The notion of quality in language education, as in other areas of human activity, is increasingly common yet is elusive in its practical meaning. The international trend has been to focus on quality by specifying clear outcome standards that describe the performance expected of learners at particular levels. Far less attention has been paid to systematically managing the quality of the learning opportunities that learners need to exploit in order to achieve the desired outcomes. One can assume that an understanding of the quality of learning opportunity is central to the process of learning. The challenge for teaching institutions is to develop a frame of action through which current understanding of L2 learning and teaching can be applied and developed. This article proposes a learning opportunity framework on which to base a dialogue about the opportunities that are needed and available in any one context. It proposes three domains of enquiry: theoretical, cultural, and management, and puts forward arguments in favour of learning opportunity standards as the basis for institutional dialogue about quality in language education.

A certain degree of cynicism in reaction to the hype that surrounds the notion of quality in language education is understandable. Yet serious work on what is called quality is undoubtedly associated with genuine concern to ensure good practice. One hears the term used more frequently as English language teaching becomes more business oriented and more accountable to funding agencies. Although the systematic management of learning opportunities might not be a strong feature in all language teaching organisations, the language teaching profession is nonetheless committed to the quality of what it does. Conferences, special interest groups, teaching syndicates, and much of the literature on language learning and teaching are directly associated with an intention to improve teaching. Quality is important, not only for those who are paying for instruction, an issue of value for money, but also for those undertaking the task of designing and implementing a curriculum, an issue of professional achievement.
It is unlikely that applied linguistics can provide a common notion of quality for the language teaching profession as a whole. It is probably also undesirable. There will always be more to understand about the social and cognitive processes of language learning, and the issue of what counts as quality should therefore always be open. Nonetheless, a general curricular framework, within which to discuss and define the quality of a language learning program in a particular context, would have obvious value.

I consider a curriculum an organisation of learning opportunities, or means, for achieving certain outcomes, or ends. This is intended to cover curricula that are organised around detailed objectives as well as curricula that are entirely process oriented, with no pre-specified goals other than increased communicative competence. In such an ends-means formulation, quality can be sought both in the product—the achievement of specific objectives—and in the process—the availability and use of learning opportunities. Objectives have been a concern of agencies that want to ensure quality from the outside (e.g., ministries of education), whereas process has received more attention from those who want to ensure quality from the inside (e.g., teachers). The curriculum is brought to life by the main actors (the learners and the teachers) and is governed therefore by their own beliefs and values, which themselves are subject to influences from the broader social context—from parents, sponsors, institutional management, and professional communities. Talking about quality of outcomes and processes, therefore, means talking more about people and context and less about universal principles of learning.

This article is concerned with how to conceptualise quality of the process in a way that makes it an integral part of the discourse about learning in any one community of practice—typically a teaching institution (see Wenger, 1998, for an explanation of the concept of community of practice). How does one raise awareness of quality learning opportunity among teachers and learners so that the parties can hold productive dialogue? Can institutions set standards of learning opportunity that then become a reference point for developing a learning program? I begin to consider the more complex means-focussed questions by first examining how quality has been aimed at through the specification of ends-focussed outcomes.

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1 The terms objective, outcome, and goal are used variably in the literature. In this article, goal is used generically to mean any learning target, while objective and outcome are used to refer to a goal that is specifically defined, usually so that its attainment can be measured in some way. The term outcome is particularly associated with the concept of standard outcomes—elements of target communicative performance that are measured in a standard way across large numbers of students.
QUALITY THROUGH OUTCOMES

The idea of quality in education has been central to the reform of curricula at the national level. This emphasis has undoubtedly been influenced by business concepts of quality (McKay, 1998). In almost all cases, the attention has been on specifying educational objectives or outcomes: the ends of learning. The general acceptance of outcomes specification as a desirable mechanism for ensuring quality internationally is captured by one of the recent Council of Europe recommendations concerning modern languages:

For all European national and regional languages, develop realistic and valid learning objectives—such as are to be found in “threshold” level type specifications developed by the Council of Europe—so as to ensure quality in language learning and teaching through coherence and transparency of objectives. (cited in Trim, 1998, p. 213)

The emphasis on outcomes or objectives has been a central feature of curriculum development for most of the 20th century. Stenhouse (1975, p. 52) traces it back to a U.S. educationist, Franklin Bobbit, writing just after World War I, and reviews the objectives movement as it developed strength, particularly after World War II with curriculum developers such as Tyler (1949), Taba (1962), and Mager (1962, 1991).

In the past two decades particularly, outcomes-based assessment has become well established in national curricula. Such curricula consist of statements of target student performance, usually within a framework of levels. At each level, learners’ performance is described as a series of tasks that they should be able to perform or competencies that they should be able to demonstrate. (See Brindley, 1998 for an overview of outcome assessment.) Examples abound on the Internet. TESOL’s (1997) ESL Standards for Pre-K–12 Students is perhaps the most well known, providing a specification of three goals and three standards for each goal. The first goal and its three standards are listed below:

Goal 1: To use English to communicate in social settings

Standards for Goal 1

Students will:
1. use English to participate in social interaction
2. interact in, through, and with spoken and written English for personal expression and enjoyment
3. use learning strategies to extend their communicative competence (p. 9)

Each standard has a set of descriptors and a set of sample progress indicators at different levels. The descriptors for Standard 1 above are
• sharing and requesting information
• expressing needs, feelings, and ideas
• using nonverbal communication in social interactions
• getting personal needs met
• engaging in conversations
• conducting transactions (p. 31)

Such a specification provides a general target for teachers to develop more specific objectives and lesson plans that provide opportunities to develop the performance specified. Some national systems prefer a more closely specified and more assessable set of specifications, particularly if they are the basis for assessment and award. The one below for EFL is from the Scottish Qualifications Authority (1994/1995). It specifies one discrete bit of performance: a component of the overall proficiency target at that level.

