefit of their members. Such collaborations are not unheard of in Europe and other continents and by means of this workshop I got to explore the advantages that small associations can derive by forging such alliances.

Some Possible Benefits of Collaboration

The most immediate benefit of collaboration is the availability to an association's members of knowledge, skills and resources that are being promulgated by other associations. For example, MATEFL provides its members with such outside contact by sponsoring the attendance of one or two of its members at the annual conference organised by IATEFL. This is quite a recent development and in the past some of MATEFL's committee members funded their own expenses and then disseminated whatever knowledge and skills they managed to develop during the conference to the rest of the association's members.

However, other language associations in Europe and elsewhere organise conventions and publish materials that could be of interest to the members of a small association like the one I form part of. Whereas it is quite possible for different associations to share their publications and thus reach a much wider audience, attending international conventions is obviously expensive and few are those who can afford to do so. However, a feasible solution to this could be that of organising a conference in one's own country and issuing an international call for proposals through other associations so as to invite submissions from speakers from other countries willing to travel from abroad in order to share their ideas with the association's teachers. It would be even more feasible if an association manages to influence the implementation of a national ELT policy obliging teachers to keep a record of their continuous professional development because in this way attending such a conference will be considered a plus to any teacher's career.

Something that emerged during my discussions with representatives of other European language associations is a concern with how to actually organise and promote an annual language teaching conference. This is something that my own association could learn about from others since currently Malta lacks an annual ELT conference that would hopefully attract a host of new members and thus further strengthen the role of MATEFL. At present MATEFL organises a number of teacher training seminars and at least once a year it invites a renowned foreign speaker to give a talk or lead a workshop. These events entail a lot of work on the part of the committee and their efforts are truly praiseworthy. However, if MATEFL is to grow even further and to continue to address the needs of the EFL industry in Malta it needs to increase its numbers by roping in many of those teachers who might not be aware of the valid work of this association or who have not yet been convinced of the significance of its work and the positive effect of such work on their professional development. In addition, it must be borne in mind that the efforts of an association like MATEFL in promoting the most innovative and effective language teaching methods are not just valid within the strictly EFL scenario but are also applicable to such a context as that of mainstream ELT.

In Malta, for example, the EFL industry caters for the needs of approximately 83,000 foreign students per year. However, there is a large body of teachers who teach at primary, secondary and tertiary levels and who are responsible for a Maltese student population that in its majority is made up of L2 speakers of English. Besides their full-time job some of these teachers teach EFL during the summer months. Moreover, it is not only English teachers who are interested in the work of an ELT association and in fact at such events I have had the opportunity of meeting teachers of other modern languages who are interested in methods and techniques that can

be applied to the teaching of their respective languages. Even though an annual conference is obviously a huge headache for whoever is responsible for its organisation, there exist a number of positive outcomes for teachers and the association itself that cannot be easily overlooked.

Another area in which collaboration with other language associations could be of benefit to an association like the one I am a member of is that of policy making, that is, how such associations manage to influence national policies on language teaching and school accreditation. Since an association represents the views of its members those members depend on their association to give voice to their needs and concerns. Even though every country has its own contextual characteristics, there are still things that an association can learn by collaborating with other associations that have successfully influenced the drafting and implementation of effective policies concerning language teaching. Malta, for example, was one of the first countries to put into practice a national policy governing the EFL industry and MATEFL has a lot to offer to associations that would like to similarly influence the implementation of policies concerning language teaching and learning.

Finally, given that the LACS project is meant to spread the work of the ECML with regards to new pedagogies, curricular design and language policies that address the needs of 21st century students and teachers, one of the most important benefits that that can be derived by means of the collaboration of different language associations is the dissemination of such work amongst as many teachers as possible.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to outline the advantages that an ELT association can derive by seeking to further focus on the synergy that can be effected through collaboration with other language associations that might not necessarily be concerned with the teaching of English. It is undeniable that small associations depend almost entirely on the hard work of their committees and the unflagging support of their members. Such associations face a number of challenges but perhaps one way of overcoming some of these challenges is by ditching the practice of insularity and resolutely taking part in the pooling of resources, knowledge and skills that many more European and international language associations need to engage in.

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