

PROFILING LANGUAGE ASSISTANTS IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT: FEATURES, ROLES, AND FUNCTIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

HACIA EL PERFIL DEL AUXILIAR DE CONVERSACIÓN EN EL CONTEXTO EUROPEO: CARACTERÍSTICAS, ROLES Y FUNCIONES EN EL SIGLO XXI

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Abstract

In the European context, language assistants (LAs) have been key actors in foreign language classes for over a century. Language assistants, nowadays considered a valuable resource for learners, work in similar contexts throughout the continent (schools, universities, language schools) and, theoretically, should perform the same roles in all host countries. In practice, however, the main features and expected roles might differ. The aim of this study is twofold: first, to compare functions of language assistants in four European countries (France, Italy, Spain, and Austria). To this end, guides published by the host countries and addressed to LAs were taken as a reference.

Second, to highlight the features which better identify and define language assistants in Europe. For this analysis, a comparative cross-national study following the Grounded Theory approach with MAXQDA software was used. Findings indicate that language assistants are usually young people coming from different educational backgrounds who have received basic information about the host country as well as pedagogical and methodological issues. They are mainly considered as language and culture ambassadors who work in association with a mentor teacher or supervisor who leads the class. The study is hoped to contribute to the creation of a European profile in the 21st century useful for current and future language assistants and their supervisors, and also to policy makers in need to update guides addressed to this valuable asset.

Keywords: Language Assistants' roles, foreign language teaching, culture, European linguistic policy.

Resumen

En el contexto europeo, los auxiliares de conversación (LAs) han formado parte de las clases de lenguas extranjeras durante más de un siglo. Los LAs, considerados actualmente un valioso recurso para los estudiantes de idiomas, trabajan en contextos similares en todo el continente (colegios, universidades, escuelas de idiomas) y, en teoría, deberían desempeñar las mismas funciones en sus países de acogida. Sin embargo, en la práctica, las características principales y las funciones previstas pueden diferir según el país anfitrión. El objetivo de este estudio es doble: en primer lugar, comparar las funciones de los auxiliares de conversación entre cuatro países europeos (Francia, Italia, España y Austria). A tal efecto, se tomaron como referencia las guías publicadas en países anfitriones y dirigidas a los LAs. En segundo lugar, destacar las características que mejor identifican y

definen a los auxiliares de conversación europeos. Para este análisis, se utilizó un estudio comparativo entre países siguiendo el enfoque de la Teoría Fundamentada con el software MAXQDA. Los resultados del análisis indican que los auxiliares de conversación proceden de diferentes entornos educativos y han recibido información básica sobre el país de acogida y sobre cuestiones pedagógicas y metodológicas. Se les considera principalmente embajadores de la lengua y la cultura de origen, y trabajan en asociación con un profesor mentor o supervisor que dirige la clase. Se espera que este trabajo contribuya a crear un perfil europeo del auxiliar de conversación en el siglo XXI, que resulte útil tanto para los auxiliares actuales como los de futuro y los responsables encargados de crear estas guías.

Palabras clave: roles de los auxiliares de conversación, enseñanza de lengua extranjera, cultura, política lingüística europea.

1. Introduction

Between 1904 and 1905, the first language assistants from France and Prussia arrived in the UK to contribute to the teaching and understanding of their own languages and cultures (French and German). At that time, only a limited number of young children from elite families had access to this valuable resource. Over a century later, the initial alliance between Germany, the United Kingdom and France evolved, and nowadays the assistantship programme gathers 67 countries (Le Guide de Assistant de Langue en France, 2021-2022), and thousands of language assistants share visions of their own culture and mother tongues with language learners all over the world.