OUTCOME
Exchange personal information with speakers of the target language

PERFORMANCE CRITERIA
(a) Appropriate forms of address, greeting and leave taking are used clearly and accurately.
(b) Comments and information requested and provided are relevant and clear.
(c) Language is sufficiently clear and accurate to be understood by a sympathetic speaker of the target language despite inaccuracies, faults in intonation, hesitation and possible mother tongue interference.

EVIDENCE REQUIREMENTS
Evidence of oral work in the target language which indicates that the candidate can fulfil all of the performance criteria for the above context. All items listed above under “type of information to be exchanged” must be covered. Evidence may be derived from simulation and role play exercises, conversation with the tutor/trainer/language assistant or naturally occurring situations. (n.p.)

The rest of the specification gives further detail on the purpose of the standard and the type of information that the learner should be able to communicate, and on suggested learning and teaching approaches.

How do such outcome statements contribute to quality? A dominant claim is that educational objectives guide teachers and learners in developing an effective process to achieve the learning specified. This point is expressed clearly by Mager (1991) in relation to curriculum designers:
When clearly defined objectives are lacking, there is no sound basis for the selection or designing of instructional materials, content, or methods. If you don’t know where you are going, it is difficult to select a suitable means for getting there. (p. 5)

and in relation to learners:

They provide students with the means to organise their own efforts toward accomplishment of those objectives. Experience has shown that with clear objectives in view, students at all levels are better able to decide what activities on their part will help them get to where it is important for them to go. (p. 6)

The advantages of goal setting for individual motivation have been reviewed by Dörnyei (1998). He refers to a paper by Locke and Kristof (1996) that itself refers to earlier research (Locke & Latham, 1990) revealing evidence that learners work best toward specific but challenging goals.

In the case of long-lasting, continuous education such as language learning where there is a rather distal goal of task completion (i.e. mastering the L2), the setting of proximal subgoals (e.g. taking tests, passing exams, satisfying learning contracts) may have a powerful motivating function in that they mark progress and provide immediate incentive and feedback. (Dörnyei, 1998, pp. 120–121)

Central to the claim that outcomes thus promote quality by channeling effort in a specific direction is the assessment of how well the learner has achieved the outcomes specified. At one level, the benefit of assessment is for those directly involved:

[A further] important reason for stating objectives sharply has to do with finding out whether the objective has, in fact, been accomplished. Tests or examinations are the mileposts along the road of learning and are supposed to tell instructors and students alike whether they have been successful in achieving the course objectives. (Mager, 1991, pp. 5–6)

At another level, the benefit is for those who pay for the education, whether the individual learner or a sponsor. At this level, there is an inevitable link between outcomes and accountability. Because outcomes provide a standard basis for measuring achievement (e.g., against established norms of achievement in a given period of time), they can be used as the basis for accountability of the individual and even the teaching institution, although the extent to which an institution can be held responsible for the outcomes achieved by a cohort of students is limited by such factors as initial competence, general motivation, attitude, and ability.
The role of outcomes in relation to quality and accountability is summarised in Table 1. The actual contribution of outcomes to quality and accountability depends crucially on the quality of the outcome statements themselves, a quality for which the outcome setters are accountable through public scrutiny and educational research. The criteria for valid outcomes might include that they are

- based on a valid construct of proficiency (on this point, see Brindley, 1998; Cumming, 2001)
- relevant to the needs of learners
- specific enough to guide learner effort
- a challenge to the learners, leading to motivation and effort
- measurable

Outcomes, then, are a way of representing performance goals that can be used to compile a standard expectation of a learner for a particular purpose. The achievement of outcomes requires good process. Good process requires good learning opportunities and good exploitation of those opportunities by individual learners, by individual teachers, and by multiple groups of teachers and learners working together in an institutional context. The focus in the rest of this article is on defining the value of the opportunities that are provided and taken up. In this regard there are, so far, few benchmarks and little standardisation, apart from whatever is considered good professional practice in the teaching/learning context.

### TABLE 1
Quality and Accountability in Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Criteria for quality</th>
<th>Type of accountability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual performance</td>
<td>Individual achieves • against age-group norms • against own previous achievement • within normal time expectations</td>
<td>Accountability of individual to self, parents, employers, and other sponsors for skills and knowledge development through individual certification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggregated performance of a cohort of individuals</td>
<td>Cohorts of students achieve against similar cohorts in terms of spread of levels of achievement • time taken to achieve levels</td>
<td>Accountability of institution for provision of quality learning conditions through comparison of results with other institutions, other factors being equal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
QUALITY IN THE PROCESS

With or without detailed outcome specification, a teacher’s job remains, by definition, means focussed, and effort goes into doing whatever is needed to achieve that target. This orientation to the means is evident in the professional literature, which emphasizes classroom procedures and the interpretation of research for classroom practice, but what processes are in place to provide for the quality of the means? The traditional framework for quality of the means is the method and its prescribed procedures. Numerous methods have claimed to provide the best opportunity for learning a language. In contrast to the fairly prescriptive methods (e.g., the silent way) is the looser, but now mainstream, communicative approach, which encourages extensive involvement in simulated or real communication as the basis for learning. The literature reports on numerous task types and procedures within this approach that claim to promote communication and learning.

