

ASSESSING ONLINE LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

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The increased use of online technologies and Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) in foreign language classrooms has led teachers to broaden the focus of learning to include intercultural understanding, the skills of intercultural interaction, as well as electronic literacy. However, while the development of e-literacy and intercultural communicative competence may be seen as inevitable outcomes of many of the activities of online foreign language learning, it is still debatable how these competencies should be formally assessed by foreign language educators. This paper looks at approaches to the assessment of competencies in the European Higher Education Area and discusses how online foreign language learning at university level can be assessed within this new framework of learning.

"May you live in interesting times" – ancient Chinese curse

INTRODUCTION

University-level foreign language educators in Spain and across Europe are working in educational contexts which are undergoing radical change and development. Over the past number of years, new frameworks have been established which are now shaping university education in general and foreign language education in particular. These are the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), with its methodological emphasis on student-centredness and the development of generic and subject-specific competencies (Tuning, 2002; González and Wagenaar, 2005), and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001). Both of these frameworks provide insight into how educational curricula should be structured and

what the goals of learning should be. Significantly, even though the former is focussed on the convergence of university education in Europe and the latter on the description and development of foreign language proficiency in a European context, both coincide in the development of learner competencies as the central activity of student-centred learning. In the case of the EHEA, these competencies can be either generic (e.g. teamwork, working autonomously) or subject-specific (e.g. in *Filología Inglesa*, the ability to analyse literary texts from a comparative perspective). In the case of the CEFR, competencies are either general (e.g. sociocultural competence) or linguistic (e.g. grammatical accuracy).

However, problems emerge when one attempts to establish how these competencies should be

assessed. For example, while the EHEA underlines the importance of generic competencies such as teamwork, the ability to communicate and to work autonomously, work on the framework has not yet attempted to offer concrete guidelines as to how these should be assessed in a curriculum.

This can be particularly problematic when foreign language learning activity involves online activities such as engaging students in online intercultural exchanges or online publishing. Online activities require students to use intercultural skills to communicate and collaborate with members of other cultures in online environments. With this in mind, this paper sets out to explore what online foreign language education involves and how such activity is usually assessed by foreign language educators and then goes on to discuss how the assessment of online foreign language learning can be located in the EHEA.

ONLINE FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

In recent years, the implantation of online and digital technologies in western societies has had a particularly significant impact on the sphere of foreign language education (Thorne and Payne, 2005; Kern, 2006). Language learners are engaged more and more in new types of learning activities such as online interaction with fellow learners and with members of other cultures using computer-mediated communication tools (O'Dowd, 2007), the development of online documents (e.g. blogs and podcasts) in the target language and the completion of collaborative project work using online resources and tools (e.g. webquests). All of these activities are located in a medium which has multimedia and multimodal dimensions, alters traditional discourse structures, introduces new notions of authorship and has a distinctly multicultural populace.

However, although online learning activity may be becoming part of the norm in foreign language education, there has been a distinct lack of attention paid to the question of how online foreign language activity should be assessed. There are various reasons why this may be the case. Lamy and Hampel (2007: 88)

speculate that it is due to the relative 'adolescence' of this area of foreign language education:

In maturing, CMCL [computer mediated communication for foreign language learning] has taken little account of assessment. Possibly, early research needed to attend to procedures, tasks, perceptions and a host of other aspects of online learning before it could speak reliably about the assessment of such a new form of learning.

But apart from researchers' and practitioners' having other priorities, it is fair to argue that there may be further reasons why the assessment of online activity has not been examined in greater detail. It may be the case, for example, that many foreign language programmes have failed to make any attempt to adapt assessment procedures to the new forms of learning. Authors such as Salmon (2000) and Levy and Stockwell (2006) have pointed out that, although many foreign language learning courses have integrated online activities, educators continue to evaluate students using traditional methods which ignore the new (virtual) contexts in which they are learning and the new skills and competencies which they are developing in these contexts. Levy and Stockwell (2006: 231-232) explain:

...although students may make imaginative use of new technologies in their coursework – creating Web sites, developing portfolios, completing Webquests, participating in collaborative projects – all too often they are still required, individually, to complete examinations and assessment items that use very traditional techniques and technologies.

A third possible reason for the neglect of online assessment methods may be related to the complexities of assessing the skills and competencies which online communicative activity involves. Online tasks engage learners in the development of linguistic competence and communicative language skills in much the same way as traditional communicative classroom activities do. But they also go much further than this. They also require to a much greater extent the use of the skills, attitudes and knowledge of

intercultural communicative competence and electronic literacy, as learners use the online medium to analyse and author *multimodal texts*¹ for a world-wide audience as well as to establish and maintain relationships with members of other cultures in a foreign language.

