

# Learning and Assessment Procedures at the University of Messina Language Center (Italy). An Integrated Approach

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## ABSTRACT

The University of Messina Language Center, Italy (C.L.A.M.) is responsible for assessing receptive language skills in students who need foreign language certification to graduate, but do not have curricular courses provided by their Faculties. This paper addresses issues such as blended courses, teacher training, creation of cost-effective, valid and reliable tests in foreign language receptive skills. Related issues concern the identification of a standard format for some CEF levels, standardized procedures for implementation, selection of suitable original authentic texts and materials produced in-house. Finally, editing, digitalization of learning objects and assessment of the outcomes will be briefly outlined.

**Keywords:** foreign languages, blended learning, computer tests, learning objects, receptive skills.

## 1.1 LEARNING BEYOND THE CLASS (ROSALBA RIZZO)

Since 2004, the University of Messina Language Center (C.L.A.M., Centro Linguistico d'Ateneo Messinese) has been using computer technology in language teaching to support our work as teachers, and to help students to learn independently and become autonomous.

Incorporating technology into a language course has been motivating both for teachers and students throughout the University and the interactivity of language tasks has been judged highly beneficial by many parties. Computer mediated communication (CMC) enables interaction between teachers and learners, who are separated by time and place and it allows language practice and study to take place outside the classroom. In recent literature on autonomy, the term "out-of-class learning" has been used, somewhat narrowly, to refer to the efforts of *learners* taking classroom-based language courses to find opportunities for language learning outside the classroom [1-2]. Learners tend to engage in out-of-class learning activities more frequently than their teachers suppose, often showing considerable creativity in situations where opportunities for out-of-class learning appear to be limited.

The relationship between learning beyond the classroom and student autonomy is complex. On the one hand, all the modes of learning such as self-access, CALL, distance learning, tandem learning, self-instruction, out-of-class activities, study abroad, involve autonomous learning as defined by Dickinson [3], but on the other hand, they demand a capacity for autonomy, as Holec [4] and others have pointed out.

The important question is whether engagement in learning beyond the class fosters the development of this capacity or not. In this context, the need for teacher support is prominent and is recognized in the emerging concept of "blended" learning, which refers to various teaching and learning modes, most frequently those combining some software-for-learning component with some form of human intervention.

The use of web oriented technologies is efficient and cost effective in a learning/teaching process, because it is a kind of learning which is flexible and offers students autonomy and self-pacing according to their interests and needs. Learners can work in structured ways on specific tasks assigned by their tutor, and in unstructured ways, where they browse through materials and get extra contact and practice with the language.

The reasons behind the growing interest in autonomy in language learning lie in the continuous worldwide growth of language learning/teaching, which involves both the spread of "communicative" principles and the deconstruction of conventional classroom processes. It has also to do with the emergence of critical perspectives on language teaching and learning as a social process and sociocultural theory in the language context [5].

## 1.2 DESIGN OF BLENDED COURSES (ROSALBA RIZZO)

An experimental blended learning project to teach English, French, Spanish and German has been undertaken in the current academic year (2007-2008) at CLAM to give extra help to students who previously only had self-learning activities to rely on in their preparation for their exams. Full curricular courses were not provided by their Faculties, so CLAM decided to take the lead in offering students English, French, Spanish, and German courses so as to equip them to provide more linguistic skills and pass language tests. We adopted opportunities of a blended learning model so as to deal with the large number of participants. 142 students took up the offer. They have been guided by the real and virtual presence of two tutors for the English cohorts and three other tutors, one for the French, one for the Spanish, and one for the German cohort. The level of skill required by each Faculty was taken into consideration. No extra fees were required.

The blended courses naturally present two different forms of interaction: online and face-to-face. Our staff chose *Questionmark Perception*, as indicated by others, a flexible assessment management system from among those available on the market. It has provided a powerful environment to create and publish activities and manage language contents for online

and offline delivery. The database of the learning objects (LOs) used, includes materials whose rationale, structure and creation procedure will be discussed in the following section.