Understandably, the current linguistic and cultural needs have changed significantly from those at the beginning of the 20th

century. Notwithstanding, throughout the current guides and handbooks addressed to LAs the term *ambassadors* has overcome the passage of time, being noticeable in the sections referring to the whole process of the LAs mobility (before, during and after). Being ambassadors, however, involves numerous micro-tasks and roles which this paper analyses, alongside the comparison between their expected roles in four European countries representing four widely taught languages: France, Italy, Spain, and Austria. These countries share a common vision of LAs as a very valuable resource, although their expected functions do not necessarily coincide in all cases. In this respect, to date, previous studies on the role of LAs have focused on one specific geographical context: Hong Kong (Gao & Shum, 2010), Italy (Cibin, 2012), Japan (Sutherland, 2014), or Slovakia (Laurent & Rošteková, 2019), to name but a few. In this paper, however, the LAs' functions are described and compared by analysing to what extent these ambassadors undertake the same linguistic and cultural functions in the above-mentioned countries. It is thus hoped that the results drawn from this comparative study might be useful not only for current and future language assistants and their supervisors, but also to policy makers in need to update guides and handbooks addressed to this valuable asset.

2. Literature Review

The common basis to promote the development of plurilingual European citizens was first put forward in the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFRL) in 2001¹, in an attempt to promote mutual understanding and enhance social

¹ Council of Europe. (2001). Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Cambridge, U.K.

cohesion. In this respect, since linguistic diversity is a defining feature of Europe, European citizens of the new millennium were expected to be able to express themselves in different languages (although not necessarily with the same competence). The education systems could contribute significantly to achieving this goal, as the Committee of Ministers to Member States observed in their 2008 recommendation on how to implement the CEFRL in the European Education Systems. As a result, actions were taken to promote foreign language teaching / multilingualism, European citizens' linguistic awareness, or teacher training on plurilingualism, among many others (Broek & Van den Ende, 2013). In addition, following European Conferences on Plurilingualism with linguistic policy makers, the European Charter for Plurilingualism (Council of Europe, 2005) was released; amongst numerous recommendations, it suggested “to develop a plurilingual and multicultural approach of teaching based on teachers who are native speakers” (2005, p. 7). In this respect, bilingual schools in Europe had already incorporated LAs not only to meet this purpose, but also to increase the students' contact with living languages from an early age. In this vein, the Commission services and national agencies recommend: “to increase take-up of the language assistantship action, in particular to support language teaching at primary level” (European Commission, 2004, p. 17).

Coinciding with the new European linguistic policies, the increase of bi/plurilingual schools in the last two decades has boosted the demand for LAs in the European Education systems. This is shown by the different calls for LAs from a wider scope of home countries, as indicated, for instance, by the following institutions: Department of Education (Ireland, 2018), *Austausch und Mobilität* (Switzerland, 2018), *Dirección General de Bilingüismo y Calidad de la Enseñanza*

(Madrid, Spain, 2021), among others. Experienced teachers and researchers (see Baker, 2014) notice how their role, expectations and functions have changed over the decades and evolved, quite likely, because of the social, educational, and methodological reasons described below.

Before joining the programme in the host country, language assistants are nowadays equipped with certain knowledge about their functions, as opposed to the first youngsters who arrived in the UK in 1904. This mismatch is closely connected, on the one hand, to changes in access to education, and on the other, to the evolution of foreign language teaching methods. Regarding the first issue, at the beginning of the 20th century, gender disparity made young girls in the United Kingdom leave school at fourteen and study domestic science “to inculcate in girls from an early age awareness of future domestic and maternal duties above all other considerations” (St. John, 1994, p. 191). As a result, the first language assistants encountered classrooms filled mainly with boys, since languages were “the rather restricted concern of educated gentlemen” (Rowles & Rowles, 2005, p. 3). The quote also highlights the relation between language learning and high social status: upper class families at that time wanted their children to learn and practice foreign languages in the most natural environment possible. Consequently, there was a demand for LAs who could provide authentic and natural input to the learners. Decades later, a process of “democratisation” (Rowles & Rowles, 2005) in foreign language learning enabled children and adolescents from all walks of life to acquire a certain proficiency in additional languages.

