

**DIDATTICA DELLE LINGUE STRANIERE,**

**TESTING E**

**MULTIMEDIALITÀ**

**Grafica copertina: Vanessa Bonazzi**

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*Didattica delle lingue straniere, testing e multimedialità*

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## WHICH ENGLISH FOR A MODERN LANGUAGES FACULTY?

DAVID NEWBOLD

### *Background: the Common European Framework and the growth of certification*

In 1976 the Council of Europe, an association of European states committed to the principles of freedom and the safeguarding of Europe's cultural heritage, published a description of language skills needed to 'survive' in a foreign language (EK, VAN 1976). Since then, the Council of Europe has gone on to describe five other levels of foreign language proficiency (two of them below 'threshold', and three above) to complete a six level 'framework', *The Common European Framework of Reference*, (COUNCIL OF EUROPE 1998). This framework has been adopted by educational policy makers, curriculum designers and testing bodies as providing an indication of the content to include in language programmes, course books and tests. In Italy, the education ministry in the 1999 document *Progetto Lingue 2000* hypothesizes exit levels from each school cycle which are directly linked to the Framework (A1 after *scuola elementare* (primary school), A2 at the end of *scuola media* (middle school), and B1/B2 after the *biennio* (initial two year cycle) of the *scuola superiore* (upper secondary school). Internationally, testing agencies have introduced new tests which correspond to Framework levels, such as the Trinity Integrated Skills in English suite (ISE), or calibrated existing exams, such as the Cambridge *First Certificate* and *Proficiency* exams to the Framework.

One of the main features of the Framework is the re-classification of language skills as 'reception', 'production', and 'interaction'. This replaces the familiar 'four skills' division (speaking, listening, reading and writing) dear to advocates of the communicative approach from the 1970s. *Interaction* counts for about 60 per cent of the activities described, testifying

to the simple truth that most language skills do not occur in isolation: speakers usually have listeners who speak in their turn, a writing skill such as note-taking may be a response to reading or listening, and so on. A second interesting feature of the Framework is the recognition of *Mediation* as a basic language skill. *Mediation* between languages includes translation and interpretation.

In universities – both in Italy and elsewhere – the Framework has been perceived as offering a useful resource for language courses, and, above all, through the growth of Framework-related certification issued by internationally recognized agencies, as a guarantee of achievement. In many university faculties in Italy international certification provides a student with credits, allowing language teachers to work with smaller numbers of students on general language courses and to concentrate on the specific (i.e. subject-related) language needs of the faculty. The University of Venice (Ca' Foscari) recognizes language credits in the faculties of economics, science, and arts, provided the certification is recent.

#### *Language teaching in language faculties: a special case?*

In modern language faculties, and in particular in the context of the study of foreign literature, the language needs of students seem to require a different kind of appraisal. Recognition of language credits from external bodies in a language faculty would be paradoxical (except, perhaps, to grade students for courses); language courses in the foreign language and literature department are a central focus of study, rather than a peripheral (albeit important) component perceived in functional terms.

Students have to invest a lot of time in learning the language, and are required to reach high levels of proficiency. But the harnessing of language to literature in end of year exams in the *vecchio ordinamento* (pre-reform programmes) may have limited, or at least fuzzed, the objectives of language courses. In many universities the primary focuses for language courses in literature departments have been knowledge of the formal systems of the language (especially grammar) and acquisition of academic skills (such as effective reading and critical writing). These are seen as pre-requisites for

actual tasks related to literature studies, such as textual analysis or writing a dissertation.

In this way, a number of the receptive and productive skills listed in the Framework are covered, but interactive skills get scant attention. Admittedly, this is also due to contingent factors: English courses, especially in larger universities, are over subscribed, making teacher-student interaction impracticable. English, in this sense, is a victim of its own success.