After registration, the students access the software contents following a guided learning path. The course focuses on testing and assessment of receptive language skills (written and oral comprehension) and different levels of competence as required by the Faculties and as laid down by the guidelines in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [6]. The Common European Framework (CEF) establishes six basic levels of competence in language production and reception, namely A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2.

Faculties basically asked for A2 (elementary), B1 (pre-intermediate) competence in their students, encompassing a range of four different languages to be included in the pilot project (i.e. English, Spanish, French and German). B2 was also required, but for a limited number of students, in particular those attending second level degrees in Political Science.

The classes were formed in order to cohort homogeneous level classes dividing True Beginners (A1) and Elementary learners (A2) from Pre-Intermediate ones (B1). Students' levels are ascertained by presenting an official certificate or by taking an internal placement test before the start of the course. Furthermore, since learning a foreign language means developing receptive skills and mastering productive skills, after the initial placement test, five English language cohorts were organized, and one for the French, one for the Spanish and one for the German. Each tutor is responsible only for a group of about 15-18 students this optimizing interaction and stimulating active participation. Significantly in these courses online communication takes place via email between tutor and students. Students meet their tutors face-to-face every week in a two-hour meeting after autonomous online study. These meetings allowed a customized learning path to each student.

Using *Perception* the CLAM staff has created a structure designed to be the scaffolding for various hierarchical components such as modules, assignments, activities and exercises, represented in the various sections of the courses. The structure allows the contents to vary in accordance with the specific course required. Topics are organized in such a way that the associated exercises match with CEF levels. For each level, assignments are divided into activities containing exercises that cover listening, vocabulary, reading and use of language.

The activities take the interplay between active and passive learning. Learners are introduced to specific vocabulary initially in a passive way through the listening and reading comprehension exercises. In this first phase, learners deduce the meaning of words for themselves from the context in which they are presented, supported by multimedia tools/genres. In the second active phase, students have to check what they acquired previously through different types of exercises the active one, through different types of exercises (select-a-blank, multiple choice, true/false, yes/no questions). Feedback is immediate and is provided in formative and diagnostic assessment to correct answers. Feedback for summative assessment is limited to providing pass/fail information. Students are also asked to actively contextualize the new expressions and words previously learnt in open questions: feedback is given by the tutor, during the face-to-face lesson, as she/he corrects the exercises. It has not been possible so far to incorporate a forum in this project, so that students could not interact with each other but could only communicate with their tutor via e-mail in a one-to-one modality. This allowed explanations to be given or doubts concerning online exercises, computer problems and so on to be cleared up.

Another useful tool available is the "Item Analysis" report in which all the cases were all/none the students got the right answers are excluded. This is so far used by teachers. The "Item Analysis" report also contains other data critical to creating valid, reliable high-stakes exams. Here tutors find information concerning the time learners spend doing activities, the numbers of activities they do and the assignments they complete. The analysis of reports provides hints for the tutor on how to plan class activities. As well as the overall class report, individual students have individual report about her/his personal activities. This is the first step towards the implementation of the European Language Portfolio [7] which *inter alia* lays down that access to more qualitative details of the history of the learners' activities shall be given. The qualitative and the quantitative data together give a general idea of each learner's progress. All the results will be evaluated quantitatively and qualitatively, since this represents a link between online study and face-to-face lessons.

The goal of this project was exclusively educational: we wanted to help students acquire skills and strategies so that they could pass an exam with the help of technology. We used the LOs that the CLAM staff created to cover different learning approaches and make the online course more appealing. All the exercises were careful to contextualizing specific lexis relating personal, public, professional and educational domains. They practised listening, reading and writing skills while speaking skills were practiced during the face to face lesson.

