



University Language Teaching against the Backdrop of International Certification. Where Are We Heading?

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Abstract

This paper is an invitation to reflect upon the role of language teaching within a university context where the focus is increasingly on measuring knowledge of students majoring in modern languages exclusively within the framework of international certification of language levels. The paper explores recent developments at an Italian university, to classify 1st, 2nd and 3rd year language students according to their language level at the time of enrolment. This means, for example, that unlike in the past, first year students who can demonstrate a higher level of language proficiency as measured by the most common international language tests no longer attend language classes provided for first year students. These students are allowed to attend courses held at a higher level in the 2nd and 3rd years. While this may appear, at first glance, as a way of maximizing student time and teaching resources, it also raises the question, for example of “What on earth did we teach?” before language levels became the main criterion in curriculum design for university level language teaching. This concern also touches upon the forever debated - yet unresolved - issue of how to differentiate between language proficiency and language knowledge in the first place. This recent development is particularly worthy of consideration within the context of providing university level education to students who, in theory, upon graduation will be language professionals of some sort whether in teaching, editing, translating, content creation or writing careers. Is language proficiency the only means of measuring language knowledge? Is it adequate? Should universities and tertiary education in general be following the certification trend? Can this approach be considered innovative? What are the implications in the long term?

Keywords: *teaching, learning, certification, testing, university, proficiency*

1. Introduction

The paper is a reflective practice paper and aims to be broad in scope so as to encourage debate. With the term “reflective practice” I refer to the recent definition by Farrell [1] whereby the concept of reflective practice is viewed holistically and reflection is defined as multi-dimensional. According to Farrell, reflective practice includes reflection on the moral, ethical, spiritual, and aesthetic aspects of our practice in addition to the more pragmatic aspects of problem solving. In this sense, he argues that, as teachers, we should be encouraged to reflect on our philosophy, principles, theory, practice and critically reflect beyond practice. In addition, the discussion presented in this paper will also be framed within the context of the author’s own beliefs about best practice as they have evolved over time as part of her ongoing commitment to professional development and need for authenticity and creativity as encouraged, for example, in Woods, Graves and Freeman [2].

The paper will start with a brief overview and discussion of recent developments in foreign language teaching at a typical, medium-size internationally renowned Italian university. The aim of this paper is not to provide an analytical study of the changes introduced but uses the new teaching and learning context as an opportunity for general reflection on the overall aims of our tertiary education teaching practice when it comes to modern languages. The paper is not specific to any modern language in particular and the issues raised are considered to be of interest to language education professionals at all levels.

2. The Context

In 2022 the University of Pisa decided to implement a number of changes to the organisation of language teaching within the Department of Modern Languages [3]. These changes have since migrated across to other language teaching contexts within the university such as the Department of Economics and Management. The two main changes are summarised in the subsections below. The



language levels referred to are those defined by the European Framework of Reference for Modern Languages.

2.1 First-year Student Placement by Levels

Until 2022, all first year language major students were provided with language courses in first year which, in general, were designed to reflect the language knowledge of the average student enrolling at university upon completion of high school education in Italy. This meant, for example, that first year English students attended language courses which covered language skills and general knowledge at the B1 Plus-B2 level in first year of their university studies. A certain amount of prior knowledge of English was accounted for as the exit level for all high schools in Italy is B2 and is compulsory. The teaching of languages that are not compulsory within the Italian school system such as German, French and Russian, for example, took no prior knowledge for granted and provided first year students with courses at the beginner level (A1). As students passed through the three years of their language training, all language courses were designed to ensure that students progressed towards higher levels. Intensive training was provided in those language, for example, that had started out at the beginner level so as to enable all students to reach the C1 level by the end of the final year of their three-year Bachelor degree in Languages.

The change that was introduced in 2022 meant that students who were already at a certain level could only attend courses appropriate for that level. For example, if a student who had enrolled to study English was at the C1 level upon taking the placement test, they were required to attend the English language courses provided for third year students. First year students with prior knowledge of French, for example, attended the same courses as second year students.

2.2 Replacement of Numerical Grading with Alphabetical Grades (A, B, C, etc.)

The second major change was the official shift from numerical grading to alphabetical grades. Prior to 2022, students would obtain a mark at exams which would usually be out of 100 or/and out of 30 which is the traditional grade range within the Italian university system where 18 (60%) is a pass mark and 30 is equivalent to 100%. Post 2022, students were no longer awarded a numerical grade but given a letter where an “A” represented the traditional top marks of 28/30, 29/30 and 30/30, “B” stood for somewhere around the traditional marks of 25/30, 26/30 and 27/30 and so on.

