

Sharing a common framework: an experiment in 'co-certification'.

By David Newbold, University of Venice, Italy

newbold@unive.it



(A fuller version of this article will appear in *ELTJ* 63/1 to be published in January 2009, and available on-line from March 2008.)

The CEFR and university reform in Italy

One of the side effects of the introduction of the Common European Framework has been to help teachers, testers, and language planners across Europe, and across languages, to understand each other better. A shared idea of what it means to learn a language, has led to unprecedented examples of international co-operation in language planning and teacher education; in this article I want to describe how it can also provide the basis for co-operation in test development.

In the University of Venice, where I teach, it had long been felt that an essentially grammar-based English language syllabus, with its focus on accuracy rather than communication, was outmoded. The advent of the Common European Framework, and the more or less simultaneous reform of the university system, at the turn of the new millennium, provided the opportunity to rethink the syllabus, while a protocol signed by the ministry and external testing agencies made it possible for universities to accept externally awarded certification as credits for language exams.

Although this new development was welcomed by most university faculties (since external certification, as well as guaranteeing objective assessment, also removed a heavy burden of language testing from understaffed university language centres), in language faculties this was not the case. Here, the type of external certification on offer seemed to be of limited relevance since it catered for non-specialists. University students specializing in foreign languages were different, it was felt, and, paradoxically, although there was plenty of certification in EAP and ESP, as well as more generic tests, none of it seemed to match the profile of university students in English who spent most of their time working on literary texts.

A starting point: student profiles and student needs

It was against this background, in 2004, that the University of Venice approached an international examining board with a view to adapting an existing exam to reflect the needs and profile of a student of English in a modern languages faculty. Ideally the

exam could be used as an optional alternative to the existing faculty exam, and would also have value as an internationally recognized qualification in the job market or for students wishing to go on with their studies in an English-speaking environment. But the starting point, we felt, should be the potential of the exam to reflect the profile of the candidate as a university student working with literature, much of whose time was spent reading literary criticism and writing critical essays. We also wanted to address the issue of what the student was not getting enough of during the three year first degree course, but which was widely demanded, namely, practice in speaking. We felt that introducing certification which assessed speaking and writing could help promote beneficial washback, since teaching programmes would somehow have to create space for speaking skills, and make more provisions for specific writing skills (which we identified as 'critical writing'). In other words, beyond its function as an independent, widely recognized form of assessment, we were hoping that the introduction of external certification would also provide the impetus for a more appropriate skills-based - and Framework-related - syllabus. The level we were initially interested in was C1, the minimum exit level for university language graduates, and the candidates would be final year students.

Finding a partner

One of the most striking discoveries that a potential consumer of language tests can make - even if we limit ourselves just to English, and the European context - is the range of variety between test formats, all of which ostensibly test the same things at the same levels, but which are perceived by teachers and students as substantially different. We were spoilt for choice. Surveying the different exams offered by those examination boards which had signed the protocol with the Italian education ministry, our attention focussed on the Trinity Integrated Skills in English (ISE) exams. Calibrated to four levels of the Framework (A2, B1, B2, C1, and from 2008 C2) these exams assess the candidate's ability to use the language, with equal weighting given to writing, through a portfolio and a controlled written exam, and speaking, in a one-to-one interview, in which both 'spoken production' and 'spoken interaction' - two modes of speaking exemplified in the Framework - are evaluated. The strong process-based orientation (in the portfolio, and discussion of the portfolio during the interview), was also attractive.

The format looked interesting, but we wanted to adapt the exam to fit the student profile described above more closely. In particular, we felt that the third portfolio task ('creative writing') could be replaced by critical writing. (The first two tasks were 'correspondence' and 'factual writing', which seemed to correspond to useful real-life writing skills).

In the standard version of the Controlled Written Exam two of the three tasks ('correspondence' and 'creative writing') mirror those of the Portfolio. The other task is a 'reading to writing' activity which involves writing a summary of an article from a given viewpoint, or with a specific objective. Again, it was felt that the creative writing task should be replaced by critical writing, but the other two tasks could remain.