As the professional journals burgeon with new crops of articles, the English language teaching materials industry produces textbooks, readers, and other resource books that attempt to attract the interest of teachers and learners through quality of content and presentation. Moreover, models are available for encouraging improvement in teaching practice: reflection on practice, action research, peer observation, and so on. The quality of learning opportunity is therefore well looked after by the profession and, to the extent to which it can be built into textbooks, by materials writers and publishers. Or is it?

The Need to Reconsider Quality

Plenty of dialogue about good practice is evident in journals, conferences, and staff rooms, but a collective and systematic commitment to improving practice in any one context is, in my experience, relatively rare. The quality of the instruction offered in the majority of institutions is dependent solely on the training and experience of the teachers they employ, rather than on a managed procedure for defining and monitoring that quality. One might think that in some ways the status quo will suffice. Learners will learn; teachers will continue to individually improve their practice to a variable extent. Two changes in the latter half of the 20th century, however, might challenge the status quo on achieving quality.

One is the weakening of the concept of a method. Kumaravadivelu (1994) suggests that L2 teaching is in a postmethod condition because of “the widespread dissatisfaction with the conventional concept of method”
He characterises the postmethod as “a search for an alternative to method rather than an alternative method” (p. 29), autonomy for teachers in reflecting on the best way to teach in their own context, and “principled pragmatism,” which he suggests is a perspective that focusses on “how classroom learning can be shaped and managed by teachers as a result of informed teaching and critical appraisal” (p. 31). In a later article, Kumaravadivelu (2001) develops the concept and practicalities of a postmethod pedagogy, emphasising the centrality of local context in generating theory and practice, and allowing for the influence of broader sociopolitical realities on the community of the classroom. Postmethod pedagogy is a compelling idea that emphasises greater judgment from teachers in each context and a better match between the means and the ends.

The second change is the globalisation of education, leading to processes of benchmarking and evaluation to achieve international recognition of quality, whether for purposes of accountability or commerce. In the education world there has been a large growth in international movement by students through educational exchanges or privately funded tuition. In L2 education the work of the Council of Europe (2001) has been the most prominent so far in setting common standards, with the main emphasis being on setting goals that serve the broader needs of language learners, particularly with reference to future employment through the portability of qualifications.

**Three Domains of Quality**

The profession needs to take a new look at quality in a way that creates a stronger framework for teachers to work within—a framework that was once provided through method but is now likely to be a flexible framework assembled to meet the needs and constraints of a particular learning-teaching context. This is not to say that one standard would be developed, so much as a common language for talking about standards. I would suggest that three parallel domains of enquiry need to be undertaken in order to fully understand the issue of quality in any one context. The first is *theoretical* enquiry—a universally oriented enquiry into what conditions need to be met in order for language learning to occur. What does the literature have to say about motivation, input, interaction, feedback effects, and other “ingredients” of language learning? Second, there is *cultural* enquiry—a context-oriented enquiry into current teaching practice in any one context, what practice is valued in any one context and what effect it appears to have, and what the established roles of teachers and learners are. Rote learning, for example, so eschewed in Western approaches, may have a positive effect in...
certain contexts. Third is management enquiry—how can good practice be established and fostered in a particular context so that there is a constant search for improvement in the teaching and learning that takes place? What is feasible in a given situation taking account of resource constraints and human limitations?2

These dimensions of enquiry have resonances with elements used in soft systems methodology. Checkland and Scholes (1990) propose a cultural stream of enquiry, a logical stream of enquiry, and then a reality check between what is constructed to represent reality and the impact of that representation on reality itself. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore a soft systems approach in relation to standards setting in order to change behaviour, but the model Checkland and Scholes propose is a potentially productive one in this context.

THEORETICAL ENQUIRY: LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

In order to address the issue of quality of the means, one needs a common descriptive unit of means that can apply across many different teaching contexts. I would argue that the most generic and useful term is learning opportunity. This term is commonly found in educational literature, typically without comment or explicit definition, although in some instances authors adopt it to represent a key concept.

Definitions of Opportunity

Kumaravadivelu (1994) sets out a list of macrostrategies to guide teachers in developing specific classroom practice. His first macrostrategy is “maximize learning opportunities.”

