

Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata

Dall'aula multimediale all'e-learning

Numero monografico a cura di Rita Salvi

BULZONI
EDITORE


Anno XLII

Gennaio-Aprile 2010 / 1-2
ISSN 0033-9725

Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata

1-2

Quadrimestrale a cura del Centro Italiano di Linguistica Applicata
Anno XLII-Numero 1-2, 2010

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all'e-learning*

a cura di Rita Salvi



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AN INTRODUCTION TO LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT: ADOPTING, ADAPTING AND DEVELOPING STRATEGIES

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"The heart of our instruction is the desire to help our language students learn, and the heart of assessment is the need to determine whether our students have learned."

Deborah J. Short (1993:653)

Abstract

Allineare le prove di verifica ai parametri europei e al tempo stesso aiutare gli studenti ad adeguarsi a quei parametri è un impegno complesso. Questo contributo intende analizzare le varie strategie disponibili, delineando come si possono mettere in pratica e per quale tipologia di studente sono particolarmente proficue. Lo sviluppo delle tecnologie apre l'indagine alla validità della verifica computerizzata. Particolare attenzione viene dedicata alla necessità di sviluppare un approccio maggiormente orientato allo studente, bilanciando la tradizionale verifica dell'apprendimento con un approccio olistico di "verifica per l'apprendimento" (Morgan 2008). Si considera quindi la dinamica e il ruolo di una verifica "formativa" nell'ambito generale del processo di apprendimento; si definisce come questo approccio sia efficace nel valutare abilità che vanno oltre la semplice conoscenza dei funzionamenti linguistici. Si conclude quindi che la costruzione delle prove di verifica, ugualmente utili per discenti e docenti, devono oggi rispondere alle esigenze di una società basata sull'informazione e sul sapere.

Introduction

Europe is a multicultural continent: diversity, as well as being an integral part of wealth, also contributes to the continent's growth and development. This diversity is reflected in the educational systems of each individual country. Yet, advances in science, technology, business, developments in the European Union and current mobility programmes, all underline the need to support common educational goals (Di Sabato, Porcelli 2004). In this light, English as a *lingua franca* is so tied to technology that learning a language through technology has important implications for all linguists, especially for those concerned with second language acquisition.

Inadequacies, especially in assessment practices, have led many teachers to call for change in assessment procedures and to adjust their teaching and curricula to maximize student performance in order to meet the linguistic parameters established by the Council of Europe in the "Common European Reference Framework". Consequently, the need for a deeper awareness of both assessment strategies and the significance of test results in both traditional and computer-based learning environments have become real challenges for today's language teacher. In fact, online or web-based instruction has taken root as a cost-effective, and pedagogically sound process of teaching and learning that supports a wide range of learning goals. How can the online environment be best used to promote second language acquisition? How should we adapt old strategies and adopt new ones to foster language learning online? Assessment can, and should, accompany and contribute to the answer to these questions.

The use of information technologies and e-learning strategies can provide efficient and effective means of assessing teaching and learning by supporting traditional, authentic, and alternative assessment strategies (Bowker J. this volume; Barone R. and Bowker J. 2009). Laurillard (1993) suggests that computer-based learning, in general, has a major role in promoting flexibility and diversity in assessment. Online technologies and web-based learning have led not only to a renewed concept of learning, but of pedagogy and assessment as well. Students are given access to learning resources, communication tools, databases and asynchronous networks accentuating the shift from transmission-oriented approaches towards active learning where the student retrieves and generates sources that can be re-used and shared with others. This approach, applied to assessment, makes it less teacher-centred, more flexible, and gives further autonomy and responsibility to the learner.

What is assessment?

In its simplest formulation, assessment is the evaluation of learners' proficiency; in other words, it is information gathered about students' level of performance or achievement and is often equated with tests, exams, and evaluations. According to Erwin (1991:14), assessment is the process of "defining, selecting, designing, collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and using information to increase students' learning development". For Angelo (1999:4), assessment involves:

... making teachers' expectations explicit and public; setting appropriate criteria and high standards for learning quality to determine how well performance matches those expectations and standards; and using the resulting information to document, explain and improve performance.

Alderson (2000:593) considers assessment central to language learning, and necessary:

... to establish where learners are at start, the level they have achieved, to give learners feedback on their learning, to diagnose their needs for further development, and to enable the planning of curricula, materials and activities.

Assessment, therefore, provides the feedback necessary to determine whether teaching and learning has successfully occurred and feedback is the key to revision and development. Consistent with Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006:198), good feedback practice does the following things:

- Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, standards).
- Facilitates the development of self-assessment and reflection in learning.
- Delivers high-quality information to students about their learning.
- Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem.
- Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance.
- Provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape or better, reshape teaching.

Assessment seen as a more formal process of measurement can be referred to as formative or summative (Table 1).

Assessment Types	Examples
summative assessment	entry / placement tests traditional examinations international certification theses
formative assessment	tests; quizzes; essays computer-based tests ¹ web-based tests
portfolios	language portfolio e-portfolios web-folios

Table 1.

