

The Evaluation of Specific Competences in Online Training Courses for Teachers of Italian to Foreigners: A Case Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to describe a model for online evaluation within the training of teachers of Italian to foreigners. What follows is a case study where, thanks to a multimedial environment, what wants to be created are the conditions for a different sort of interaction between teachers and students in the moment of evaluation. Such a context requires organizational and didactic choices that have been considered carefully in order to be consistent with the development of the technologies used in the interaction, perfecting in such manner training processes capable of acknowledging objectively specific competences concerning didactics.

Keywords: Online teaching training, Constructivism, Post-evaluation feedback

1. Technology in the Training for Teachers of Foreign Languages

The latest technologies applied to the field of online teaching training for teachers of foreign languages respond to the needs of learners to find new ways of studying and virtual means of communication that guarantee interconnections (Baym, 2010) and accessibility and change (Strother, 2002). With this in mind, Bullock (2004) argues that online training and refreshment courses have become ever more popular as technological devices tend to be more and more widespread and user-friendly and are therefore capable of enlarging the availability of training courses to an ever increasing audience of individuals wanting to improve their professional profile (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, 2005, 2010).

The latest technologies have also been widely applied to didactic contexts leading to learning environments that build and acknowledge specific competences and create new means of expression, new study methods and effective didactic and linguistic instances (Kern, 2014).

In this sensibility, Conner (2004) argues that teachers can avail themselves of the advantages offered by technology to extensively upgrade their competences and become aware of belonging to a community of teaching professionals (Wenger, 1999) globally spread and up to the challenge of our time provided that these virtual habitats, on the one hand, help teachers obtain new forms of acquisition, communication and sharing, and on the other, better focus on the latest innovative methodologic practices conducive to the most effective language learning processes in class.

2. The Paradigm for Online Learning Environments

The relationship between the need for training and the acquisition of certain teaching practises develops through a proper understanding and use of the latest technologies on behalf of teachers.

The different operative platforms for the training and upgrading of teachers are organically planned to address all aspects of the teaching profession. The next paragraph, in fact, highlights the theoretical model used in building online didactic courses such as those offered by Ca' Foscari University in Venice.

2.1 The Impact of Constructivism on the New Environments for the Training of Teachers

In the view of Sadera et al. (2009), belonging to several communities online - in this case linked to professional and foreign language teaching contexts - results in a progressive evolution of the teacher's identity as he or she becomes the active component of a process that generates thought, research and knowledge. The nature of this context gives the teacher the chance to be the protagonist of the educational challenges triggered not only by technology but also by the greater global community. With these contexts being committed to the building of knowledge, teachers focus their attention on the tools that allow them to refine their methodologies and make them adequate to the educational system they work within and the educational needs of their students.

According to Gold (2001), such objectives need the support of a model for knowledge development that leads to a context in which the main protagonist is the community of individuals who take advantage of their interaction and collaboration to, first of all, determine their identity and sense of belonging, and secondly conceive innovative forms of job cooperation and communication that result being more incisive and shaped to fit the true needs of the community members.

If the human parameter of the community members represents the specific foundation for these new learning environments, the operational platform needs to respond to a vast set of criteria (Compton, 2009):