It is customary to distinguish teaching acts from learning acts, to view teaching as an activity that creates learning opportunities and learning as an activity that utilises those opportunities. If we, as we must, treat classroom activity as a social event jointly constructed by teachers and learners (Breen, 1985) then teachers ought to be both creators of learning opportunities and utilizers of learning opportunities created by learners. (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, p. 33)

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2 The order in which theoretical enquiry and cultural enquiry are addressed is not at issue in this article (they are seen as parallel enquiries), but Freeman and Johnson (1998) suggest that the contextual element, an understanding of belief and practice, is the primary driver of what happens in classrooms, with SLA research playing a secondary role.
The term is also used by Spolsky (1989), who proposes 74 conditions that “are relevant to second language learning” (p. 16). Seventeen of these conditions involve the provision of learning opportunities, for example, No. 57: “Opportunity for analysis: learning a language involves an opportunity to analyse it, consciously or unconsciously, into its constituent parts” (p. 23).

Pearson (1993) explicitly talks about opportunity standards, which, he says,

provide an answer to the question, What evidence is there that you have the opportunity to participate in a curriculum that would help develop the skills, understandings, and dispositions that would enable you (to) meet the standards to which you are being held accountable? (p. 66)

I address the issue of opportunity standards under the discussion of management enquiry, but the point for the moment is that the term learning opportunity is used to refer to access to favourable learning conditions, whether access to learning in general (as in educational opportunity) or, in the sense adopted here, access to specific conditions, such as those required for language learning.

An opportunity for L2 learning, then, might be defined as access to any activity that is likely to lead to an increase in language knowledge or skill. It may be the opportunity to negotiate meaning in a discussion, to read and derive meaning from a printed text, to explore a pattern in language usage, or to get direct feedback on one’s own use of language. Such opportunities are normally available in classrooms in varying quality and quantity. Outside the classroom, more opportunities to practise and use a foreign language are available to more people than ever before—through print, film, satellite television, the Internet, and CD-ROMs. The development of multilingual communities through extensive migration, together with affordable travel to other countries, makes real interaction more accessible.

Opportunity is very far from accomplishment, however. Spolsky (1989) suggests that the social context, attitudes, and motivation combine with personal factors such as age and personality to explain the uptake of opportunities. Only the most independent of learners finds it easy to take up and make effective use of language learning opportunities without some guidance. A language curriculum provides such guidance by organising learning opportunities into a controlled exposure to the language. A slightly modified version of the earlier definition of a curriculum might thus be the organisation and facilitation of learning opportunities (the means) to achieve particular learning outcomes (the ends). The professional task of language teachers is to manage the curriculum and, in particular, to mediate the access to language and language in use by
organising individual and collaborative learning activities, by scaffolding activities, by providing positive feedback and information about language and language learning, and by bridging the gap between public- and private-domain learning (Crabbe, 1993) so that the take-up of the opportunity can be maximised.

**An Opportunity Framework**

A schematic view of opportunity and opportunity take-up is presented in Table 2. In the column labeled *opportunity categories* are types of opportunities based on current views of second language acquisition (SLA). In order to develop full competence in an L2, learners are likely to need to receive extensive input, participate in interaction, produce extensive output, rehearse language forms and communicative routines, get direct or indirect feedback on performance, and have access to knowledge about language and about language learning. Although this list of ingredients for language learning is unlikely to be definitive, each ingredient is well supported by surveys of SLA research (Ellis, 1990, 1994; Lightbown & Spada, 1999).

An indication of the intended coverage of each of these terms is provided in Table 3. The ingredients or opportunities are likely to be accessed by individual learners in various combinations but also to be mediated through collaborative work, as promoted by studies within a sociocultural framework (Swain, 1999; Swain & Lapkin, 1998).

Columns 2, 3, and 4 in Table 2 refer to key factors that might affect the take-up of the opportunities. Whereas the provision of opportunities is a relatively straightforward matter, the greater challenge for teachers is to manage groups of learners in ways that take account of how these factors might be influencing opportunity take-up. The three broad and interrelated factors identified here are ones that are well supported by SLA research: affect (Arnold, 1999; Macintyre & Charos, 1996; Schumann, 1997), style and prior experience of learning (Reid, 1995, 1998; Willing, 1988) and motive (Dörnyei, 2001).

The two final columns represent the action of taking up opportunities on a routine basis and the immediate perceived result of take-up. The perceived result for a learner will range from positive to negative and may encourage learners to seek further opportunities and to use them in the same or different ways. In some cases it may lead them to avoid further opportunities altogether. The bottom row of the table summarises in broad terms the responsibility of the teacher.
## TABLE 2
The Opportunity Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunity categories</th>
<th>Take-up of opportunity affected by personal factors such as</th>
<th>Individual progress dependent on</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affect</td>
<td>Style/experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning opportunity access and use by language learners</td>
<td>Working individually or collaboratively, what range of formal and informal opportunities, can you get to</td>
<td>Are you feeling positive about your language learning? For example,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Teacher responsibility | Providing and raising awareness of opportunities in and outside the classroom | Contributing to a positive classroom and sociocultural environment | Modelling and discussion of diverse learning approaches | Providing incentives to perform, goal structure, positive feedback, awareness of ends-and-means relationships | Helping establish routine learning behaviour | Providing informed feedback and encouraging self-assessment |

*Note. An earlier version of this schematic framework was developed jointly with Jim Dickie. The components of the diagram are similar to the model proposed by Spolsky (1989) but are not derived from it.*
Advantages of Learning Opportunity as a Unit