Formative assessment aims to assist the learning process by providing the information needed to draw the learner's attention to areas for further study and therefore improve future performance. Summative assessment is generally intended not only to check progress, but also for external purposes and is usually administered at the end of the course. This form of assessment, when used in regards to language acquisition, is designed to gauge the students' overall linguistic performance. While formative assessment is most useful in guiding the learning process, summative assessment is most effective for summarising students' abilities.

Computer Aided Assessment (CAA) is often used for formative assessment of language since it provides immediate feedback in terms of 'right', 'wrong', and 'try again'. Learners feel confident with this form of feedback and undoubtedly it has a great many qualities; nevertheless it contains some inherent weaknesses. Feedback given to the student is not always adequately differentiated, nor does it necessarily set future goals or provide guidance on how to improve one's learning. Numerous variables may influence students' performance when tests are delivered via a com-

¹ Computer-based tests (CBTs) have been used in second language assessment since the early 1980s. The most common CBTs are matching, multiple-choice, cloze, sentence reordering / jumbled words, text reconstruction, true or false, crosswords, word search, text entry quiz. A Web-based language test, for example, is a computer-based language test which is delivered via the World Wide Web. WBTs share many characteristics of more traditional CBTs, but using the Web as their delivery medium adds specific advantages due to the wealth of sources that can be used. Both CBTs and WBTs have the advantage of being offered and used on demand and they can also provide immediate feedback on each response—a characteristic which is very useful for pedagogical purposes.

puter, including navigational and usability issues, monitor resolution, the way in which the text is displayed on the screen, the amount of scrolling involved and the possibility of sudden and inexplicable computer breakdown. Therefore, the use of CAA as an effective assessment tool requires ongoing research.² According to the Council of Europe:

Evaluation is a term which is broader than assessment. All assessment is a form of evaluation, but in a language programme a number of factors are evaluated other than learner proficiency. These may include the effectiveness of particular methods or materials, the type and quality of discourse actually produced during the course, learner/teacher satisfaction and teaching effectiveness.

(Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, Council of Europe 2001:177)

As a result, language assessment can be further divided into the following forms of evaluation: diagnostic, achievement, proficiency, performance, progress-based. Portfolios may also be used for assessing purposes; however, they should be considered primarily as tools to integrate assessment. The e-portfolio, as a form of multimedia, has obvious benefits for the pursuit of lifelong learning and as a method of assessment, fosters autonomy and learning-to-learn skills. It provides the student with authentic online, reflective, interactive and individual features. Although it is useful for short-term purposes, the basic concept behind the portfolio is one where learners contribute continually to their portfolio throughout their learning and draw on it for assessment, for job interviews and for maintaining a record of achievement. The Council of Europe's Language Policy Division has developed its own portfolio, the "European Language Portfolio", (Council of Europe 2000), which aims to motivate learners by acknowledging their efforts to extend and diversify their language skills at various levels and also provide a record of the linguistic and cultural skills learners have acquired.

The portfolio format, primarily intended as a "linguistic passport" allows learners to reflect on progression and contributes as a building block in the development of a blended or integrated form of assessment. Undoubtedly the efficacy and reliability of portfolios deserves further study.

² Alderson and Widdowson 1991, Chalhoub-Deville 1999, Chapelle 1997a, Chapelle 1997b, Chapelle and Douglas 2006, Hicks 1986, have all evaluated the advances made in computer/web-based language assessment.

Why assess?

Assessment is a central component of teaching and learning and serves different purposes. One approach has, as its main focus, the making of summative judgements of a student's level of achievement. In practice, this is likely to involve formal-type examinations with mark schemes. Current assessment practices tend to focus on the assessment, or testing, *of* learning. These assessments largely fail to address *for* learning, assessment as a means to measure learner progression and to inform the learners about their progression. Hall (2004:63) affirms that "a true education requires far more than pre-packaged tests and a box of number two pencils". Alderson and Clapham, (1995), have pointed out the need for actual studies on the existence of "washback", or the influence of tests on teaching. Therefore, the need to shift from assessment *of* learning towards assessment *for* learning is indispensable and should aim at making assessment part of the curriculum; in other words, assessment is to be considered as learning not as testing. In this case, a more formative aspect comes into play, the importance of feedback and its role at improving the students' subsequent linguistic performance.

What to assess?

Modern society's rapidly changing nature seems to place more priority on skills and abilities than on factual knowledge. In fact, technology is actually changing the way language is used and therefore the abilities required to use it (Crystal, 2001). This, of course, underlines the importance of learning transversal skills that can be applied to interdisciplinary activities. It is also necessary for us to reflect on what precisely we consider most useful for our language students to know and do. In general, assessment criteria should bear in mind the following questions:

- Is the *product* or the *process* most important?
- Is the objective *knowledge of the language* or students' *ability to use it*?
- Is the focus on *teaching or learning*?
- Is it more useful to *give a mark or to provide feedback*?
- Should the assessment be *convergent* (only one possible correct answer)?
- Should the assessment be *divergent* (individuality and range rewarded)?
- Should the assessment be *holistic* (integrating material from various sources)?
- Is the assessment based on a *specific aspect* of language?
- Is it better to measure a student's performance in relation to other students (*norm-referenced*) or against other principles (*criterion-referenced*)?

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