3. The Rationale for the Changes

The rationale for the changes to student placement was that the placing of students according to their levels as defined by the European Framework of Reference enabled students not to waste time going over already acquired knowledge and practicing skills they were already competent in as a result of their prior learning at schools or language acquisition and life experiences during their school years. It was argued that the change would allow for a more efficient use of student contact hours. In addition, by placing students in courses that were a better match to their levels, this would impact on student motivation. The change would also guarantee, it was argued, that language learning groups would be more homogeneous and allow for more effective teaching.

The argument, however, in support of abolishing a numerical value to student performance in tests and exams is less straightforward. At the time the change was introduced it was put forward that the introduction of letters was a better alignment with the educational grading system of English speaking countries, for example, and thus made it easier for students to move from the Italian university system into other educational systems and viceversa. In addition, it was suggested that while students may score very high marks in their language proficiency skills, this was no guarantee that their performance would be matched in other areas of their university studies. It was put forward that by abolishing a numerical grade for language proficiency, there was greater leeway for university teaching staff to provide students with a final overall language mark – which also included language theory subjects – that was not biased by a high proficiency levels which were considered easier to achieve through learner experience which was not necessarily related to university teaching. By limiting proficiency marks to an A, B, C etc., it was suggested that it would be easier for the final overall exam mark to reflect student knowledge of the non-proficiency or non-skill based subjects during exams more accurately.

4. General Reflections



While the rationale for the changes to learner placement is not necessarily misplaced and may lead to better learner and teacher experience and efficiency, and, indeed impact positively learner proficiency and progress – it is still too early to be able to evaluate the outcomes – it does however raise a number of questions from a broader perspective. For example, by placing the focus on rewarding students for their language proficiency and their skill base, are we not at the same time depriving our university students – the language professionals of the future - of the opportunity to spend time thinking about language and language use? By focussing on placing students with other students who are a better match in terms of language proficiency, are we shutting down opportunities for the language professionals of the future – many of whom will go into teaching – of benefitting from the input of learners who are either behind them or ahead of them in terms of language acquisition? By limiting our teaching to the training for proficiency that is measured by international standards, are we not allowing for local needs, understandings and diversity? Are we shutting down on the complexity of language use? Are we actually dumbing down our courses rather than ensuring that standards are internationally competitive and attractive. Are we not taking away value? If the focus of our language teaching and testing is only on student proficiency, what is the difference between a university education and high school education? While it is commendable that many language major students are entering university with higher levels of proficiency compared to the past and with internationally recognized certification, should we be only assisting them to move through the university system as fast as possible by allowing them to skip first year, for example, or should we be capitalizing on their high levels of proficiency by devising more creative courses and allowing them time to mature and acquire an understanding of the complexity which is implicit in all language use? Furthermore, how does this issue stand in relation to the declaration by the European Association for Language Testing and Assessment (EALTA) of the importance of diversity in education systems and assessment traditions and values [4]? In a study by Jimenez et al. [5], for example, in-house exams are valued alongside the use of international certification in evaluating students.

At the same time, is not the abolishing of a numerical value of learner proficiency in exams a contradiction of all this? By placing less importance on the results of learner proficiency within the system, it appears that we are actually sending a conflicting message to students. On the one hand, we are sending students the message that proficiency is highly valued and can get them through the system faster but, on the other, student proficiency is worth less at exam time than other subjects. How does this reflect on student motivation? How does this create value for students?

5. Professional Reflections

As a younger professional university language teacher working in Italy in the second half of the 90's, I remember being enthusiastic at the idea of the introduction, alongside the more traditional annual language courses, of specific non-compulsory shorter courses for the preparation of students for international certification. I saw it as a much welcomed and necessary addition to the training of language students. I saw the new courses as an opportunity for students to measure their knowledge against international standards. Within a university system which at the time I viewed as very much focussed on knowledge acquisition rather than proficiency development, I saw the push towards international certification as a way of enriching students' learner experience and complementing a teaching context which tended to privilege more static and less participatory approaches to language learning. The fact that the courses in preparation for language proficiency were much smaller in student numbers than the lecture-hall based language courses was also a way of guaranteeing more individual and tailored tuition which could make a difference to learner outcomes generally.

As an older professional, however, I feel that the push has now gone too far. With the introduction of the changes, it seems to me that the university system, by only focussing on measuring students' language knowledge in terms of skills and proficiency, is no longer providing students with the core of language knowledge which I believe makes the difference between someone who can speak a language and someone who knows about language in addition to being able to use it. As native speakers we all can speak a language, but as language graduates and language professionals we need to be able to do more than just speak and write in that language. As a professional, I feel that the trend has gone too far and that we need to shift once more to find a solution to language education which is able to balance the need to train for proficiency while also providing students with in-depth knowledge about language and the complexity of working with language knowledge in diverse contexts in the interest of both the students and society at large.



REFERENCES

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