Overall, I would suggest that the effectiveness of a program lies in the quality of the process represented by this opportunity framework. In discussing quality of the means, the concept of learning opportunity is attractive for several reasons. First, as suggested above, it fits well with an ends-means view of language learning. Of course, this may not be a strong recommendation in the eyes of some because of an association between ends-means and the objectives model of teaching (see Stenhouse, 1975), here referring particularly to a reductionist specification of outcomes as discrete chunks of performance. However, an ends-means view of language learning is not restricted to the objectives model. It applies equally when the end is specified simply as increased language

### TABLE 3
Coverage of the Opportunity Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>Activity covered by the concept</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Input</td>
<td>Listening to and reading monologue or dialogue that can be understood with limited difficulty</td>
<td>Elley (1991); Gass (1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Producing meaningful utterances in written or spoken form, either as a monologue or in the context of interaction</td>
<td>Swain (1995), Swain &amp; Lapkin (1995)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>Speaking and writing with one or more interlocutors in real or simulated communicative situations</td>
<td>Gass (1997); Swain (1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Receiving information relating to one’s own performance as a second language user, which may include indirect feedback (e.g., that one has not been understood) or direct feedback (e.g., that one has made a specific error)</td>
<td>Hyland (2000); Lyster (1998); Mackey &amp; Philp (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehearsal</td>
<td>Any activity designed to improve through deliberate repetition specific aspects of performance, including experimentation with pronunciation, memorisation of words or word patterns, and repeated role play of a piece of communication</td>
<td>Nation (2001); Ortega (1999); Willis &amp; Willis (1987)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language understanding</td>
<td>Any conscious attention to language that is intended to lead to an ability to explain or describe or gloss an aspect of grammar or sociolinguistic conventions</td>
<td>Doughty &amp; Williams (1998); Long &amp; Robinson (1998); Spada (1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning understanding</td>
<td>Any conscious attention to one’s own language learning that is intended to lead to a better metacognitive control over that learning, which would include a detailed representation of the task of language learning, an analysis of the difficulties encountered and an awareness of strategies to overcome the difficulties and achieve the task</td>
<td>Benson (2001); Wenden (1998)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
competence—the aim of the Bangalore project, for example (Prabhu, 1987). The concept of learning opportunity enables course designers to think and talk more generically about the means of reaching selected outcomes. Course designers can, for example, ask what input opportunities or interaction opportunities learners are likely to need and how feedback opportunities will be built in, rather than locking in too early instructional categories such as task or group work or some favourite classroom activity that has “always worked well.” This would seem to suggest a more creative, problem-solving approach to course design, working from principles. Moreover, an ends-means frame that explores learning opportunities to achieve established goals facilitates learner engagement in the process, principally through a dialogue about language learning as a personal problem-solving activity.

A second advantage of the term opportunity is that it embraces all types of learning activity. It does not favour one approach or method over another, thus allowing common ground for discussion about choices made and an exploration of the relationships between opportunity categories. For example, different teachers will place a different value on opportunities to develop an explicit understanding of grammar in contrast to opportunities to actually deploy grammatical patterns in communication. Using the term learning opportunity allows the options to be discussed without predetermining their value in the local context.

Third, the term enables the easy separation of the availability of the opportunities from the take-up of the opportunities. This is, of course, a crucial difference that emphasises the personal and strategic variability of language learning. Providing or seeking out highly regarded opportunities is a public and easily reportable thing; the use of those opportunities tends to be private and less easily reported. One cannot assume that specific opportunities will elicit the same response from all learners.

Finally, learning opportunity is a term that is neutral as to who seeks or provides the opportunities, unlike terms such as instruction or delivery, and as to where those opportunities might be available (outside and inside the classroom). This aspect of the concept allows a teacher to consider the learner’s role in seeking opportunities and the teacher’s role in encouraging that opportunity seeking. In short, the notion of opportunity is compatible with the goal of supporting and fostering learner autonomy within institutional curricula (Benson, 2001; Crabbe, 1993).

The concept of learning opportunity is based on a view of language learning as universal, recognising individual differences in the take-up of the opportunities available. However, the presentation and mediation of the opportunity is likely to be heavily influenced by the local context of learning. Different opportunities are likely to be valued according to individual and group beliefs about language learning and the expecta-
tions of classroom activity. We are not, therefore, in a position to assign universal value to all opportunities. Course designers can call on research to show positive indications for particular opportunities and the ways in which they are used, but beyond this, they have to rely on local practitioners to search for quality through evaluation and through professional dialogue about learning quality. This point brings me to the cultural enquiry.

CULTURAL ENQUIRY: VALUES AND ROLES

The cultural enquiry seeks to understand the specific contexts in which language learning and teaching are taking place. The understanding may stretch from an understanding of large-scale cultural differences in the ways in which people are personally motivated (Munro, Schumaker, & Carr, 1997) to an understanding of cultural differences in the roles and values that are dominant in particular institutions. The concept of values in culture is expressed by Schwartz (1997):

Aspects of culture can be seen by an outside observer, but their meaning remains unclear until the observer comes to understand how the members of a group evaluate particular practices, symbols, rituals and figures. That is, the heart of culture is formed by values—what people believe is good or bad, what they think should or should not be done, what they hold as desirable or undesirable.