#### *Il nuovo ordinamento: a change in focus*

One of the principle features of the reform of the Italian university system is the adoption of a modular approach, a *module* comprising a teaching input or *insegnamento* (e.g. 25 hours) and a related number of hours allocated to self-study. The teaching input for languages has acquired a two-tier structure: each *insegnamento* is backed up by the *esercitazioni* (lessons) of the mother tongue teacher (CEL), in a proportion decided on by the faculty, on the basis of available resources. In this way, language teaching has acquired a sort of operational autonomy, no longer one of the components of a language and literature course. This new-found status has brought the language into clearer focus for students, but it brings with it questions which require answers. These include: *What language skills should a graduate in English language and literature have? What should be the content of modules and CEL language courses, and how can they complement each other? How can better use be made of resources, especially modern technology? And, not least, What, if any, should be the role of the Framework and international certification?*

#### *The student questionnaire*

To get a student perspective on the language needs of graduates, and on what sort of language courses might be appropriate in the context of the reform, 4<sup>th</sup> year students of English (one of the last groups to go through the *vecchio ordinamento*) at the Department of European and Postcolonial Linguistic and Literary Studies at the University of Venice (Ca' Foscari) were asked in

October 2002 to fill in a questionnaire covering aspects of CEL/lettori language courses they had followed over the past years.

Thirty-seven students, all of them regular attenders, completed the questionnaire. They were asked to spend at least half an hour doing so. The questionnaire (see Appendix) invited them to assess their own levels of proficiency and to identify their strong and weak points, to provide feedback on language courses attended, and to make suggestions about how language courses could be improved by focusing on aspects such as language needs, class sizes, materials used by teachers, the use of new technologies, and the possible role of international certification. Students were also asked to make judgements about the validity and reliability of the language exams they had taken.

#### *Students' self-assessments*

Students were asked to rate their overall level of proficiency against the six broad bands of the Framework, which were also defined in traditional terms ('lower intermediate', 'upper intermediate', 'advanced', etc.) for those students unfamiliar with the Framework (Question 1). 76% rated themselves at B2 (higher intermediate), 13% at C1 (advanced) and 11% at B1 (lower intermediate) – the minimum exit level envisaged from secondary education. Yet the vast majority of students (97%) believed that a graduate in English literature should reach at least C1 (Q 2), while 24% thought C2 ('near native speaker'), the highest band, an appropriate objective.

How should we interpret the disparity? Are students' self-assessments inaccurate, or their expectations unrealistic? Research suggests that university students, perhaps more than other subjects, produce reliable self-assessments which correlate well with other forms of assessment such as tests and teacher evaluations (LEBLANC and PAINCHAUD 1985; TUDOR and NIVELLES 1991). But Bachman and Palmer (1989) found that language users are more aware of the areas in which they have difficulty than those they find easy. Provision was made in the questionnaire (Q 5 and 6) for students to identify these areas: grammar (62%) came top of the list of perceived strengths, whereas speaking was recognized by 65% as their main weak point. The next most frequently mentioned weak point was writing (16%),

whereas other strengths (such as reading, listening, translating, writing, vocabulary learning and speaking) were identified by at most only two students (5%).

Finally, although only one student acknowledged (Q 3) she had an international qualification (an unspecified grade at Trinity ESOL), a resounding 97% thought (Q 4) that language courses should be linked to specified internationally recognized levels.

#### *Students' feedback on courses*

The response to the question: "How have language courses at the university contributed to the development of your language skills?" (Q 7) ranged from 'In no way' (a lone voice) to 'a lot'. Most students acknowledged progress of some sort, usually in grammar, reading, writing or translation skills, and occasionally enabling skills (e.g. *I have learnt to read more quickly*). However, all students had comments to make about how courses could have been improved (Q 8). The most common criticism was lack of student-teacher and student-student interaction in classes. "More interaction", "more conversation", "more discussion between students" were typical comments. One student's desperate remark had faint echoes of Hamlet's reply to Polonius: "speaking, speaking, speaking".

But students also recognized that contingent factors – usually overcrowded classes – were largely responsible for the teacher controlled 'chalk and talk' lessons they were familiar with. 92% thought (Q 14) that the maximum class size in which effective interaction can take place was twenty or fewer; 76% thought the optimal number was fifteen or fewer. But throughout their university career class sizes are likely to have averaged nearer fifty, while in larger universities language classes of over one hundred are not uncommon.