In terms of teaching methods, at the beginning of the last century there was “a shift in FL learning in Europe away from

grammar and translation and towards more direct engagement with the foreign language” (Codó & McDaid 2019, p. 222). As a result of this shift, the Direct Method was introduced in France and Germany (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), home countries of the first language assistants, as mentioned above. The Direct Method, very much in fashion in Europe at that time, emphasised the use of the target language as vehicular language, and oracy over written skills. In addition, everyday vocabulary and the inductive teaching of grammar replaced previous methods and approaches based on written skills and translations. In accordance with the new trend, the first language assistants were expected to focus on reading and especially, on the speaking skill (Rowles & Rowles, 2005). Due to the then emphasis on oral production and interaction, LAs were required “a good and clear pronunciation, not too strongly marked dialectical peculiarities”² (1905). This requirement highlights how much has changed over the last century, since nowadays perceived dialectal barriers cannot (or should not) be a constraint in terms of employability; conversely, phonological variations are considered an asset when learning additional languages (Bayley, 2005; Charpentier-Jiménez, 2019; Rosa, 2017), since they contribute to improving the learners’ communicative and intercultural competences.

Currently, language assistants are (usually) young native speakers of modern languages who help provide meaningful contexts to use the target language at schools. They promote their home language and culture by helping the classroom teacher (usually a non-native speaker) in a variety of tasks and activities mostly designed to foster oral communication (Da Silva, 2020). For instance, they help

² Memorandum from the Foreign Office, 23rd March 1905.

students participate in authentic exchanges, support students individually or in small groups and actively interact with teachers to keep their oral skills (fluency, vocabulary range, etc.) and deepen their knowledge and understanding of different cultures (Vescan & Saiuc, 2018). Bruchet (2012) takes this observation even further, indicating that LAs can also help with modern pedagogical practices and provide the host colleagues with a “linguistic, cultural and didactic update” (p. 232).

Much of the available literature on LAs also highlights the relationship they have with their students: far from sticking to the conventionally asymmetric relationship between teacher and learners, LAs seem to get closer to the students, facilitating communicative exchanges, and therefore, lowering the potential linguistic barriers (Fernandez Rivero, 2008; Bolarín Martínez, Porto Currás & Lova Mellado, 2021). This behaviour is quite likely determined by the close age between LAs and students, who frequently belong to the same generation (Bruchet, 2012). The LAs themselves occasionally find this close relationship unexpected (Codó & McDaid, 2019) since this is not a common practice in their home countries. In addition, as Buckingham (2018) points out, the menial tasks they are asked to perform at times might make students “see the LA as a less powerful player in the classroom and may lose respect for him or her, making it much more difficult for the LA to control the classroom when leading an activity” (p. 41). Gerena, & Ramírez-Verdugo (2014) indicate that this type of tasks hinders the full integration of the LAs in the classroom.

The profile of LAs is heterogeneous (Caparrós, 2010; Llana, 2015): most of them are young graduates with little or no experience in foreign language teaching who voluntarily apply for the job to

have an experience abroad and improve their CVs upon completion of tertiary education. Their expectations, therefore, might clash with those of the host institutions (Ortega, 2003; Gerena & Ramírez-Verdugo, 2014), since LAs might not be interested in learning about language teaching or in becoming language teachers in the future, but in having a first-hand experience of a new country and its culture, close to what Stainton (2018) calls “the TEFL tourist”, i.e., a tourist who teaches English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and experiences roles of trainer, trainee and tourist. Thus, regarding LA’s foreign language teaching, classroom teachers often notice “a lack of competences and skills in this area” (Méndez García & Pavón Vázquez, 2012, p. 4). This clash is closely related to the lack of guidelines on what their role specifically involves as indicated in the literature (Méndez García & Pavón Vázquez, 2012; Dafouz & Hibler, 2013; Sánchez Torres, 2020; López Medina & Otto, 2020).

