

Pioneering and Innovative Influence of EU's Language Label Project and Its Enlightments*

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As an incentive to the innovations and stimulus to peer schools and individuals, European Language Label is performing an increasingly important role in disseminating the results and achievements of the innovative activities and programs by the labeled winners. This program greatly draws and promotes public interest to innovative initiatives in the field of language teaching and learning, which will consequently facilitate the implementation of the Rethinking Education and contribute to the realization of the 2020 European Strategy for growth and employment. This paper is intended to explore the strength of this linguistic promotion program and offer some visions and inspirations to domestic foreign language education reform.

Keywords: European Language Label, foreign language teaching and learning, innovative approaches, awarding criteria, application and results, enlightments and implications

General Introduction of European Language Label

European Language Label (ELL) is a pilot project launched by the European Commission (EC) in 1998 following the recommendations of 1995 white paper teaching and learning objective ways of language learning. It was established to credit and promote the innovative initiatives in the field of language teaching and learning across the European Union. To meet the Barcelona goal of *Mother Tongue+2* (to acquire two foreign languages other than the mother tongue) set in 2002, the ELL has dedicated great efforts and contributed a lot to the multilingual objective. So far, more than 2,400 projects have been labeled and awarded from as many as 28 EU participating countries. In recent years, this program has become increasingly comprehensive and integrated, covering a wide range of topics and stages of education and training. It shows cases and role models of the innovative achievements by labeled activities and programs and stimulates other schools and personnel to follow suit or draw some inspirations to launch their own reforms and innovations (Guidelines for Implementation, 2012).

Program Background

ET 2020 strategy (The Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training) highlighted and pinpointed the weakness of European education and training systems in providing the right skills

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for employability. With the further integration of the European Union, more and more Europeans will have cross-border or cross-cultural working experiences. Multi-linguistic skills are becoming increasingly important for workers' mobility and employability in Europe. But the fact is that the European Union is facing an austere foreign language situation which falls far behind other developed nations. According to statistics, only 14% students in France received secondary low levels of foreign language education and only 9% in the UK. More than half of the residents of EU member states only communicate in one language. EU claims that by 2020, at least 50% of the 15-year-old adolescents could achieve the level of using the first foreign language independently (currently 42%) and at least 75% of the junior high school students could master at least two foreign languages (currently 61%) (European Commission, 2012). To this end, Member States should speed up the reform to guide and train people to grasp the first and second foreign language and strive to achieve the "mother tongue plus two" objective.

Linguistic Target and Initiatives of "Rethinking Education"

"Rethinking Education" is an education development plan released by the European Commission in 2012 with an aim to improve people's professional skills and finally promote regional economic growth and international competitiveness for the next decade. The plan encourages and adopts the most innovative education and training system in a bid to provide the skills needed for the labor market. Through these reforms and programs, people obtain the necessary support and get fully prepared for future employment and cross-cultural exchanges. The program sets clear language education objectives, among which foreign language ability is a key element in sharpening the competitive edge of talents. Recommended measures include: (1) taking advantage of the open and public programs and funds to develop innovative teaching approaches and (2) enhancing the competence of the teaching staff with various on-the-job training programs. European Language Label is one of the projects serving these goals (European Commission, 2012).

Management and Operation

The NELLI (Network of European Language Labeled Initiatives) project is launched by the European Commission targeting at the Key Activity 2 Language objective set up in the framework of the Lifelong Learning Programme. Its main goal is to promote quality in language learning and teaching through the dissemination and promotion of the innovative results and breakthroughs achieved in the field of multilingual education and training explorations (Colibaba & Vlad, 2012). The program application is open to any institutions and individuals at various levels, ranging from pre-primary education, primary education, community and adult education, to higher education and vocational education involved in language education and target languages may involve any modern foreign languages. The innovations may fall into various forms including new policies, methodologies, practices, approaches, and even new technologies and devices. The whole project is managed and operated at both European and national levels. For the former, a working group is established to handle the multilingual issues across the Commission with each member state having one representative and the working group convenes annually in Brussels. For the latter, the member states organize their own panel of judges for the appraisal of the label candidates. Candidate application programs should firstly meet the general selection criterion approved by all member countries with each nation having its minor alternations conforming to the national needs. These criteria include: (1) comprehensible and applicable; (2) original and creative; (3)

motivating and fulfilling; (4) European-tailored and oriented; and (5) transferable and productive. From 2006, the program has proposed a two-year priority system in the middle of the previous year, which outlines the emphasis and guides the direction of next award. The following is a summary of Label Priorities over the past 10 years (2006-2015).