## **2.1. ASSESSMENT AT CLAM: BACKGROUND AND MAIN ISSUES (MARIA GRAZIA SINDONI)**

Assessment at the University Language Center is the result of research into education, foreign language learning/teaching and information technologies. Our task was to test a large number of students from different backgrounds and fields of studies but without providing them with a full teacher-led curricular course, as discussed above. Our main concern was to implement a computer-based test which would be perceived as valid, reliable and focused on receptive language skills (as requested by the Faculties) without using pre-existing materials. Hughes differentiates between a general, overarching idea of validity, called "construct validity" and more specific or "subordinate" forms of validity, namely content and criterion-related validity. Content validity refers to the fact that the test includes a "representative sample of language skills, structures, etc.", while the criterion-related validity "relates to the degree to which results on the test agree with those provided by some independent and highly dependable assessment of the candidate's ability" [8]. Criterion-validity was measured by means of data provided by short-term assessments in the self-learning or blended learning programs, which were subsequently compared to results in the final test. In short, what we did was to compare samples of test results taken during the course with the outcome of the final test. This made it possible to assess the degree of compatibility between the two sets of scores. As regards reliability, our goal was to be as near as possible to Coefficient 1, as testing theory suggests. These general considerations led us to design a test format which, in theory, satisfied the general criteria discussed above, together with other specifications, in particular those expressed by the Faculties in discussion with the CLAM.

How did we go about selecting materials and methods by which they were presented? As Swales [9] claims, a lot of valuable published materials are ignored, even though they could easily be used in virtually any given situation/context. However, other considerations were taken into account. In short, the idea was to

invest financial resources in young local researchers to promote innovation and integration between IT and foreign language studies. The ultimate goal was to produce a completely new test, satisfying precisely those criteria set by the Faculties, who had called for specific assessment procedures.

The pilot project started in 2004. Since then, figures show that English is the language chosen by most students (ca. 85%); however it has been decided to provide for four languages in order to encourage plurilingualism at University, by explicitly suggesting that Faculties give extra credits to students who take more than one foreign language test.

Initially, some preliminary meetings were arranged to discuss the possible procedures to be adopted with language teachers and to train them as regards LOs writing. Instead of producing a fixed number of ready-made, highly structured tests, the creation of several LOs was thought to be a more cost-effective and flexible method, especially if we consider that each LO can be assembled in novel ways each time the software selects it from the database. Thus teachers wrote LOs following a specific standard, using html language in the form of a Microsoft Word File later converted to Questionmark Perception format.

Procedures of selection, adaptation and editing of tests are essential, above all to standardize the language level of every LO. The database includes LOs grouped according to language (i.e. English, Spanish, French, German); level (i.e. A2, B1, B2); text type (i.e. General vs. Language for Specific Purposes). The system is set to randomize LOs and create a test *vis-à-vis* language, level and text type. Each LO is given a right/wrong tag and an associate score (0/1). Normally, a pass/fail score is awarded.

Teachers were guided by the P.O.S. document (Perception Organization Standard), put together by the CLAM's teaching and technical staff, which illustrates rules and principles for test writing in terms of html tags including those for formatting purposes and the system requirements (consistency checking, number of items and association of level-consistent LOs).

## **2.2. HOW TO WRITE, EDIT AND REVISE A LEARNING OBJECT (MARIA GRAZIA SINDONI)**

Each LO needs to comply with a set of principles as listed below:

1. Careful compliance with CEF levels. CEF provides the "descriptors", which describe the abilities a student must have reached in each language skill (speaking, writing, reading, listening) to meet the level. These go by the name of "Can Do Statements" [10]. For example, a B1 student "Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans" [11]. An LO for a B1 level must conform to this profile of B1 skills.
2. Variety of tested language. The language used is the Standard variety [12]. British English is being preferred to General American as called for by Faculties, but some institutions are starting to ask for a more specific linguistic competence in General American, so that it is foreseeable that eventually Faculties will act accordingly. Defining

Standards on these issues goes beyond the scope of this paper [13].