- a) the conditions of its accessibility;
- b) how easy it is to access, surf, visualize and recall functions and specific pages within the platform (Orr, 1990); when dealing with particular niches of the system or special activities, the course participants need guidance in order to choose specific technical tools and become receptive towards what is occurring in the virtual environment so that they become more confident in detecting in real time the signs and symbols of the different virtual contexts and can associate them to specific communicational and job-oriented functions;
- c) the usability and relevance of each of its constitutional elements; each learning object activates a series of experiences and a network of relationships (Eady & Lockyer, 2010);
- d) the personalization entailed in this online learning environment;
- e) its multisensorial features;
- f) the meaningfulness of its multisensorial stimuli that support and give shape to processes that generate meaning originating from actions and activities that work as acquisition and training tools;
- g) the multimodality of its communication;
- h) its hypertextuality;
- i) the quality of its contents;
- j) the tools for evaluation inside its system needing to be less subjective and more consistent with the items and methods covered in the course; according to Compton (2009) such evaluation system must be based on criteria and descriptors that need to be clear, detailed, widely applicable and transparent (Serragiotto, 2013);
- k) the processing of the system's information and its problem management needing to be interactive and dynamic;
- l) the availability of a customer-care service (Goodman, 2010) so that problems concerning technicalities or administrative issues may be resolved quickly and permanently;
- m) what impact and effects this new knowledge-building experience has on the organization of the platform; the institution supplying the service may then draw conclusions on the

general trends that the critical mass of thinkers produces in terms of feedback on the service so that it may make adjustments to the course; and

n) the continuity of the platform so that it may become a reference point for the learning-teaching community in the future.

In such manner are generated situations where each step of the training process has been carefully designed, contextualized, developed, negotiated and followed up on analytically as part of a greater system focusing on the teacher, his or her emotions, learning style and knowledge in progress; all these personal facets become the building blocks, both theoretical and practical, for the requalification and retooling of the teacher (Luzón, 2006).

From this point of observation, each element of this learning system needs to facilitate the building of cognitive maps in order to quickly access content and knowhow and reorganize the net of internal relationships.

This paradigm for training processes has its source in coherent and functional educational and didactic objectives resulting from research-action procedures. This allows teachers to use research tools to carry out experiential and analytical observations on certain didactic features and thereafter evaluate them effectively.

According to Menhaca and Bekele (2008), the latest environments for teacher training are successful as they are built within user-friendly technological settings that the community members are familiar with. Then, when considering the professional training of teachers of foreign languages in particular, what becomes crucial is to verify the consistency and specificity of each training course in relation to the nature of the participants and find ways to evaluate the specific competences developed through the course. In this perspective, online evaluation must result being a highly meaningful moment to boost the motivation and involvement of the participants in the training activities.

2.2 The Use of Technology to Evaluate the Acquisition of Specific Competences within Multimedial Environments

According to Graves (2000), multimedial resources facilitate active learning where the acquisition of linguistic practices is developed through a consistent understanding and use of modern technology.

With regard to this, several platforms are suitable in realizing didactic courses provided that they respond to at least these two criteria:

a) the creation of multimedial classrooms where students can work out their own thinking and learning processes and interact with their classmates; and

b) the chance to allow for more effective studying and learning methods where each student's contribution is complementary to the contribution of the others (Hiltz & Turoff, 2002).

If, on the one hand, a multimedial class allows for a flexible timetable, on the other, it implies that students in order to accomplish a certain subject task, need to log in even in their own downtime, work on their own and participate in group work. Of course this means that inside

these virtual contexts students can communicate and be present although being physically elsewhere, going therefore beyond all cultural, linguistic and temporal barriers.

The reticular metaphor often used when referring to knowledge therefore is perfectly reflected in the logic of the World Wide Web being that one learns thanks to a network of connections and exchanges; the metaphorical size of one's knowledge becomes figuratively the proof and awareness of having or not having acquired content. What becomes relevant in a virtual class, compared to a physical class, are the implicit decisional processes of the participants who are, by nature of the context, not in a condition to distract themselves nor learn contents simply by heart, as may happen in a physical class. They need in fact to follow, participate and identify the best strategies to solve a certain didactic issue. Their participation online is monitored and their projects are subject to evaluation.