Part of the lack of specificity on the LA’s roles stems from linguistic policies aimed to guide language teachers in their efforts to teach foreign languages and cultures. In this respect, LAs are informed in the home countries about the assistantship programme in general, via websites, dissemination activities or word of mouth, among other possibilities. Once a host country is chosen, LAs find in the guides and handbooks addressed to them practical information about the host countries, including issues such as health, insurance, salary, etc. To facilitate the transition process, schools quite often get in touch with the LAs before arrival and encourage them to bring memorabilia of “authentic” culture (Bolarín Martínez, Porto Currás & Lova Mellado, 2021). This is a controversial issue since it consolidates the belief that there is a unique culture in the LA’s home country “instead of working towards breaking down stereotypes of the home

country abroad (as the programme aims to do according to Rowles & Rowles (2005, p. 26) it seems as though there is a push towards reinforcing these" (Codó & McDaid 2019, p. 233). In this respect, recent research has addressed the imbalance between linguistic and cultural aspects, favouring the first over the second (Bruchet, 2012; Llana, 2015; Bolarín Martínez, Porto Currás & Lova Mellado, 2021), among others. The guides and handbooks are not prescriptive, but conceived to lead the users through their work, which partially explains why details on methodological specificities are missing in some contexts. In most cases, the LAs` functions are described in general terms and, when present, a list of general linguistic intercultural and ludic activities is provided. In consequence, each language assistantship develops independently, strongly shaped by contextual features and achieving heterogeneous outcomes, which eventually are difficult to identify, partly because of the scarce literature on the topic (Ehrenreich, 2006; Macaro et al. 2014; Codó & McDaid, 2019).

The studies carried out so far outline the importance of contextual features (schools / regions / countries) in the assistantship experience and its results (relation of symmetry / asymmetry with classroom teachers, teaching approaches, traditional / innovative methodologies, etc.). This is observed in studies focused on specific contexts: Hong Kong (Gao & Shum, 2010), France (da Silva, 2020), Italy (Cibin, 2012), Japan (Sutherland, 2014), Turkey (Ekmekçi, 2015), or Slovakia (Laurent & Rošteková, 2019), among others. In Spain, the regions of Madrid (Buckingham, 2016, López-Medina & Otto, 2020) and Andalusia (Tobin & Abelló-Contesse, 2013; Sánchez Torres, 2020) lead research on the topic, -in Spain, the regions are autonomous regarding the educational responsibilities. The aforementioned

research endeavours sample the current literature, which describes the situation under study in specific locations. This study, however, examines language assistantship programmes in different settings underpinning the analysis with the main features which describe the LA profile. We expect this contribution to shed light on the comparative analysis of the programmes in different countries, but also on the identification of the key terms related to the programme and how they are associated with the educators' competences.

3. Research questions

In consonance with the literature above-mentioned, the main aims of this study are: (1) to compare the main features of LAs in four countries: France, Italy, Spain and Austria, (2) to describe the main roles expected of the LAs in the host countries and (3) to identify the features which best identify the European LA profile. In order to achieve these aims, this study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: What is the LA profile in France, Italy, Spain and Austria?
- RQ2: What are the LA main roles in those countries?
- RQ3: What features identify the language assistants in Europe?

4. Methodology

We have followed a Grounded Theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) as a way to generate theory from data and avoid previous assumptions on the main themes to be observed. In this way, an interpretative qualitative paradigm was used, as qualitative studies are believed to offer an interesting approach that is currently gaining more ground in the educational fields, and which helps to

acknowledge a deeper understanding of the diverse contexts and contingencies in language education (Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2019).

4.1. Study Design

A comparative study was used for the cross-national analysis and a subsequent autocode search to help identify main conceptual categories through the MAXQDA software.

The rationale behind using MAXQDA was to avoid prejudgment in the coding process and identify key words and conceptual categories from a pre-established semantic framework, which is coincident with the coding of main themes and sub-themes.

4.2. Procedure

For the purpose of drawing data, the following steps were taken:

1. Guides addressed to the LAs in France, Italy, Spain and Austria were separately analyzed and compared.
2. From the resulting categories, themes and sub-themes were compared and agreed on.
3. MAXQDA analysis was conducted to (i) generate a list of the most common words or conceptual categories in the guides, and thereupon contrast them with the initial search; (ii) conduct an auto code search with the goal of identifying the most common labels or codes and obtain the emergent themes and sub-themes.