Schwartz is writing about culture in general, but it is not difficult to apply his construction of culture to language classrooms, which are specific domains in which behaviour can be described with reference not only to local cultural patterns (Coleman, 1996) but also to international educational patterns (Holliday, 1999). Each teaching/learning community has its own practice, ritualistic or otherwise, and forces for and against change. Within each community there will be majority value holders and dissenters and an interplay between the local practice and practice that is promoted on the international circuit. Moreover, the dynamic nature of individual and community practice and beliefs means that both values and practice will be subject to change.

What does this apparent complexity mean for defining quality in concrete terms and for promoting change toward better practice? It is clear that a one-off outsider ethnographic account of a teaching/learning culture is less useful than an insider engagement with the culture through continual negotiation of what a common perspective of quality is. It is for this reason perhaps that stakeholder participation and continuous improvement are key elements of the management system
known as Total Quality Management and can be found in such language program evaluation models as that proposed by Mackay, Wellesley, Tasman, and Bazergan (1998).

The principal task of cultural enquiry, then, is to understand current language learning and teaching practices and the values and beliefs that underlie those practices. There are a number of ways to undertake such enquiry. An opportunity framework, such as that provided in Table 2 above, is one starting point in exploring perceptions of best practice. It has the advantage of starting from a theoretical view of language learning and eliciting teacher perceptions about extensive reading, interaction, the roles and types of feedback, and so on. Another starting point might be elements of current classroom practice, including teaching materials and teacher tasks like marking assignments, setting homework, and introducing new tasks. These familiar elements can be explored in order to establish common perceptions of good practice, which are then measured against theoretical conditions for learning. Whatever the starting point, the product will be an initial list of best practices as agreed by a group of teachers and referred as far as possible to authoritative research.

There is still some way to go from such an aggregated description of individual good practice to collective good practice in action. Teachers’ perceptions of quality of opportunity are input into a process that needs to

• take account of such values and beliefs
• develop some consensus through negotiation and reference to theoretical and empirical enquiry
• establish a means to operationalise the resulting accepted view of quality and evaluate it in an institutional context

The process is essentially one of management.

**MANAGEMENT ENQUIRY**

Defining quality requires an initial understanding of theoretical perspectives on language learning and the cultural context in which language teaching and learning are taking place. Operationalising and

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3 Quality has long been a concern in the business world, represented best by the quality management standards defined by the International Standards Organisation (ISO). An ISO definition of Total Quality Management is reported by Dale (1999) as a “management approach of an organisation, centred on quality, based on the participation of all its members and aiming at long term success through customer satisfaction, and benefits to all members of the organisation and to society” (p. 3).
achieving quality is by far the most demanding part of the endeavour and is considered a task of management. The term management here is used in a broad sense to mean the organisation of collective activity (although it could also include individual activity) directed toward specific goals and outcomes.

The aim is to set up a common set of expectations as to what constitutes quality in any one teaching context and to explore ways of meeting those expectations. In doing this, one does not want to discourage new directions or open-ended experimentation by individual teachers and learners. Divergence can be professionally engaging and productive, and is a characteristic that is valued highly in many contexts. Rather, what is sought is a statement on what colleagues can all agree constitutes good practice in providing learning opportunities and facilitating their take-up. Such a statement in written form would provide a common reference point both for practice and for debate about practice.

**An Example: TESOL Standards Framework**

A dominant framework for describing such expectations is a standards framework. A recent example of this work can be found in a TESOL publication (2000) in which a set of quality indicators are proposed. The indicators cover a number of dimensions of program design and management: planning; curriculum (in the sense of course specifications); instruction (learning activities); recruitment, intake, and orientation; retention and transition; assessment and learner gains; staffing, professional development, and staff evaluation; and support services. An example of a standard under the instruction category is presented in Figure 1, with the indicator being the desirable practice, the measure being the way in which the practice can be observed, and the standard being the measurable degree to which the indicator should be present. The authors emphasise that these standards are not meant to be prescriptive for all classrooms and recommend a select-and-adapt approach rather than simple adoption.

Standards such as these identify received wisdom about the quality of language programs. They attempt to move from the individual items of advice on good practice to a generic statement of quality with a means of measuring whether or not the specified practice (the indicator) has been achieved. At this point some educators are likely to throw up their hands in horror at the idea of capturing, guiding, or evaluating professional behaviour in this apparently constrained way.
Why Quality Standards?

Why might a set of such standards be considered useful? First, from a teacher’s point of view, standards can provide a common reference point that enables teaching teams to clarify and reconcile their beliefs about language learning and teaching and to discuss the conditions under which their learners are most likely to achieve the goals. The goal of the professional discussion would be to adopt, modify, or add standards that would be the basis for the course design and would be owned by everyone concerned. As such, they are not so much constraints on new practice as they are a potential catalyst for change.

Second, a statement of standards would provide a basis for internal and external evaluation that would represent what the institution intended to provide. It is common practice for internal evaluation to be based on customer satisfaction and for external evaluation to be based on the results achieved, with variable attention to the process. Working from a set of explicit opportunity standards seems to attend to the process side of the picture in a transparent way.

The third advantage of opportunity standards is that they would provide the basis for international dialogue about what constitutes a desirable program. They would be the basis, for example, for comparing programs internationally when student exchanges are being discussed and for advertising what is on offer in an attempt to set up realistic expectations. They would also provide the basis for problem solving in international teacher education programs.