According to this model, evaluation mediated by technology perfectly matches multimedial training and education. In the view of Lombard and Ditton (1997), this concept of teaching and learning, especially in the field of languages, entails a peculiar context where didactic choices must pay attention to:

a) introducing and evaluating specific technological tools after processes of simplification and rectification of errors have occurred; in this manner the different devices chosen help keep high the quality of the didactics;

b) customizing the most efficient didactic courses so that the time needed to carry out specifically planned activities diminishes thanks, in fact, to the multimedial devices, and the time needed to correct assignments is optimized as a result of simplification and standardization; and

c) managing at a communicative level the contents addressed to the students, meaning that by adopting certain technological resources, the process of evaluation is best contextualized; an example could be to design a didactic course using the platform Moodle, where activities by students are more easily retrievable, totally accessible and more extensively described, so that the teacher can better analyze and evaluate what the student has produced.

In the end, multimediality results being a possible resource for didactics in general by guaranteeing learning options parallel to in-class situations and by offering different forms of evaluation that are, on the one hand, consistent with the items covered during the on-line course and, on the other, as much as possible objective through grids that show clear descriptors and are shared with the students.

3. Experiences of Training and Refreshment Courses for Teachers

This present study takes into consideration a specific case of online training for teachers of Italian as a foreign language. In detail, here are given answers about research interrogatives in the form of the following two questions:

a) is it possible to design online evaluation that, although lacking the face-to-face interactive moment, can still involve both tutors and participants in a communicative process?; and

b) what tools must be used to produce a form of reliable evaluation of the competences expressed by the course participants during activities?

The answers to such questions find inspiration in the studies by Willis (1996) and Hitchcock and Hughes (1989), whereas the practical context for this case study is the Master ITALS (*ITALiano come Lingua Straniera*, Italian as a Foreign Language) 1st Level of Ca' Foscari University in Venice, given that the underwriter has followed the design, development and expansion of the course in the capacity of director, coordinator and tutor throughout the 18-year life-span of the course. Finally, studies by Meyer (2004) have helped design the evaluation grids.

3.1 Online Training: The ITALS Master 1st Level

The training method selected for the ITALS Master avails itself of the latest technology to develop through blended learning training contexts featuring a constructivism framework and resulting from research-action methodologies.

The operational platform is based on Moodle and therefore course participants are invited to steadily improve their computer competences and consciously integrate them into their everyday practices when teaching Italian as a foreign language so that each phase of their tutoring becomes ever more interesting and engaging.

The different tools help participants establish relationships with each other and cooperate for the accomplishment of didactic projects.

The reticular metaphor mentioned in Paragraph 2.2 used both for the concept of knowledge and the logic underlying the World Wide Web shows how learning passes through sharing within a network and exchanging ideas through the net; observations on content and the development of didactic projects becomes the living evidence of the acknowledgement and awareness of having or not having acquired knowledge. With this in mind, the evaluation of the learning process takes directly advantage of some tools that allow to carefully examine the materials produced at the end of a module or an entire process. These tools - that entail the production of indicators needed to limit as much as possible the subjectivity of the tutor and to properly process the average grades of each participant – are considered in the following paragraph.

3.2 The Evaluation of Participants Through Technology

This paragraph shows practical examples of different evaluation methods used for the 1st Level of the ITALS Master.

At the end of each module lasting 4 weeks, the course participant is judged by the tutor of the subject matter. Given that the Master is mostly carried out online, the test is designed, administered and marked using tools found in the Moodle platform. Evaluation requires that the participant elaborates a written composition on a specific topic from the module and to this purpose the examiner needs to design a specific grid to support his judgement and increase the reliability of the evaluation itself (table 1).

