

QUALITY ASSURANCE THROUGH INSPECTIONS AND THE INSPECTOR'S ROLE¹

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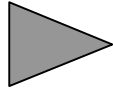
Abstract

In this paper I will argue for the need to carry out inspections in Language schools for quality control and ongoing evaluation and assessment that will finally lead to ongoing school development.

“Few, if any, researchers deny the value of external evaluation [...] - above all there has to be a systematic attempt to fit external and internal evaluation together and use them as a coherent planned whole.” J MacBeath

Language schools which are members or would like to become members of an association whose main goal is to provide quality language services have to undergo inspections at regular intervals in order to prove that they meet the quality standards set by the respective association. Examples of associations are QUEST (the Romanian Association for Quality Language Services), EAQUALS (the European Association for Quality Language Services), OPTIMA (the Bulgarian Association for Quality Language Services), QLS (the Greek Association of Quality Language Schools), etc.

Keywords: inspection scheme, class observation, reports, feedback, quality control



Inspection schemes

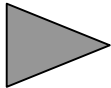
A common denominator for these schools is that, regardless of their size and organizational structure they will be measured objectively against a set of criteria, an inspection scheme, that would help them maintain and improve quality standards. Inspection schemes are tools that have to be constantly refined in order to cope with the ever changing reality of the environment where language schools operate. The schemes also have to be flexible and transparent, as they can be used for self-assessment by the schools themselves, while preparing for the final inspection. They also help inspectors and the inspected school to check the broad principles formulated in the Code of Practice and the Charters (the Student Charter, the Teacher Charter, the Information Charter) against some clearly formulated criteria.

Let us take as an example the "Information Charter" in the *Guide to the EAQUALS Inspection Scheme* (version 5.3), which states: "This guarantees the veracity, comprehensiveness and clarity of the information provided by the school in its brochures, publicity and other information sources." (EAQUALS 2004/2007). That means that inspectors will have to check the completeness and accuracy, clarity and accessibility of the information in the promotional materials. They will then talk to students in focus groups, as well as to managers and staff, to see if there are any queries.

In the "Staff Charter" the following statement is laid out:

"2.5 Members provide all staff with appropriate workspace...as well as relevant opportunities for training and development within and outside working hours." (EAQUALS, 2004/2007)

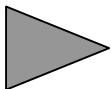
The inspectors verify this principle by asking teachers in teacher focus groups about their participation in conferences and other events, whether they are offered training courses or they can buy books or other materials for teacher development. Inspectors will also check files where Teacher Training/Development events are recorded, they can look for specialized books for teachers on the bookshelves of the teachers' library, etc.



Qualities of a good inspector

The external evaluation is carried out by inspectors, whose professional experience and personal qualities would play a decisive role in the success or lack of success of an inspection. Within a limited period of time (1-3 day), two inspectors coming from different geographical places and sometimes having different backgrounds have to reach consensus on **what to look for** - to find evidence that the inspection criteria are being met - and on **how to do it**. Good inspectors would not compare schools they have seen before or even compare them with their own schools. They have to be able to assess correctly the school's strengths and weaknesses, by emphasizing areas of best practice and making recommendations on how to improve certain aspects. Referral for areas that have not met the minimum requirements should be clearly stated and supported by factual information in the feedback session at the end of the inspection and in the report, that has to be sent within three weeks after the inspection.

Inspectors also have to remember that being inspected is a stressful occasion however professionally the inspection is carried out, and should avoid asking questions they would not like to be asked. Their attitude should be open and unobtrusive, avoid socializing with the staff of the inspected school, talking about their own school or other inspected schools. Confidentiality issues are a matter of deontology, inspectors should be aware that they are in a privileged position by having access to confidential documentation and "accept that inspections involve mutual learning."



Organizational skills

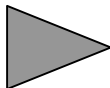
Preparation for the inspection should start three weeks before the date of inspection. By reading the advanced documentation sent by the school and by talking to the manager of the school and to the other inspector, a timetable for inspection should be drawn up and details regarding accommodation, meals, transportation to and from the inspected school should be settled.

The timetable is a mirror of all the aspects that have to be covered within a limited period of time: talking to members of staff, students, observing lessons, checking on documents and giving feedback. All this cannot be attained without careful planning, good time management and carrying out the inspection effectively. Here is an example of how to draw up a timetable for inspection:

When	What	Who
08.30-09.15	Arrival and introductions. Tour of building. Finalise timetable.	both inspectors
09.15-10.30	Class observation	both inspectors

When	What	Who
10.30-11.00	Break	
11.00-12.30	Class observation	both inspectors
12.30-13.00	Student focus group	both inspectors
13.00-13.30	Visit self-access centre	both inspectors
13.30-14.15.	Lunch	both inspectors
14.15- 14.45	Meeting with Admin staff / Accommodation Director and organisation of accommodation visits for later Monday or Tuesday (see below)	both inspectors
14.45-15.15	Inspect academic documentation	
15.15-16.15	Meeting with the Academic Manager	both inspectors
16.15-16.45	Inspect legal documentation and contracts	inspector A
16.15-16.45	Inspect Teachers' Rooms and Resources	inspector B
16.45-18.15	Visiting student accommodation (see above/Tuesday)	both inspectors
19.30	Evening meal and review	both inspectors