5. Results

In this section, the main results of the cross-national comparative study from the guides are shown to address the research questions

raised. Three main themes emerged from a first analysis of the guidelines: the training provided to the language assistants prior to taking up duties, the roles they usually perform, and the advice they receive from their sending organisations. Out of these three themes, however, only two emergent themes were identified by MAXQDA: Roles and Advice. Both themes were considered as preeminent for the objectives of the study.

As for the features intrinsic to the language assistants' work and profile, they are drawn from the comparative analysis of the guides and the LA's background, so as to provide answers to RQ1 and RQ2. Regarding RQ3, a profile of the European LA is offered by depicting the main characteristics thrown by the software and the guides analysis.

5.1. Main features of language assistants

RQ1: What is the LA profile in France, Italy, Spain and Austria?

After analysing the LA's background (age, nationality and previous training), one initial observation is that they tend to be young people who are studying at university or who have just finished their university studies and are necessarily proficient in the language they intend to support. They may or may not have a degree in education, as this depends on the requirements of each country, and generally, they are not fully qualified teachers. The sending organisations depend on the Ministry of Education of each country, which confers a certain degree of specificity to the programme.

In general, LAs are appointed to work in *foreign language programmes*, although they can also take part in subjects taught

through the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach used in European bilingual education, and very widespread in Spain. LAs come from different backgrounds, and in most cases no formal training is required in order to access the programme. Nevertheless, initial training is thought to improve the quality of the (language) assistantship and to prepare them for later schoolwork and main duties. Provision and support regarding initial training differ depending on the host country, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: *Information for LAs before arrival in the host country*

	France	Italy	Spain	Austria
(Online) induction seminar	No	Yes	No	Yes
Useful documents	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observation period	Yes	No	Yes	No
Pedagogical and methodological information	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Information on educational System	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

The information addressed to the LAs before arrival at their host institution might include the following: induction seminar, useful documents, observation period, pedagogical and methodological advice and information on the educational system of

the host country. As observed, different countries decide on the channels and ways to communicate the initial information.

Once in the host country, an *induction seminar* is offered where the assistants are welcomed and informed of the main features of the language program, including their expected role and main functions. Two of the countries (Italy and Austria) give the participants the possibility to attend this introductory event. In Italy, this is carried out through a meeting from the countries' embassy representatives and education managers from the Language Assistant Programme. In Austria, conversely, this is done through a non obligatory but highly recommended initial induction seminar at the beginning of the academic year³.

By far, one of the strengths of the guides is the *useful documents* provided, catering for LAs' initial needs and providing them with practical information on travel arrangements, how to get started, visas, health insurance, payments, and additional services. In France, the initial information consists of a guide addressed to schools and a "lettre d'information électronique pour les assistants"⁴. The guide offers very specific guidelines on the documents LAs will receive when appointed, types of schools they can work for, visas, budget, etc. In Italy, however, a more simplified (and practical) version is offered to inform about how to fill the application form or contact the school; it also adds instructions related to their salaries,

³ Although these seminars are not included in the national Spanish guide, some regional governments such as Madrid do organise their induction seminars at the beginning of the academic year.

⁴ Newsletter addressed to LAs.

how to communicate absences to school headships, other teachers involved in the programme, and additional services the LAs might require. The Spanish guide covers all the above-mentioned aspects plus a section with Frequently Asked Questions, whilst Austria has the most complete guide as it includes a checklist of steps that prospective LAs need to complete.

As for the initial *observation period*, which is considered beneficial to get used to the classroom teachers' work, school atmosphere, etc., half of the guides (France and Spain) include this as an essential step for language assistants prior to their teaching or educational practices. In France, there is a one / two-week observation period complemented with a rubric the LAs need to complete with their impressions afterwards. In Spain, the observation period is not compulsory, but the participants can attend several language classes as observers to learn to be aware of specific aspects such as students' linguistic level, teaching methodologies, error correction and classroom management, to name just a few. In Italy, observation is not conducted, and in Austria it is not completed in a systematic way, although LAs are highly advised to contact the classroom teacher and try to organise meetings with the rest of the staff they will be working with.