Figure 1. Evaluation grid for module from ITALS Master 1st Level

ITALS MASTER

OUTLINE OF COURSE FRAMEWORK

TITLE OF MODULE: Language Evaluation

 CYCLE: 18TH

PERIOD OF ATTENDANCE: _____

TUTOR: _____

COURSE PARTICIPANT: _____

CLASS: _____

Column A FORUM	Column B FINAL TEST – 1ST ANSWER (THEORETICAL FEATURES)	Column C FINAL TEST – 2ND ANSWER PRACTICAL-OPERATIONAL AND ABILITIES FEATURES
1 st activity	Knowledge of the topic	Structure of the activity or paper
2 nd activity	Organization and structure	Effectiveness of the activity and consistency of the ideas
3 rd activity (optional)	Critical-synthetic observations	Capability to use knowledge and be creative and ability to analyse and evaluate

GRADE LEGEND	unsatisfactory	satisfactory	fair	good	excellent
Contrib. Forum	< 23	24	28-33	34-37	38-40
1 st Answer	< 14	18	22-24	25-27	28-30
2 nd Answer	< 14	18	22-24	25-27	28-30

Evaluation of Contributions to Forum (result from Column A)	____ / 40
Evaluation of Final Test of Module (results from Columns B and C)	____ / 60
Final Evaluation of Module (including possible round-off)	____ / 100

The use of different descriptors and the range of scores allocated to a certain grade bracket are useful in allowing to track down in real time the progress of the student and reducing to a minimum the subjectivity of the examiner.

In many cases the tutors have used a website where participants modify content and structure, namely a *wiki*, to increase the degree of interaction and collaboration among the users. A *wiki*, in fact, is so finely cut out for projects to students needing to cooperate; here assignments are

written and then stored. Unlike blogs, the wiki allows users to modify posts by other members making the original text better with the addition or elimination of parts that are believed to be either obsolete, incorrect or incomplete.

In this kind of setting, the tutor can carefully collect data through the work and interaction of the course participant in the forum activities to fill in the first column of the evaluation grid, “Contributions to Forum”. The examiner then considers the evaluation parameters in the grid to reach a grade bracket in order to measure the performance of the student. There are some applications that the tutor may use in order to simplify and speed up the evaluation process, in particular he can use specific functions to:

- a) build up an online register for evaluation that the student himself can consult as a sort of online report card kept updated in real time and accessible from anywhere;
- b) set up a register to delineate, within a timeline, the specific objectives of the course that can be modified or adjusted according to the needs of the learning experience;
- c) lay down a marking system from top grade “A” to not-pass mark “F”; and
- d) download or upload the online register onto an Excel, html or Word document.

The tutor can also view the progress of a certain participant throughout the entire learning course thanks to tools within the register in order to highlight the student’s general trend and obtain an average of the scores he or she has achieved during the course itself.

3.3 Example of Online Evaluation Tools: The Portfolio

Evaluation in general is the proper answer to the persistent need of monitoring the different dimensions of a learning process such as motivation, effort, attitude, participation, work carried out and objectives achieved, and thanks to the evaluation moment, both tutors and students can align their objectives and maximize their resources and efforts within the didactic process they belong to.

In this sense, the instance of evaluation becomes the chance to verify and monitor the work done up to a certain point, and to discuss the results and general attitude towards the course on behalf of the participant. This probing moment, by analyzing both the development and results of the course, highlights the perceived value of the student’s performance after each test. The perception allows to become aware of the progress being made, which methodologic and subject-matter items need to be strengthened and how to overcome downfalls through personalized measures of reinforcement for steady improvement.

What becomes crucial therefore is to have available a tool allowing to organize, monitor and compare the results and progress being made by the student in relation to the expected results and targets.

At this point, the idea of using a portfolio sounds appropriate in that it allows to easily gather all the necessary information to establish a general framework of reference for each student where both quantitative and qualitative results are taken into consideration (table. 2).

Table 2. Example of student portfolio

Group A		Academic Year 2017			Academic Year 2018	
Motivation		October	November	December	January	February
Name and Surname of Student	attendance					
	participation					
	effort					
	interaction					
	collaboration					
	in-class activity					
	online activity					
	assignments					
	test score					

This portfolio model has a formative function in the sense that it gathers the body of the formative assessment of the student. The options shown in the chart highlight the history of the student from different perspectives in relation to his or her study experience and results achieved. The understanding of this learning process is based on several subjective, relational and performance factors that are framed as a set of parallel activities to verify what the learner has acquired.