No changes were proposed to the format of the oral interview. But since the portfolios are discussed in the oral, and since a major part of the oral consists of a presentation by candidates of a topic of their choice, which could if wished be related to their university course and interests, the 'university dimension' would be preserved and consolidated in this final part of the exam.

Trinity were interested in the proposal, and agreed that it could be offered as a 'university' version of an existing exam. But one major point had to be clarified: who was to be responsible for assessing 'critical writing'? If Trinity were to relinquish overall control of the assessment process (i.e. if the university of Venice became responsible for assessing the critical writing element) the exam would split into two separate parts, one 'local', the other 'external', which would effectively become two distinct exams. But Trinity could not reasonably expect to train Italian university teachers as examiners, because of the year round commitment required (Trinity examiners are UK based and have to attend regular standardization meetings). On the other hand, Trinity recognized that they were not easily able to identify the topic areas which Italian university students of English could reasonably be expected to write about critically.

At this point the roles of the two partners became clear: the university of Venice would define 'critical writing' and input examples of portfolio titles; Trinity College would assess students' writing, drawing on their own experience, and by referring to the working definition of critical writing. An agreement to work together to produce a 'co-certification' was reached, reflected for candidates in the logo of both institutions which would appear on the certificates issued by Trinity.

Defining 'critical writing'

Trinity required us to define what we meant by *critical writing*. The Framework, in its description of 'overall written production' at C1 level, came some way to identifying the skills we had in mind:

C1 Can write clear, well-structured texts of complex subjects, underlying the relevant salient issues, expanding and supporting points of view at some length with subsidiary points, reasons and relevant examples, and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.

After drawing up a list of underlying constructs which we felt contributed to the skill of writing 'critically', ('evaluating', 'exemplifying', etc.) we felt in a position to write our own *can do* statement using the Framework description as a starting point. This was eventually agreed as:

C1 Critical writing

Can write a critical appraisal of a work of art, such as a novel, a film, or a collection of poetry, *or present a critical overview of a cultural phenomenon, such as an institution or a lifestyle, or of an economic, historical or linguistic issue*, isolating and developing the main thrust of the argument with some assurance, identifying supporting themes *or typical features*, and evaluating the work appropriately against the background to which it belongs.

The additions in italics were made in part to ensure that candidates from other degree courses (such as linguistics, and the humanities generally) would not be excluded, and to underline the importance of attention to detail, as well as presenting the wider picture, in critical writing. The definition is not meant to be definitive; it is a working document intended to help candidates and examiners towards a mutual understanding of the task, and can be modified if it turns out to be inappropriate. In fact, it may be a common feeling among testers trying to draw up meaningful descriptors that the wider you try to cast your net, the more fish are likely to slip through unnoticed.

Examples of critical writing tasks

The portfolio titles chosen for the 2008 exam session are as follows:

1. 'Modern film makers are compromising their artistic integrity at the cost of producing commercially successful films.' Discuss this statement indicating how far you consider it to be true, supporting your viewpoint with relevant examples.
2. The *Gazzetta dello Sport* is the third best-selling daily paper in Italy. Comment on the phenomenon and analyse the relation between Italians and sport, both as participants and as spectators.
3. Latin continues to occupy an important place in the Italian secondary school curriculum - but should it? Comment on the role of Latin in the educational system and society at large, and present a critical argument in favour of its retention or removal from the curriculum.
4. More than two million Italians are engaged in voluntary work of some kind. Write an overview of the phenomenon, giving relevant examples, and commenting on its socio-cultural significance.
5. Poetry is often described as 'the Cinderella of the arts'. Explain what you understand by the term, and use the example of one or more modern or contemporary poets to decide whether you think poetry is still socially useful.