Another relevant aspect is the information LAs receive about the host *educational system* and related *pedagogical* and/or *methodological advice*. The former is covered in all countries except for Italy, and information referred to the latter is considered by all four countries. Italy offers the least information, as it restricts it to some basic hints on teaching materials, school life and grading and relation with other teachers. The French guide includes specific information on not only the different teachers

working at the school and their main functions, but also classroom management, course objectives, along with examples of activities they can use in the class, resources, etc. Finally, the Austrian guide offers a detailed description of classroom issues such as lesson preparation and approaches for mistake correction, to name just a few.

Ultimately, all countries share an interest to furnish LAs with information so they can gain an understanding on how a school is organised and works. School life, however, cannot be separated at this stage from administrative procedures which differ in the four countries and, understandably, draw LAs' initial attention.

5.2. Roles

RQ2: What are the LA main roles in those countries?

This section presents the main roles assumed by LAs and the advice they receive from the host country before they start the year abroad. In order to identify both aspects, we have conducted searches for conceptual categories and for themes and subthemes in MAXQDA.

The first search about conceptual categories and auto code search with MAXQDA yielded the following word combinations, their frequency being shown after each item: mentor teacher (7), home country (6) and other teachers (3).

These word combinations (conceptual categories) are aligned to the main emergent themes and sub-themes, displayed in Table 2 below, and obtained through MAXQDA when searching themes and subthemes.

Table 2: *Coding Framework. Emergent Themes and Sub-themes*

Coding	Emergent themes	Emergent sub-themes
Role	Language and culture ambassadors	Communication Mentor teachers Classroom materials
Advice	Communicate in L1 Talk to other teachers	Collaboration with other teachers Cultural differences

The results disaggregated by country are outlined as follows:

In France, the assistants are thought to *improve students' communicative competence* (mostly in oral communication) and *deepen their knowledge about cultural differences*. For this purpose, they assist the teachers in language lessons and classroom management. Their specific role allows them to encourage students to communicate orally by implementing a playful approach to language learning and discussing socio-cultural topics which might interest students. As it is highlighted in the guide, the assistants bring authenticity to language learning, as they have accents from their country or region, and introduce their culture when participating in the lessons. In this sense, they are advised to try and express themselves using their mother tongue and restrict the use of French to very specific moments.

It is important to note that LAs can either teach in the class if the mentor teacher is present or take split groups to cater for specific needs (different language levels, attention to diversity, etc.) in a nearby classroom. They can also participate in school activities, take part in infant education lessons to introduce their language and culture smoothly, and implement pedagogical projects under the supervision of the mentor teacher.

Their most relevant functions are listed below:

- Practice speaking with students following the mentor teacher's suggestions.
- Participate in the implementation of pedagogical projects.
- Promote the creation of speaking clubs.
- Provide authentic audio-visual materials from their home country and culture.
- Contribute to establishing academic exchanges.
- Teach in collaboration with a teacher from another discipline, or in a club.

In Italy, the role of the assistant is not as specific as in other countries, as it only portrays a figure who *supports and favours foreign language learning* and *reinforces the shared values of European culture*. Apart from that, the Italian guide specifies that LAs usually cooperate with no more than four teachers and no less than two at the host school. When in class, they cannot be left alone with the students, nor take part in academic activities, check exams or grade evaluations. In this respect, their judgement is only advisory and focused on language proficiency during listening, speaking activities and interaction. The guide also advises on the materials they use, which need to be supervised by an appointed teacher. Finally, it is worth mentioning that they are strongly encouraged to behave professionally, showcasing motivation, cooperating with colleagues, and being diligence and reliability highly regarded.