#### *Testing*

In the light of self-assessments and feedback on courses, the fact that most students thought language exams they had taken (Q 9) "tested the right

things" (73%), "gave accurate results" (70%) and "had a positive effect on learning" (65%) may seem surprising, especially the last of these. The three questions were intended to provide student feedback on test validity, reliability, and backwash – three of the qualities that are needed to make a good test (HUGHES 1989). In making positive judgements, students may have been viewing tests solely in relation to the courses, as appropriate ways of measuring achievement, rather than for any intrinsic qualities. But where students had comments to make, they were invariably pertinent, and usually concerned validity and backwash, rather than reliability, which in grammar-based tests tends to be high: "too much importance given to errors", "not enough information about the exam", "sometimes not even native speakers pass the exam", "results should take into account progress made by individuals" and "learning is too exam centred".

#### *What students would include in a 3-year degree course*

The final part of the questionnaire required students to say what basic and specialist knowledge a graduate of a three-year degree course in Language and Culture in the *nuovo ordinamento* should have (Qs 11, 12) and to comment on materials which could be used in classes (Q 13), on class sizes (Q 14, see above) and on the use of new technology (Q 15).

All students identified speaking as an essential component. This was followed by writing (92%), listening (84%) and reading (76%), with reading rating lower than the others, possibly because it is viewed as a skill which can be developed through self-study. As for formal knowledge, the grammar system (76%) was seen as more important than the sound system (54%).

As for identifying possible specialist components, a great variety of suggestions were made. Apart from the examples of specialist knowledge (contemporary varieties of English) and specialist skills (how to write a critical essay) given in the questionnaire, which were frequently quoted, students identified genre analysis, register, cultural and historical aspects, pronunciation, translation into and from English, speaking in English about literature, formal and informal letter writing, commercial English and the language of information technology as appropriate objects of study. Less frequently, specific real-life skills were requested, such as 'speaking in

public: organizing a meeting and introducing a topic'. Perhaps the most succinct reply came from the student who wrote "a graduate should be able to speak properly and write in good English".

On materials used by teachers, there was a clear preference for *ad hoc* materials produced by teachers (89%) over course books (41%), while authentic materials were considered important by 78%. Perhaps predictably students also thought more use should be made of modern technology, with only two (5%) disagreeing. They gave reasons to justify their opinions, e.g. "modern technology is more interactive than books", "it gives more help with listening", "the Internet can help students get closer to English", or just "to diversify the routine". However, there was recognition of problems, whether contingent ("Yes, but the rooms are often not suitable") or intrinsic, related to the quality of the product – in short, technology not for the sake of technology but as a genuine aid to learning.

#### *Students responses – a summary*

One of the features of students' responses is the degree of consensus on most issues: levels of proficiency, class sizes, the use of technology, and especially language needs. The group is never split down the middle. This in itself could be a reason for paying careful attention to their perceived needs. It is also worth noting that, although the sample is a small one from a medium-sized university, there is no reason for supposing that responses would be dissimilar in other universities.

The overriding concern of students is that language courses should do more to help them develop speaking skills. Some responses reflect concern that speaking skills are a pre-requisite for literature exams, or that there might be a tacit assumption that they should be acquired outside the university, for example in language schools or on exchange programmes: "Many students can't go on Erasmus, but this must not become a handicap" one person wrote.

The need is linked to methodology, which is seen as being insufficiently interactive, a fact due in turn to the large number of students following courses. *Interaction*, as we have seen, is the primary type of language use

identified in the Framework. Is it possible to include interaction in a language teaching model for the *nuovo ordinamento*?

### *The need for a model*

What does it mean to know a language? This question, the driving force behind current (Chomskyan) research in linguistics, is of fundamental importance to the foreign language course designer. All language teachers recognize that there is a difference between knowledge of the formal systems of the language (phonology, morphosyntax) and the ability to use the language. Chomsky's initial (1965) distinction between *competence* (internalized knowledge of the language) and *performance* (limited by errors, lapses, distractions, etc) provided useful insights, but was rejected by curriculum planners because, by referring only to psychological constraints in performance, it did not take into account social interaction. It was left to the sociolinguist Hymes (1972) to develop the notion of *communicative competence*, or appropriate language use in context, which opened the gates to the communicative language courses which began to appear from the late 1970s.