The grid may be personalized with the addition of features that the tutor believes mostly crucial for the student to pass the overall test. For example, areas negotiated between tutor and student can be added concerning objectives to be achieved month after month, areas needing improvement, strategies being adopted and processes put in place to strengthen both interest and motivation towards the course. The portfolio therefore represents a dynamic tool to mirror the performance of each student within his or her learning process. Because of the multichannel didactic options offered by online training contexts and by wanting to be consistent with the theoretical constructive premises that encourage students to entertain meta-reflexive activities and develop meta-competence skills, it is believed crucial to focus on the online portfolio and have it managed by the learners themselves. Therefore, within a didactic process where what prevails are the innovations coming from the web for platforms for the spreading of knowledge, students can rely on a virtual area where it is possible to:

- a) update their profile in real time;
- b) upload, manage and gather files and materials used to carry out assignments;
- c) catalogue their learning process in relation to their hourly online participation and the results achieved in their final test;
- d) review the entire learning experience with particular attention to the cognitive strategies developed in relation to the inquiries assigned by the teacher;

- e) retrieve support files and feedback comments from the tutor; and
- f) take advantage of the ongoing self-evaluation tools in order to give proper value to answers and materials produced and re-establish a sense of responsibility towards one's work (Pfeffer, 1994).

With this kind of scenario in mind, evaluation paves the path to the careful analysis of the learner's development. He or she can, in fact, turn the learning process into a cross-curricular and all-rounded experience within a framework that allows to steadily monitor one's own achievements. Learning organized around self-determination and the actions of the learner and his or her performance highlighted through evaluation, makes the student more motivated, self-aware and responsible towards tutor evaluation and self-evaluation.

Thanks to multidisciplinary and multichannelled grading, the learner can perceive the moment of evaluation as a fundamental milestone in checking one's own development in order to move to a higher level of responsibility and action.

4. Post Evaluation

It has been observed that between designing an online training project and its management, there appear to be, especially for tutors, critical aspects such as organizational issues and the handling of the post-evaluation phase.

In the specific case of the online training course taken into consideration, once evaluation had been completed, what appeared to be evident was a sort of lopsided judgement tilting towards the point of view of the tutor which triggered an ambiguous relational and communicative situation between the student and teacher where in the end the point of view of the examiner seemed to prevail.

Because of this delicate situation, a new solution is being experimented capable of organizing and directing the tutor's answers and feedback on the student's acquisition process more objectively and reliably.

Figure 3 shows the chart that is now being used once tests have been concluded and final results communicated.

This feedback model is based on a so called "hybrid" theoretical model for which evaluation is seen as a wide-span phenomenon starting from gauging student performance through results and objectives reached and measurable, all the way over to behaviours put in place to accomplish such results and objectives. In this manner, the several stages of evaluation and post-evaluation, on the one hand, highlight the competences acquired and displayed by the student, and on the other, become tools to qualify the contribution of the student to the course itself and his or her own ability to manage the learning process in terms of relational build-up, strategical awareness and critical thinking (Bullen, 1998).

Table 3. Model for online post-evaluation chart

Chart of Examinee										
Surname		Name		Master	M od ule	Class			Fin al Mar k	
Examiner										
Surname		Name		Module	from-to					
Temporal References										
Period of reference evaluation	of Evaluation parameters for communicated on date:			Evaluation carried out on date:		Score		Subject of request of feedback		
Proficiency Area										
Competence	Indicator			A1	A2	A3	VA1	VA2	VA3	VF
Actuative Competence	Autonomy									
	Precision									
	Focus on Objectives									
	Synthetic Thought									
	Focus on Results									
Intellectual Area										
Competence	Indicator									
Relational Competence	Relational Skills									
	Communicational Skills									
	Sense of Belonging to Community									
	Sense of Belonging to Group									
	Collaboration									
	Flexibility									
	Sharing									
Organizational Area										
Competence	Indicator									
Organizational	Problem-Solving									