**FIGURE 1**
Sample TESOL Adult Education Program Standard

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Performance standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>III. INSTRUCTION</td>
<td>Interactive tasks or a variety of grouping strategies are evidenced by classroom observation, teacher logs, written lesson plans, student journals, and/or directions related to the use of classroom materials.</td>
<td>During classroom observations, the majority of the students are actively engaged in a task that cannot be completed without appropriate communication. A teacher’s log or lesson plans show evidence of communicative pair work or small group work for ________% of class time each day.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: TESOL (2000, p. 26).*
Problems With Quality Standards

A number of objections might be raised about the prospect of setting such standards. The first is the danger of oversimplifying the conditions required for language learning by reducing them to a set of discrete points. The opportunities and the take-up of opportunities are a undoubtedly complex affair, yet it is not clear that a reductionist approach to learning opportunities is counterproductive to promoting good practice. The evidence either way is more likely to come from an actual implementation than from logical argument. The whole is indeed more than the sum of the parts, but the specification of some of the parts does not necessarily mean a loss of the whole picture.

Secondly, setting standards might be realized as a prescriptive and confining exercise rather than as encouraging, creative, and problem solving. This objection is particularly salient in the evaluation of courses—if standards become a tool for evaluating, then this may encourage a trivialisation of the value of the teaching/learning process by only quantifying the provision of predetermined opportunities. Such a reductionism would indeed be a problem because it would fail to take account of the dynamics of running programs.

A third objection to setting opportunity standards is that it may bypass the students’ preferences with regard to the means by which they learn the language. Standards could be written in this way, but there is no reason why they should be. Even if a set of standards were to be selected before a particular cohort of students joined a program, that does not preclude negotiation about learning opportunities. On the contrary, a list of opportunities would seem to be a very good basis from which to start negotiation. The issue of learner participation in the problem-solving process of learning is a question of willingness rather than something that is precluded by documentation.

Sample Opportunity Standards

What would a set of standards based on the opportunity framework look like? Table 4 provides a set of illustrative standards relating to potential learning opportunities for developing an understanding about language learning (one of the categories of opportunities listed in Table 2), and in particular an understanding of how to diagnose difficulties in learning and communication and make a strategic response to them. A set of standards of this kind is of interest to those programs that aim at fostering learner autonomy.

Table 4 provides a sample standard for each of the broad teacher
TABLE 4
Sample Opportunity Standards for Raising Awareness About Language Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher responsibility</th>
<th>Providing and raising awareness of opportunities in classroom and outside</th>
<th>Contributing to positive classroom and sociocultural environment</th>
<th>Modelling and discussing diverse learning approaches</th>
<th>Providing incentives to perform, goal structure, positive feedback, awareness of ends-and-means relationships</th>
<th>Helping establish routine learning behaviour</th>
<th>Providing informed feedback and encouraging self-assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example of standard (developed through professional discussion, taking into account international and local research, values, and beliefs)</td>
<td>Learners will be provided with at least 10 different case studies of learning or communication difficulties experienced by learners together with potential strategies to deal with those difficulties.</td>
<td>Learners will be positively encouraged to reflect with one another and the teacher on task-related difficulties that they experience in learning and communicating.</td>
<td>For each task that is undertaken in the class, ways of enhancing learning from the task will be modelled, with input from students and teachers.</td>
<td>The goals of all language learning tasks will be made clear with a link between the activity and the goal and how in-class activities might be replicated or extended out of class.</td>
<td>Regular reflection on the purpose and potential of different learning activities will be encouraged.</td>
<td>Learners will be encouraged to provide their own evaluation of how well specific strategies worked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale (representing a contestable claim about language learning opportunities)</td>
<td>Exploring the dimensions of learning and communication difficulties leads to better problem representation and better solutions and a better understanding of exploiting learning opportunities.</td>
<td>The sharing of problem solving about learning leads to reassurance that problems are often shared by others. Collective problem solving is a productive process.</td>
<td>Variable responses to the challenges of learning and communication encourage learners to evaluate and experiment with solutions.</td>
<td>Understanding the goals of tasks and how they might be achieved leads to a greater motivation and ability to undertake the tasks both in class and out of class.</td>
<td>Regularly asking the question “What is the purpose and potential of this activity?” will encourage a habit of reflecting on learning and evaluating its effectiveness.</td>
<td>Self-evaluation of strategic behaviour encourages more effective strategic planning for continued language learning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
responsibilities in Table 2. The stated rationale for each standard effectively constitutes a claim about language learning—a claim that is open to investigation through action research or with reference to the research literature. The rationale is an important component in the standard because it represents a claim and adds an element of enquiry that might be met in the form of action research. For example, the rationale for the first standard, on case studies of difficulties, claims a causal link between the ability to represent a problem or difficulty in learning and communication and the ability to find a solution. This rationale is based on general problem-solving theory (e.g., Anderson, 1995, chapter 8; Newell & Simon, 1972). The fact of stating it in this way raises a claim that can be discussed and investigated by teachers through classroom observation.