3. Sources for LOs. They are mainly web-based. Teachers were asked to quote the source and not to use copyright materials. The process of editing and adaptation, which always requires many textual and intertextual skills, allows a substantial manipulation of the original sources. This means that to conform to a specific level, specific texts (i.e. an article or interview) need to be edited with relation to CEF scales *vis-à-vis* omissions, simplification of particular tenses, aspects of the verbs or of difficult words.
4. Text types/genres. LOs must encourage students to experience discourse with language in authentic, daily contexts, respecting the level to be tested. This means that for the first part of the test (written comprehension, grammar and lexical competence), articles from newspapers about topical issues, sport, cinema, hobbies are preferred, while passages from novels, biographies, journal articles are excluded where they go beyond the level in question. Text typologies are thus chosen in accordance with the level to be tested: an A2 student is not likely to get to grips with scientific papers, whereas he/she needs to be encouraged to tackle easy and "friendly" topics, such as personal interests, family, hobbies and the like.
5. A valid test ought not to examine areas below or beyond the level it is testing. Teachers should then avoid building up questions below or beyond the level. Easier said than done, because it is very easy to slip above or, more often than not, below the level. For example in a "fill-in-the-blank" item, a B1 test ought not to include complex hypothetical clauses but it should include testing of the correct use of aspect in the English verbal system.
6. Listening activities need to be developed in relation to real-life situations and sources, e.g. adapting radio/TV short scripts. Given that the level tested is generally low, it is often easier to invent daily situations than adapt real-life ones, which are rather too complex and idiomatic to be intelligible to A2-B1 learners. For other instances in other Italian University Language Centers, see Taylor, Taylor Torsello, Gotti, [14] and Ackerley, Coccetta, [15]. The final listening comprehension texts are produced in collaboration with CLAM technical staff in the recording phase specifying contextual details in the Microsoft Word files, both for speakers' attitude (such as "angry", "annoyed", "interested") and for technical staff in pre/post production phases (such as "in the street", "at the restaurant", "at the airport", "at the station" or audio genre, such as "audioguide", "voicemail", "radio interview") in order to gauge audio effects in the post-production phase. Noises are meant to create a context in keeping with "real-life" situations without disturbing or hindering comprehension.
7. Quality control principles are carefully observed during all stages to guarantee maximum efforts to get a realistic and unbiased picture of each candidate's language skills.

## **2.3. TEST PROCESSING, TEAMWORK AND QUALITY CONTROL SYSTEM. PROCEDURES AND METHODS (MARIA GRAZIA SINDONI)**

From the outset, the project was planned as a staged activity in all its aspects. The staged and cyclic activity includes planning and quality control. The database is thus growing in size every year in keeping with the goal of other Italian Language Centers,

including AICLU itself, (Associazione Italiana Centri Linguistici Universitari). As a consequence, test association (i.e. randomization of LOs) is improving. The result is a growing number of tests and one side effect is the opportunity for students to undergo a larger number of simulation tests during their learning process.

The stages in which the project can be divided from theoretical and applicative standpoints include several passages that may be summarized as follows:

- Creation of the format and pilot phase;
- Planning, including a detailed schedule with deadlines for each staff member;
- Selection of authentic texts and adaptation for written comprehension and grammar exercises and production of original materials for listening comprehension activities;
- Peer-revision and multiple checks via careful reference to CEF levels;
- Audio recording and post-production of audio files;
- Uploading of the revised materials by the technical staff;
- Tests are assigned to groups (according to number and type of students who are pre-registered to take the exam) and LOs are randomized to create a given number of tests with the same format and the same level, but with a different association of exercises for each student.

Each file in .doc format is automatically processed by the Converter program developed by the CLAM technical staff, which checks for error presence, creates automatic feedback for each question and automatically generates .qml files, ready to be imported into the system. Advantages in these procedures are easy to imagine. Quality control measures can be introduced thanks to the staged nature of the activities.