It is beyond the scope of this article to examine the underlying models of communicative competence which were developed, notably in the 1980s (e.g. BACHMAN and PALMER 1982, SAVIGNON 1983). But it is worth noting that the communicative language courses which they spawned, innovative and motivating though they may have been for many users, rarely found their way into the modern language departments of universities. This is not because functional language was rejected, but other factors, such as inappropriate content, or organisational constraints imposed by activities, limited their appeal to teachers. University courses continued to focus on formal knowledge in their attention to accuracy, error analysis, and a product approach to writing. The special case of the modern languages department could be invoked: many graduates would become language professionals, perhaps teachers, and they would need the tools to describe the language.

However, the *nuovo ordinamento*, in its two-pronged approach to language teaching through modules and CEL *esercitazioni*, offers the chance to adopt a dual focus to language teaching and learning: descriptive and

functional. In such an organization, the input of modules could be primarily descriptive, allowing CEL language courses to focus on developing functional skills. There is an attractive simplicity to this, but in practice it would be necessary to plan for horizontal as well as vertical (year to year) integration to ensure that modules and *esercitazioni* were complementary. In short, an operational model is needed.

### *Content and organisation of language courses*

Although content of modules will vary greatly from one university to another, and be related to the interests and competencies of those who teach them, it is possible to envisage core topics of which morphosyntax, the sound system, language varieties, discourse analysis, stylistics, the lexicon (e.g. in relation to corpora studies), and language change, are obvious candidates. Other courses may take a more historical or cultural approach.

When planning the more functional courses envisaged above (*esercitazioni*), however, and as the response in the questionnaire indicates, class size is of paramount importance and ideally should be known before drawing up a syllabus. A rational distribution of hours and students could mean larger classes for some types of lesson, and smaller classes (preferably with an upper limit of twenty) for others. The key to this sort of breakdown could lie in the type of interaction anticipated. After all, if we are to believe Ellis (1985), successful language learning probably depends as much on the type of interaction that takes place in the classroom as on the method used. Thus a process-orientated lesson in writing skills is likely to be more demanding on teacher-student interaction (and class sizes be smaller as a result) than a product-orientated approach in which the teacher presents a model to students or examines errors. Interaction between students in English could also have an important part to play, not only because this format maximizes participation (and may allow larger classes), but also because students notoriously learn a lot from their peers.

As for the content of courses, which, as suggested above, should in some way complement the input of modules, this will presumably vary from one university to another on the basis of specific objectives and available resources. However, the most valuable single tool that teachers are likely to



find in planning a functional language syllabus, both in its distinction of levels, and its exhaustive list of communicative activities, is the Framework.

### *Back to the Framework*

The Framework is, of course, not itself a syllabus. It is an exemplification of the *types* of language activity which language users normally engage in. Many of the descriptors and the areas in which they are classified ('formal discussion and meetings', 'goal-orientated co-operation', 'obtaining goods and services') seem to relate directly to the world of commerce, although closer examination will reveal that the focus is not so narrow: for example, at level B2 one of the five descriptors for *formal discussion and meetings* is "can contribute, account for and sustain his/her opinion, evaluate alternative proposals, and make and respond to hypotheses"; under *goal-orientated co-operation*, at the same level, we read "can outline an issue or a problem clearly, speculating about causes or consequences, and weighing advantages and disadvantages of different approaches". Sometimes there is exemplification within exemplification, as in one of three B2 descriptors for *obtaining goods and services*: "Can cope linguistically to negotiate a solution to a dispute like an undeserved traffic ticket, financial responsibility for damage in a flat, for blame regarding an accident".

Some descriptors in the Framework may seem irrelevant to the present and future (though these are less easy to predict) needs of university language students. However, it could be used selectively, by drawing up a list of communicative activities (receptive, interactive, and productive) which could be useful within the student's university career as well as in the world beyond academe. For example, at B2 level the following are examples of objectives which could be appropriate:

#### **Reception (listening): Watching TV and film**

Can understand documentaries, live interviews, talk shows, plays, and the majority of films in standard dialect.

#### **Reception (reading): Overall reading comprehension**

Can read with a large degree of independence, adapting style and speed of reading to different texts and purposes, and using appropriate reference

sources selectively. Has a broad active reading vocabulary, but may experience some difficulty with low-frequency idioms.

#### **Interaction (speaking): Conversation**

Can convey degrees of emotion and highlight the personal significance of events and experiences

#### **Interaction (speaking): Interviewing and being interviewed**

Can carry out an effective, fluent interview, departing spontaneously from prepared questions, following up and probing interesting replies.