Table 1

A Summary of Label Priorities Over the Past 10 Years

Time duration	Priorities for the label campaigns	Number of team project labels awarded	Number of labels awarded to individuals
2006-2007	1. Initial and in-service language teacher training 2. Diversification of the languages on offer	315	16
2008-2009	1. Intercultural dialogue 2. Languages and business	287	39
2010-2011	1. Language learning in the community 2. Language skills as a preparation for work	284	32
2012-2013	1. Language learning based on the new technologies 2. Multilingual classrooms	243	57
2014-2015	1. Languages for social inclusion 2. Languages and sport	115	1

Table 2

The Top 10 Countries Winning the Highest Number of Labels Both at Team and Individual Level From 2006-2015

Rank	Country	Total number of labels
1	Italy	195
2	Poland	138
3	United Kingdom	95
4	Romania	79
5	Ireland	72
6	France	69
7	Belgium	63
8	Turkey	58
9	Austria	56
10	Czech Republic	56

Table 3

The Top 9 Countries Winning the Highest Number of Labels at Individual Level From 2006-2015

Rank	Country	Total number of labels
1	Poland	50
2	Slovakia	36
3	Ireland	31
4	Czech Republic	9
5	Lithuania	6
6	Estonia	5
7	Romania	4
8	Finland	3
9	Latvia	1

The Classification of the Labeled Programs

So far, the labeled programs are vast in number, which can be generally classified into five broad categories:

innovative teaching and learning approaches, innovative teaching and learning techniques, innovative teacher training programs, and innovative management and assessment methodologies and practices. And each can be further classified in terms of nature (formal and compulsory, open, vocational) and level (pre-primary, primary, secondary, tertiary).

Table 4

Sample Teaching and Learning Approach Labels by Nationality

Sample teaching and learning approach labels	Nationality
New ways in teaching foreign language to the children from the age of three years	Slovenia
Language learning in action (LLA)	Cyprus
Legal English training for intermediate and advanced students	Hungary
Football and languages link people from the youngest age	Poland
LOA—Learning from/with one another	Portugal

Table 5

Sample Teaching and Learning Technique Labels by Nationality

Sample teaching and learning technique labels	Nationality
An all-sensory experience: Learning English the easy way	Malta
Learning English with a mobile	Netherlands
Multimedia e-platform for the democratic learning of foreign languages	Romania
Language robot	Estonia
Multimedia tool for learning and teaching slovenian sign language and international gestures	Slovenia

Table 6

Sample Teacher Training Labels by Nationality

Sample teacher training labels	Nationality
Research and teacher education for business and economics	Romania
Emilangues	France
Dual Language Programme (DLP)	Austria
Working group of language teachers from the five regions of the Meuse-Rhine Euregio	Belgium
Interact	Romania

Table 7

Sample Management and Assessment Labels by Nationality

Sample management and assessment labels	Nationality
Open to every citizen	Lithuania
The language policy plan of the Brussels public hospital network	Belgium
The European language festival	Slovenia
The ambassador of languages of the year 2012	Lithuania
Language learning in the community	Belgium

The Impact and Significance of the Linguistic Promotion Program in Case

As a pioneering program, European Language Label provides a wide range of topics and issues. Each serves as a brainstorming experience and offers novel and original ideas and techniques, some of which can be completely duplicated in other classes or by individuals and some can be tentatively used after due adjustments

and modifications. Still others may offer some inspirations for further innovations. The labels are updated and in processions, which opens a window for both teachers and learners to keep abreast of the latest development of language acquisition theories and practices, and enjoy the most fruitful and productive means of learning and teaching. So far, a vast database of labeled projects has been established, in which projects are categorized and analyzed according to different criteria and many case studies are examined in terms of quality elements (European Commission, 2009). The database of awarded projects offers resources for teachers, students, and institutions across EU in enhancing language quality and awareness and provides a real source of inspiration and creative thoughts in the field of languages. These materials are comprehensive and systematic which include the background information, theory and rationale, process and operation, data and result, illustrations and analysis, useful lessons and tips, conclusion and reflections. People can find vast examples and cases of language learning and teaching in this database, which can greatly inspire them to conceive their own language learning and teaching approaches and enrich their own language experience. Some of these initiatives are not only conducive to language learning and teaching but also practical and applicable for other projects in different fields. So this database can be used both as reference for quality language projects as well as inspiration and incentive for the development of other novel initiatives. People who have many novel ideas and want to put them into reality may turn to this database for insights and inspirations (NELLIP project website). As a useful tool, teachers can use it to aware and follow the latest innovations and developments in the field of language education and actively get them involved in the lifelong learning and training, so as to get to know educational trends, what is being done in other places and how to adapt themselves to the everchanging contexts and situations. Students equipped with the modern ideas, techniques, and devices can greatly improve their language efficiency and proficiency. Administrators and managing staff can produce more appropriate curriculum and syllabus conforming to the scientific language acquisition rules and principles.