In Spain, their role as *ambassadors portraying both language and cultural issues* into the classroom is stressed. As in the aforementioned cases, LAs cannot teach alone but they always have a mentor teacher to supervise them. They are not responsible for

students' safety, should not deal with behaviour problems alone and/or become socially involved with students. However, those working in Official Schools of Languages, which are more independent institutions by nature, can work on small tasks under department coordination, conduct oral exam preparation, help with exam tasks, and later teach part of a class independently. Foremost, their functions involve supporting classroom teachers to strengthen students' oral skills by using their mother tongue as much as possible. Additional functions involve:

- Practice conversation by topic.
- Present the culture of their country.
- Create materials to facilitate students' learning as directed by the teachers.
- Make recordings in the target language for language teachers to use as examples of native speakers' discourse.
- Contribute to teacher training, if there is available time within their timetable.
- Participate in extracurricular activities (voluntary, although recommended).

In Austria, LAs take a more active role than in the previous countries, since they are considered *members of the teaching body* and are expected, for instance, to bring materials to the school, such as videos from the home country, recipes, tourist brochures, maps, etc. They are also meant to be diligent and sufficiently prepared and pay attention to their supervisors' pedagogical advice and suggestions. As in the rest of the countries, they need to respect the classroom teacher's decisions, show willingness to cooperate with other teachers, and observe rules and regulations at school. They are also encouraged to motivate students to use the foreign language as a vehicle of

communication, and to exploit the materials the teachers have previously worked with to make them suitable for conversation. Through their practical experience and background, they can also complement lessons to expand class contents. They are also welcomed to take part in extracurricular activities and school events. The Austrian guide also offers detailed information on methodological issues, school management and school environment. Regarding methodological issues, it mentions lesson preparation, approaches to providing feedback avoiding an excessive focus on correcting mistakes (focus on form -FoF), and advice on classroom discourse. As for the school management, LAs are expected not only to attend regular meetings, but also to ask for individual meetings with other teachers they will work with, and to be aware of cultural differences and basic pedagogic principles which might differ among countries. As for the relation with the stakeholders, LAs are encouraged to introduce themselves to the classroom teacher as soon as possible upon their arrival, and to make the most of the initial interview with their mentor teacher, as an opportunity to discuss their ideas and interests and present their preparatory work. Finally, LAs, as an active part of the teaching body, are highly respected and considered in school life, and might even have a say in disciplinary issues, among others.

5.3. European profile

RQ3: What features identify the language assistants in Europe?

From the cross-national comparative analysis of the guides and results retrieved from MAXQDA, a profile for a European LA (hereinafter, EuLAs) can be outlined. Typically, EuLAs gather the following features: age undefined (usually young), and graduates

with different educational backgrounds (not necessarily teachers). They are mainly considered language and culture ambassadors of the country they come from, act as helpers of other teachers, and have as the main goal to develop students' communicative competence in the additional language, be it in language or content lessons. EuLAs are appointed for foreign language and bilingual/plurilingual programmes between 12-13 hours a week. Their main features are summarised below:

Table 3: *Personal, Methodological and Practical Information for EuLAs*

Personal	Practical	Methodological
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Undefined age- Graduate from any educational background (not necessarily teacher)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Useful documents about the host country (visa, health insurance, educational country)- Works 12-13 hours a week	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Language and culture ambassadors- Teachers' helpers- Develops students' communicative competence

Other features, although not that salient, which characterise the EuLAs' profile are the following: they cannot act as a supply teacher, be left alone in the class without the classroom teacher, be responsible for marking homework or exams or carry out administrative tasks.

6. Discussion

The current study stems from the recommendations from the first guidelines issued at the beginning of the century, which, as shown by Rowles and Rowles (2005, p.3), were twofold: "to expose learners to real ('authentic') language" and "to aid their understanding of neighbouring countries and cultures". In this respect, along with those initial recommendations, the

findings of this study support the idea of a LA who promotes both culture and language in academic contexts. Notwithstanding, time allocated to cultural and linguistic issues might not be necessarily balanced. This is confirmed by Llaneza (2015) and Bolarín Martínez, Porto Currás & Lova Mellado (2021), who also observe a mismatch between the information provided in the guides and the practical experience in the classroom (p. 513) where the linguistic takes over the cultural part.