Standards-Setting Issues

The sample standards in Table 4 raise several issues about setting opportunity standards. Obviously, a number of standards such as these cannot capture every possible learning opportunity. Opportunity standards cannot, therefore, be seen as limiting. What they do is capture opportunity targets agreed by an institution or a group of teachers and the learners, together with an agreed minimum strategy for achieving those targets. Stating expectations in this way seems a good starting point in establishing the nature of the program without preempting further creative ways of providing learning opportunities. New targets and new ways of achieving targets would in time also be incorporated as standards into a bank of standards that would be available to select from and work with for a particular course. Moreover, each set of standards would be the basis for discussion and reflection, when appropriate, by the students, thus adding further value to their understanding of language learning.

A second point is that drawing up such standards requires a construction of the teaching/learning process that will not be universally shared. There is likely to be dissonance in views of what it takes to learn a language—dissonance between local practice and the international literature, for example, or dissonance within groups of teachers or between learners and teachers. A degree of dissonance is almost always present in a teaching/learning situation. A reasonable claim for the process of defining opportunity standards is that any dissonance between the practice valued by individual teachers and that valued by others is more likely to be brought into the open and negotiated to a satisfactory conclusion than if the dissonance is simply ignored.

A third question is how specific one would want to be in setting up such standards. I think the answer is, as specific as one needs to be in any
one context. In an institution that wants only to draw up the broadest parameters and leave the rest to the creativity of the teachers, the opportunity standards may be rather loosely specified (e.g., regular discussion of communication difficulties experienced). In a context where those with responsibility for the curriculum want greater control over specifying what counts as quality, one would expect greater specificity (e.g., “10 different case studies of communication difficulties of the following types will be provided . . .”). The effect of greater or lesser specification can be monitored.

Finally, standards are, by their nature, measurable. Without a measure that reasonably reliably shows that a standard has been met, there is no point in drawing up standards. The simplest way to measure is to count. The TESOL examples in Figure 1 have a quantitative measure, as does the first standard in Table 4. The obvious danger in this, particularly if the standards are being used for course evaluation, is that the numbers may receive greater attention than the qualitative intention behind the standard. A learning opportunity standard is a statement of valued practice and of a collegial expectation that teachers will attempt to provide that opportunity for their learners. A qualitative measure is therefore more likely to take account of the essential intention of the standard and, in addition, address the issue of whether the opportunity is being taken up. For example, in the discussion of the 10 case studies of communication difficulty in Table 4, one might want to add that the case studies should be relevant and that the learners should be engaged in the case studies. Again, such measurement links well with action research, peer observation, and other means of professional development.

**Evaluation of Standards**

The use of standards as a program management tool will raise the question of how to evaluate whether or not the use of opportunity standards is effective in bringing about a change in quality. On the basis of the arguments put forward above, one would want to see evidence of some or all of the following when a program adopts a set of such standards:

- participation by teachers in negotiating what counts as good practice, selecting standards and committing to them, a criterion that draws on the cultural element that is essential in setting the standards in the first place
- evidence of meaningfulness of standards for learners, thus facilitating negotiation of opportunities between teachers and learners and enhanced learner understanding of language learning
• evidence of the standards being realised in classroom practice over a given period of time
• institutional dialogue about the quality of teaching and learning
• support for processes of peer review, action research, and so on to evaluate the standards themselves

Such criteria would form a basis for evaluating how effective the use of opportunity standards has been in specific teaching contexts.

**FINAL COMMENT**

This article has attempted to frame language teaching in a way that is intended to enhance the quality of learning opportunity in a program in several ways. First, a framework of learning opportunity standards links practice and understanding (theoretical or otherwise) by encouraging teachers and learners to work from basic principles rather than fixed routines as provided by materials or unanalysed tasks. Fixed routines have their value, but a thinking teacher or learner is primarily a problem solver following a heuristic path to identify the appropriate learning opportunities to reach the intended learning goals.

Second, such a framework is intended to foster discussion about quality. The very fact that a group of teachers sets about selecting a number of opportunity standards for their program raises the questions of how they define and implement good learning opportunities and what the literature has to say about learning. In this way, standards emphasise the institutional role in promoting quality beyond the individual teacher’s role. At the same time, they can be an instrument for developing the learner’s role by providing a reference point for learners to talk about learning. Dialogue about learning works toward the capacity to self-direct. A framework of opportunities demystifies language learning by exposing the underlying processes aimed at by tasks and materials. Opportunity standards as goals are as relevant to the learners as they are to teachers.

Third, an opportunity framework provides a proactive basis for evaluation by stating the salient features of program quality from the beginning. It does not claim that all quality features of a program can be described—an unobtainable and undesirable goal—but it provides a frame of action that is at least a safety net and at best a productive tool for program development.

Quality is comparative by its nature. Working with quality targets that have been adopted by a teaching team implies that current practice is being critically evaluated and compared with a notion of improved practice. Improved practice may be derived from creative thinking, or it
may be founded on exposure to ideas from other programs, other institutions, or other countries. This view of quality as something that is defined, owned, and developed locally, with input from research on teaching and learning, is to be distinguished from a view of quality that is defined and managed entirely through external specification. Accountability can nevertheless be achieved through a combination of student achievement, student satisfaction, and evidence of a strong quality management and evaluation system in place. Internally set opportunity standards provide a partial basis for this system. Moreover, they allow for some degree of common currency for any comparative processes, such as benchmarking, that might be deemed useful.

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