- Teachers use familiar tools (i.e. Microsoft Word or Wordpad) and only need to learn basic and “user-friendly” rules in tagging the materials as outlined in the POS document;
- Scheduling clearly sets the task for each professional involved in the project in coordinated way that relies on and encourages team work;
- The risk of propagating errors is effectively reduced and the resulting LO is cost-effective as it is re-usable each time it is assembled in a novel way;
- The inclusion of multimodal, visual and verbal texts [16] in the test is much easier (i.e. Flash objects integration with Listening comprehension questions);
- Peer-revision and multiple checks reduce the risk of many other kinds of errors (i.e. typos, spelling, inconsistencies, etc.) [17].

#### 2.4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS (MARIA GRAZIA SINDONI)

Any student enrolled in the University of Messina can pre-register for the exam, using the CLAMCard badge. This is a card given gratis to each student, who is assigned a user name and a password to access the test. The CLAMCard is linked to the database containing all the information about the University students. The database is synchronized with the test database. Once registration is complete, a set number of groups of students are handled in an appropriate way in relation to the next exam session. As soon as groups are created, the system generates a given number of tests, meeting the specified criteria. On the day of the exam, students need to show their ID and CLAMCard in one of the Center’s multimedia labs. Progress with service delivery always contributes to service culture. In this respect, our instructions have been changed several times

during the experimentation program, since even the most basic procedure appeared to be completely new to the majority of students who were not familiar at all with computer-based tests. After experimentation and research, video instructions on each screen now provide all the information students need. When the student has finished the test, the outcome is shown in real time. This saves time, money and reduces the risk of human-made errors in correction and assessment.

The CLAM project responded to an emergency situation. New rules at a national and European level had in fact established a foreign language test in every first level University degree, without catering for financial resources. The CLAM, as many other Italian University Language Centers, has since been trying to deal with this issue, offering blended learning programs and computer tests where official courses lack a foreign language curricular course. The CLAM has taken under consideration local needs by making available a number of services based on technologies. These services have been inspired by teamwork principles, integrating teaching studies and research with IT. Data gathered so far are included in the following table, which reports students’ initial enrolment, attendance, dispersion and success in the final test:

<i>Enrolled</i>	142
<i>Attended the course</i>	63
<i>Never attended the course</i>	49
<i>Dispersion during the course</i>	30
<i>Took final exam</i>	50
<i>Pass</i>	40

Results for different languages are illustrated in the following table:

	<i>Attendance</i>	<i>Pass</i>
<i>English</i>	36	32
<i>Spanish</i>	14	5
<i>French</i>	13	3
<i>German</i>	0	0
<i>TOTAL</i>	63	40

A problem that emerges clearly is student dispersion. Only 63 students out of 142 regularly attended the blended program. In the table, there is a separate figure for candidates who never attended the course and another one for dispersion during the course. The former is quite significant, because it represents more than one third of the initial number. Student dispersion is another issue that needs to be tackled. These figures led us to ask ourselves what was the problem with attendance and to what extent our responsibility had to be taken into account. Teaching staff contacted students to interview them informally via telephone or emails, and the general problem appeared to consist in lack of time even if they knew that this kind of course required very limited amount of time for face-to-face meetings with their tutors. However, students seemed to be more interested in their curricular courses and their lack of familiarity with blended programs had an impact on subsequent dispersion. In the future a greater emphasis should be put on pedagogical approaches, because students maybe needed more information and guidance *before* the beginning of the courses. Organizational and technical factors should be analysed only after a careful consideration of the students’ needs, tackling issues such as personal and interpersonal students’ characteristics, especially their affective schemata. For a further discussion on these points see Weir [18] and Alderson [19].

However, as figures show, 80% of students who took the exam passed it on their first attempt, during the first available session (December 2007).

Another issue refers to languages other than English, which are problematic to promote in our context, since English seems to be the only “necessary” foreign language to learn, even though we, as teachers, are well aware that the most fundamental challenge is multilingualism for a full European (and global) citizenship.

In conclusion, our experiment is far from perfect as data clearly show, but it represents one of our many efforts to contribute to foreign language learning/teaching culture.

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