One of the most salient findings is the importance of the role of the LAs in the improvement of students' oral communication skills. The overt effort from all stakeholders (students, teachers, mentor teachers, etc.) is observed by Ekmekçi (2015) and Sutherland (2014), among others. This fact is also shown in the findings, both in the retrieval of themes and subthemes and in the conceptual categories analysed through MAXQDA.

Surprisingly, the relationship between LAs and students can only be retrieved from the Austrian guide, which considers language assistants as teaching bodies who can also be responsible for disciplinary issues. The current literature, on the contrary, points out the interpersonal relation between LAs and students highlighting their closeness, especially in some contexts like the Spanish one (Fernández Rivero, 2008; Codó & McDaid, 2019; Bolarín Martínez, Porto Currás & Lova Mellado, 2021). This might be due to the gradually weakened role of teachers as public authority in the last decades (Herrero & Redondo, 2018; Torres, 2016; Pérez-Díaz & Rodríguez, 2013). As pointed out above, the (quite frequent) slight difference in age between LAs and students might also have an impact on their relationship (Bruchet, 2012). Finally, the fact that LAs sometimes are asked to perform menial tasks might also lead

students (at least to a certain extent) to lose some respect for them (Buckingham, 2018).

Interestingly, only the French guide encourages LAs to disseminate the programme in their home country when the academic year is over, in line with da Silva (2020). Social networks also contribute to this aim by making the programme well known and helping recruit potential candidates. Another salient feature of the results is shown in the Austrian guide, which offers more detailed information than the rest of the guides in terms of language correction. As the LAs in Austria are considered members of the teaching body, they are explicitly advised to avoid an excessive focus on form in favour of content. Since in Austria, LAs usually participate both in language and CLIL programmes, this can also explain this fact (the CLIL approach focuses on content more than form (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010).

Overall, the results support the idea of the LA as an ambassador able to find synergies between cultures and countries, and willing to collaborate with colleagues and academic authorities in the host country. The findings corroborate the existing literature on the matter (Bruchet, 2012; Gerena & Ramírez-Verdugo, 2014; Laurent & Rošteková, 2019). Notwithstanding, the combination of these findings and the co-occurrence of conceptual categories and emergent themes and subthemes contradict Codó & McDaid (2019) when they observe that “there might be significant differences between the profiles of many ELAs⁵ and of those of other languages” (p. 222). This discrepancy could be attributed to the caution which must be applied considering the limited number of research on the

⁵ ELAs: English Language Assistants

topic and the consequent inability to transfer the results to wider contexts.

7. Conclusion

This study helped us to profile the language assistant in 21st century Europe. Through the comparison of the four guides and the retrieval of conceptual categories, themes and subthemes through MAXQDA, a common core encompassing the roles of the LAs in the four countries under study is observed. Some other aspects, however, are salient and correspond to just one context. This reveals the heterogeneity of the guides regarding the length, quality and detail of the information presented. Understandably, specific features of each country should be signposted individually, but we consider that a common core on the key roles should be respected.

Since LAs are not expected to be trained teachers, we believe that more information on pedagogical and methodological issues should be provided. This provision would, on the one hand, guide the initial steps in the teaching of the LA's mother tongue to foreign students and, on the other, reduce potential methodological flaws. The study also offers some insight into the excessive zeal for language shown through the different guides, while indications on how to approach culture are either omitted, expressed in general terms (an LA is an ambassador of the country) or reduced, which leads to the promotion and perpetuation of stereotypes or the concept of a single culture. Finally, an issue which is only partially addressed in the guides (and consequently, in this study) is the follow-up of the stay, involving, among others, the dissemination activities monitored by the home countries. All in all, more research is needed to analyse to what extent

more consistency in the European guides would help to better understand the EuLAs' role.

The scope of this study is limited in terms of the number of guides analysed and thus, of the amount of information obtained. In this respect, a possible area for future research would be to take into consideration a wider international context. Notwithstanding, it is hoped that the above-mentioned observations could support decision-makers in the creation of future guidelines to ensure adequate support for students in language learning contexts, and therefore, improve foreign language teaching and plurilingual programmes in Europe.

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