Face validity: the university dimension

The critical writing component (in the portfolio and the controlled written paper) constituted the only change made to the existing exam, and the only input provided by the university, carrying just one sixth of the total marks available. But the discussion of portfolio tasks during the oral, and the chance for candidates to present a topic relevant to their university studies (as well as the simple fact that the exam was held in the university, which had to be registered as a 'Trinity exams centre') all contributed to a knock-on effect which gave the whole exam a university dimension.

As it happens, from the beginning most students have avoided presenting topics from degree courses or dissertations - perhaps because they thought the topics were too dry, or that they couldn't do justice to them in four minutes. Only around ten percent of the 60 or 70 students who enrol for the exam choose topics closely related to their degree courses. But a wide range of topics come from the arts and humanities (music, painting, history, and music), while talking about personal experiences (as Erasmus students, or on work placements, or as volunteers) is also popular. There are more esoteric subjects, too (*canary breeding, carp fishing, English writers in the Dolomites*) and reflections on socio-cultural phenomena (*'mammismo'- why Italians stay at home with their mothers*). If anything, the range of topics chosen by candidates (commented on favourably by examiners) seems to fit the 'university dimension' of the exam well. Overall, the topics on offer in the portfolio or freely chosen by students for the oral combined with the tasks to give the exam a high degree of face validity - an unscientific notion which testers ignore at their peril. In short, students felt the exam was able to do the job it was meant to do: to measure their specific competences as university students of English.

Washback and impact: the classroom and beyond

The first aim in the project was, as I hope I have just shown, to make the exam fit the student. The second, equally important, was to provide the impetus for syllabus change. By introducing Framework-related criteria to 3rd year language classes preparing for the exam, it became necessary to draw up Framework-related objectives for the first two years of the course as well. For the first time, a document was drawn up by language teachers which clearly stated year by year objectives in functional (*can do*) terms; at the time of writing this is still being implemented, with speaking making its long overdue appearance in teaching and assessment programmes, and the role of writing being more closely defined. The new syllabus has made it relatively simple to introduce (in 2008) a lower (B2) level of the co-certification, suitable for first year students, but also of interest to high school students of the more academically-orientated *licei*. Perhaps it is

the high schools which will provide most candidates for this level, with university students preferring to do the faculty exam (which unlike the co-certification has no cost) at the end of the first year and 'saving' the co-certification for the higher level at the end of the third year. It is also possible to see the exam as having an impact beyond the classroom, for example:

within the context of university reform it is an independent guarantee that a required level of language proficiency is being achieved by the majority of students, a guarantee which cannot be provided by internal exams;

it provides a more widely acceptable certificate of proficiency to potential employers than a mere list of university exams passed.

a joint European postgraduate course in Anglo-American studies organized by the University of Graz in Austria, of which Venice is a partner, has made the co-certification an entrance requirement, in addition to the better-known IELTS and TOEFL exams.

Looking ahead

The high pass rate (around 95%) since the introduction of the exam in 2005 has been a source of satisfaction, but hardly surprising, if we remember that the minimum exit level for university graduates should be C1. What's more, candidates think twice before paying for an exam, and having made the decision they are ready to spend time and effort preparing for it; and preparation for a learner-centred, skills-based, process orientated exam, perceived as relevant to the student's own experience, is itself a motivating experience.

But perhaps the most interesting implication of the project is simply to have shown how a local institution, and an international testing agency, can work together to provide relevant certification. There are numerous contexts, far beyond the scope of this article to consider, in which joint certification may in the future be desirable and useful, not only to reflect professional or academic profiles (such as the university dimension reported on here) but also, increasingly, to acknowledge the reality of non-native, as well as native, varieties of English which daily ensure international communication across the globe. But the fact that a pilot project of this nature could have taken place at all, and that the two partners involved were quickly establish a shared sense of purpose, is due in no small measure to the existence of the Common European Framework.

David Newbold is a researcher in English language at the University of Venice (Ca' Foscari). He has taught in France, Italy, Spain and the UK, and has published a wide range of ELT materials. He has a special interest in testing and assessment.