Enlightenments to Foreign Language Education Reform in China

Good teaching methods and cases could be used to improve language learning and teaching practice to yield the best effect. It can effectively broaden the vision and horizon of the language teachers and learners, mobilize their potential, stimulate their enthusiasm, and facilitate language learning efficiency. In recent years, numerous good language learning and teaching initiatives have been promoted and disseminated across Europe through the label program followed by vast reports both at national and European level. All these measures and cases, while benefiting the people in Europe and their own nations, also offer great enlightenments and inspirations to Chinese domestic foreign language education reform as follows: National and regional quality language teaching and learning funding and incentive projects are scarce and the support and propaganda for the innovative teaching projects fall short. Most of the fruitful and fulfilling teaching approaches and experiences in this area are only confined either to one's own campus, or within the college English teaching and research association or the annual training sessions and conferences organized by certain foreign language book publishing institutions, such as FLTRP (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press), SFLEP (Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press), etc., of which the teacher exchange opportunities and audience are rather limited and rare, thus innovative initiatives are not fully accessible to the majority of foreign language teachers and avid language fans. At the national level, publicity and promotion of the pilot programs and practices with broad demonstration

effects are far inadequate. People's knowledge of innovative teaching and learning methods is mostly accidental and consequently they do not follow the latest methods and trends in language teaching very closely. Therefore, the promotion and dissemination of the innovative teaching methods are of great significance. To upgrade people's knowledge and facilitate the effective exploitation of the latest and top-notch methods, techniques, and approaches, more diversified promotion and publicity channels are expected to be produced to make people aware, understand, get familiar with, and use the good practices and cases to serve their own purpose. The following practices and measures would mostly be helpful and productive: (1) Present and highlight the language innovations (presently not very obvious) on the main menu of the authoritative language teaching websites, through the careful page layout and meticulous content introduction, making it more attractive and eye-catching. For example, making the ELT's Innovation Award Program available on the portal websites of the College English Teaching Council and the National Band 4 and 6 Examinations to get them related to ELL links; (2) Require universities, language training schools, and local educational institutions to include links to ELL pages on their own websites; (3) Use social media to create links and promote exchanges between ELL winners; (4) Require major sponsors, especially publishers of English publications and textbooks, to include additional leaflets and posters of the language program in the mail sent to the school staff, so as to add additional profiles to them; and (5) Find ways to maintain a higher visibility for the project after the award, for example by creating an online network of dedicated award-winning project leaders and a Wechat chatting group with which all of the people interested and concerned can share their views and visions, and more important jointly work out some solutions to certain universal problems. The final objective is to create a framework for the effective exploitation of the results of the ELL programmes and to ensure that the results of the LLP are appropriately recognized, demonstrated, and implemented on a wide scale at regional, national, and European levels.

New Perspectives and Challenges

In recent years, with the political, social, and economical transformations and changes of the member countries, the EU is confronting some unprecedented challenges both internally and externally facing the great events like the Brexit from EU, Italy's referendum, and Greece debt crisis. All of these will impose some effects on the goal of EU's ambitious Key Activity 2 which aims to raise people's awareness of the importance of acquiring linguistic skills and create opportunities and possibilities to boost the building of multilingual skills.

As a founding member and great contributor of the language label project, Britain is currently undergoing certain visible changes either in the membership or participation. Early from leadership shift from CILT (the Centre for Information on Language Teaching), now part of a large charitable trust, CfBT (educational consultancy and quality assurance) was subsequently in charge of the Label implementation in the UK. But from mid 2013, its responsibility was denied by Ecorys (UK national agency for EU lifelong learning programmes) who then formed an alliance with British Council to be in charge of Erasmus+. And ever since, the European Language Label scheme is suspended in the UK and no program is funded so far. Looking back, a total of 192 innovative programs in history had once been labeled and gain wide publicity throughout England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Next is a summary table illustrating UK winning number of labels both at team and individual level from 2006-2015.

Table 8

British Labels Over the History

Year	Labels awarded to team	Labels awarded to individuals
1999	12	
2000	15	
2001	12	
2002	12	
2003	15	
2004	17	
2005	14	
2006	12	
2007	15	
2008	12	
2009	12	
2010	10	
2011	11	
2012	10	
2013	13	
2014	0	
2015	0	
Total	192	

Whether Britain can continue their applications to the project awards and enjoy the vast resources of the initiatives is becoming a question right now. With these questions in perspective, the author will continue to track the legacy of this project in UK.

Conclusion

As an award and boost for quality initiatives, the Label program has already turned out to be very productive and successful, and made an important contribution to achieving European objectives in the field of language education. It encourages the exploration and application of creative ideas and approaches and helps to deal with various challenges facing language teachers and learners. A bulk of the contents and practices of such an innovative program can be definitely adopted and taken advantage of to serve Chinese language education reforms.

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