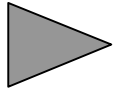
When	What	Who
09.00-9.30	Class observation	both inspectors
9.30-10.30	Meeting with the Director of the School	both inspectors
11.00-12.30	Visiting student accommodation	both inspectors
12.30-13.00	lunch	both inspectors
13.00-13.30	Class observation	both inspectors
13.00-13.30	Final check on documentation	Inspector A
13.30- 14.30	Preparation of feedback (1)	both inspectors
14.30-15.15	Teacher focus group	both inspectors
15.15-15.45	Preparation of feedback (2)	both inspectors
15.45-16.45	Inspectors' feedback to management team	both inspectors
17.00	Depart	both inspectors



Observational qualities

As teaching is central to all the schools that offer classes of foreign languages a great deal of the inspectors' time is devoted to class observation. They have to observe all the types and levels of classes on offer, off-site classes for corporate clients or classes held on other premises (they could be located in the same city or even outside the city). The first two classes are observed by both inspectors together to make sure that they have the same methodological approach to teaching/learning. By sitting in classes no more than 20 minutes the inspector has to assess the quality of the teaching methods, materials used, the graded activities, their timing, interaction, classroom management, rapport and atmosphere, etc. and at the same time absorbs information from everywhere like a "sponge". Students'

projects displayed on the walls and other teaching materials will tell a lot of what is going on in the classroom. Of course, they have to see if the classroom is well-lit, good-sized, with modern furniture, well-equipped (CD-player, whiteboard, video sets etc.) They will also have to check whether the group size corresponds to the maximum number of students indicated in the advertising materials. To the information gathered in the classroom they will add data extracted from checking all the documentation that supports the activity in the classroom, such as the syllabus, the working schemes, the lesson plans, the testing procedures and by talking to the Academic Manager, the teachers and the students. Only by checking on different sources can they realise that there is a system in place that would ensure that the activity in the school is running smoothly and at a high quality level.

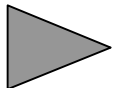


Interviewing techniques

A good inspector is able to interview staff in a polite manner and get the desired information in a non-obtrusive way. They will invite people to talk about their jobs without interrupting and jumping to the next question. They should make people feel at ease and ready to give honest answers. Key staff should be interviewed in order to get more information on what was checked in the written documentation.

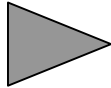
Questions should range from questions related to job responsibilities to more open ended ones, for example ones that would enquire about the atmosphere in the school, the communication between staff members, between teachers and administrative staff, manager and the rest of the staff., between teachers and students.

Questions should also be adapted to the age and level of the students (in student focus groups). Inspectors should never talk about their own school or be critical or ask questions which might be perceived as too personal.



Giving feedback

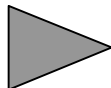
“Feedback is the gentle art of praising or criticizing with justification another person’s performance and behaviour through discussion.” (Maxwell-Hyslop, 1996) It does not necessarily imply too many words, and it should be factual. It is important to decide who is going to participate in the feedback session: the manager and her deputy, or the manager and the DOS. The inspectors can take turns in giving feedback or the reporting inspector should do the job. Both inspectors have to be present and focused on their work, they should cancel any travelling arrangements that impede their work.



Effective writing skills

Inspectors have to collect information from different sources, so that at the end of the inspection they should be able to put all the bits and parts together and form a coherent whole. Note-taking should be one of the inspectors' strengths in order to write down a multitude of data in an organized and brief manner, so as to be able then to use it effectively in writing the report. The report should contain complete and truthful information and reflect what the inspectors found in the inspected school.

Factual information, not opinions, is required and this should be in accordance with what has already been communicated to the management team in the feedback session. The inspectors are not allowed to use names and the language has to be impersonal, but at the same time clear and accurate. The report will have to contain also areas of best practice, make recommendations and referrals if standards are not being met. The inspection report is then sent to the Chair of the Inspections Committee for validation; the inspected school receives it, as well, and has the possibility to make comments in case some details have not been reflected entirely accurately. All the three inspection stages: pre-, during- and after the inspection are equally important and should be dealt with accordingly.



Concluding remarks

Inspections are an important part of any quality assurance system, although there is a shift towards self-assessment. Their 'value will not be denied' as long as they are carried out by inspectors, who have the right skills and knowledge, to keep an open mind. Both the inspected school and the inspector will benefit greatly from this encounter and will introduce changes in their daily activity, which would lead to ongoing school development and improvement.

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The author

Dr. Radadiana Calciu has been a Lecturer in English and German since 1996. Her main activity is to teach Business students how to communicate effectively in an international market. By tackling a wide range of topics, such as negotiations, presentation skills, intercultural aspects, business ethics, etc., students get prepared for their future jobs, while improving their language competence as well. Another important field, where she is active is Quality Management, as she is aware of the need that modern universities have to develop systems for the ongoing improvement of their teaching/learning environment.