Competence	Decision-Taking							
	Planning							
Competence	Indicator							
Self-Improvement Area	Enhanced subject competence compared to 1 st test							
	Improved didactic effectiveness in doing assignments							
	Improved specificity in doing tasks							
	Improved final score compared to intermediate tests							
	Contribution to didactic innovation and change within module							
Relational Area								
	Teamwork							
	Leadership							
	Appreciation of colleagues							

This post-evaluation chart takes into consideration a vast set of competences acquired by the course participant and is made up of two major areas, namely:

- a) the overall performance of the student with an indication of the specific results obtained so that he or she can keep on improving on the learning process; and
- b) the didactic-cognitive sphere, meaning the professional competences acquired and actually shown by the student.

The first area is connected to the competences acquired by the student at the end of each test, therefore this area measures the performances and results of the course participants. The second area is linked to the didactic and cognitive sphere of the learner, and is therefore more organizational in nature; it is aimed at giving objective feedback about the student's psycho-aptitudinal and organizational competences while progressing in the course. In this way it is possible to verify if the trainee is showing capabilities in carrying out didactic

projects, in establishing relationships with colleagues and in handling and using didactic materials.

The two areas are ultimately linked being that one area inspires and complements the other in this process of crafting a true professional that, in this case, is an all-rounded and full-fledged teacher.

As to evaluation criteria, at every structural level, the achievement of specific operational and performative objectives is measured in terms of total or partial completion of the tasks therewith involved.

Evaluation is therefore finely tuned according to the following chart (table 4).

Table 4. Example of evaluation applied to an area of specific competence taken from the feedback chart

Actuative Competence	Evaluation (1-4)	Weight	Weighted Evaluation
Autonomy			
Precision			
Focus on the Objectives			
Synthetic Thought			
Focus on Results			
		Total:	

The single competences with their corresponding measurable behaviours are ordered following a qualitative growing scale where for each step are foreseen scores expressed in numbers as reported in the chart here below (table 5):

Table 5. Evaluation scale

Legend: 1-4
4 = excellent
3 = good
2 = satisfactory
1 = below expectation level

Because of the critical issues observed, this model has established that the feedback on test results needs to be connected to:

- a) the performance indicators referring to the didactic field that is under the direct responsibility of the course participant;
- b) the achievement of specific personal objectives;
- c) the quality of the student's contribution to the course in general; and
- d) the professional and cooperational competences displayed by the student in line with the overall purposes of the Master.

By analyzing the content of these points, it is exactly the object of evaluation that determines the choice of this model with the two macro-areas, “results” and “actual competences”, which are given different kinds of weight that can vary from 75% for “results” to 25% for “actual competences” in the final evaluation.

The objectives that want to be reached with this kind of tool are summarized in the following chart (table 6):

Table 6. Objectives of the feedback model

Competence	Indicator
Actuative	Autonomy Precision Critical Thought Focus
Relational	Relational Skills Communicational Skills Sense of Belonging
Organizational	Problem-Solving Planning

5. Conclusions

By using new technologies, evaluation has become a priceless and effective means of tutor-learner involvement and communication. In this sensibility, training processes mediated by the web connect technology to space and time giving teachers the chance to become aware of their own professional role and become ever more expert in using technological tools to support better teaching and learning.

The critical situation that online evaluation presents has laid the grounds for a series of interrogatives on the tools and criteria to be used in order to avoid the typical mistakes of examiners such as a distorted judgement on the actual performance of a course participant. This, in fact, has determined the need to offer experimental grids and post-evaluation feedback charts as the ones considered above that have allowed to separate the subjectivity of the examiner from the actual performance of the examinee, and have also allowed to give trustable feedback to the true competences that learners have acquired.

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