#### **Production (speaking) : Putting a case (e.g. in a debate)**

Can construct a chain of reasoned argument.

#### **Production (writing): Reports and essays**

Can write an essay or report which develops an argument systematically with appropriate highlighting of significant points and relevant supporting detail.

### *Which levels?*

Referring to the Framework immediately raises the question of level. Is it appropriate to establish an entry level, as well as the certifiable exit level(s) demanded by students? At first glance, if the *lowest* exit level from secondary school is estimated by the education ministry to be B1, a first year course for language specialists might be expected to aim at B2. But in actual fact, many students choosing languages arrive with a low level of proficiency. Out of 182 students who sat a placement test to start a three-year course in *Lingua e Cultura* in Ca' Foscari in October 2002, the majority displayed a level much nearer B1 than B2. It would be more realistic to allow the first year for consolidation, set B2 as a feasible objective for year two, and aim at C1 – the level demanded by students in the questionnaire, also known as 'Effective Operational Proficiency' and certified in the UCLES Cambridge Advance English (CAE) exam – for the final year.

The question of how to link levels directly to international certification is more delicate. One of the dangers in calling in outside bodies as a guarantee for levels acquired is that language courses become primarily exam preparation courses, which could compromise validity and promote bad backwash. But if outside exam bodies are not used, teachers may find

themselves having to develop a battery of in-house tests calibrated to declared levels in the Framework – a challenging task, to say the least.

*Conclusion*

Ultimately, of course, individual universities have the operational autonomy to make their own decisions about how languages are taught and tested, and these decisions will be conditioned at least in part by available resources. The reform, with its ‘containers’ for different types of courses, and prescribed number of hours of study and self-study for students, offers a useful moment of reflection for the establishing of objectives and for course planning. In drawing up these objectives, the Common European Framework can be consulted as a fundamental background document, best used selectively, rather than prescriptively. Finally, the conviction shared by almost all students consulted that courses should be linked to internationally recognized levels, indicates a concern that language learning at university should be directly related to students’ language needs beyond the course, whether as students in postgraduate courses training as future language professionals, or in the wider world of work.

*Questionnaire on language teaching and testing (4<sup>th</sup> year students)*

1 How do you rate your level of English? If you are familiar with the Common European Framework of Reference, circle the band:

*A1 A2 B1 B2 C1 C2*

If you are not familiar with the Framework, select one of the following traditional categories:

*Beginner Elementary Low Intermediate  
High Intermediate Advanced Near native speaker*

2 What level do you think a graduate in English language and literature should have? (Choose from the above list)

.....

3 Do you have any international certification (e.g. *Cambridge First Certificate/Proficiency, Trinity ESOL*)?

If so, which?

.....

4 Do you think language courses in a faculty of Foreign Language and Literature should be linked to specified internationally recognized levels?

YES NO

5 Identify your strong point(s) in English (e.g. skills, such as *speaking*; formal knowledge, such as *grammar*; study skills, such as *learning vocabulary*)

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6 Identify your weak point(s)

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7 How have language courses at the university contributed to the development of your language skills?

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8 How could courses have been improved?

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.....

9 Do you think language exams you have taken at the university

A	tested the right things?	YES	NO
B	gave accurate results?	YES	NO
C	had a positive effect on learning?	YES	NO

10 If the answer to any of the points in 9 is NO, please give relevant details

.....  
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.....

11 Which basic language knowledge and skills should be included in a three year course in Language and Culture? Tick (✓) any or all of the following:

- Speaking
- Listening
- Reading
- Writing
- The grammar system
- The sound system

Other  
.....

12 Which special language knowledge (e.g. contemporary varieties of English) or skills (e.g. how to write a critical essay) should a graduate of such a course have?

.....  
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.....  
.....

13 Do you think the main input of the course should be through

- A *ad hoc* materials produced by the teacher? YES NO
- B authentic materials YES NO
- B a course book YES NO

14 Which do you think is the maximum number of students in a class in which effective teacher-student and student-student interaction can take place?

.....

15 Do you think more use should be made of modern technology (video, audio, information technology) during language classes? If so, please give relevant details

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