In the following section, we look briefly at what the literature on the EHEA has to say on issues of developing learner competencies and of assessment and we then relate them to the area of online foreign language education.

ASSESSMENT IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

The Bologna Declaration, which was signed by 29 European countries in June 1999, proposed various objectives which would lead to the establishment of a European Higher Education Area by 2010. These included the design of a common framework of reference of easily readable and comparable degrees, the organisation of studies into undergraduate and postgraduate levels and the creation of the European Credit Transfer System. The EHEA also proposes the use of a generic and subject-specific competence-based model of curriculum development in order to facilitate transparency in educational programmes, as well as student mobility and employability.

The Tuning project has linked the political objectives set in the Bologna Declaration of 1999 to the higher education sector and has explored the consequences of the establishment of an EHEA for university education across Europe. Tuning identifies the use of competencies to describe and orientate university learning as being at the centre of a new teaching/learning paradigm, which is student-centred and which shifts the emphasis of learning from the transmission of knowledge to what students are able to do at the end of a period of learning:

'Tuning' results make clear that Universities must not only transfer consolidated or developing knowledge, their traditional sphere of expertise, but also a variety of 'general' abilities. This implies that they must explicitly develop a novel mix of approaches to teaching and learning in order to

encourage, or allow to develop, valuable qualities such as capacity for analysis and synthesis, independence of judgement, curiosity, teamwork, and ability to communicate. (2002: 128)

The White Paper entitled “*Título de Grado en Estudios en el Ámbito de la Lengua, Literatura, Cultura y Civilización*” (Agencia Nacional de Evaluación, 2007), which deals with the adaptation of English Philology to this new framework, does not identify any subject-specific or generic competencies for *Filología Inglesa* which specifically refer to the need for students of this degree to be able to interact online or to analyse or create multimodal documents. However, at the University of León, the proposed set of competencies for the revised degree of *Filología Moderna: Inglés* does include the following:

1. *Capacidad para comprender, analizar y elaborar textos de distintos tipos, registros y en distintos medios en lengua inglesa (lengua B).*
2. *Capacidad para utilizar tecnología informática aplicada al trabajo lingüístico y de comunicación en general y evaluar su utilidad en cada caso concreto.*
3. *Capacidad para reconocer las idiosincrasias de los entornos multilingües caracterizados por la diversidad social, cultural y étnica y ser capaz de asegurar la comunicación y mediación interlingüística e intercultural inglés-español.*
4. *Conocimiento de las técnicas de comunicación interlingüística e intercultural que afectan al inglés y al español.* (Rabadán, 2008)

Competencies 1 and 2 confirm the relevance of online foreign language communicative activity for this degree, as the reference to “*distintos medios*” in competence 1 can be understood to include the online medium, while competence 2 makes a clear reference to the use of new technologies for online communication. Competencies 3 and 4 highlight the importance of sociocultural knowledge and intercultural communicative competence for learners studying this degree and it is fair to suggest that this knowledge and competence should be applicable to all contexts – including the virtual.

However, it is unclear from the EHEA documentation how such competencies should

be evaluated. The 2002 Tuning report limits itself to the following comments on assessment:

Changing teaching and learning approaches and objectives implies corresponding changes in assessment methods and criteria for evaluating performance. These should consider not only knowledge and contents but also general skills and competencies [...] Of course, transparency and comparability of assessment methods and criteria for evaluating performance are essential if quality assurance in a European context is to be developed. (2002: 128-129)

Apart from attributing importance to the evaluation of general competencies, the report also calls for a “...greater wealth of assessment strategies (portfolio, tutorial work, course work...)” (2002: 18). A more recent Tuning report adds to this by providing an overview of the different formative as well as summative assessment procedures² which are currently in use in European universities, but does not actually provide suggestions as to which of these may be most suited to assessing competencies (González and Wagenaar, 2005: 207-209). However, the authors do warn that generic competencies are often interpreted in very different ways, depending on the subject areas and the national contexts in which they are taught.

In summary, the EHEA provides a new framework for university education within which foreign language degrees can be located. Its methodological approach is based on the development of learner competencies – both subject-specific and generic - and which requires assessment methods to be transparent, to take on both formative and summative roles and to be sufficiently varied in order to reflect the different possible outcomes of learning. The form which this approach to assessment will take appears to be very much open to interpretation.

CURRENT APPROACHES TO ONLINE ASSESSMENT

Although the guidelines proposed by the EHEA as regards teaching and assessment have yet to become the norm in university foreign

language education, it is interesting to establish how online foreign language learning activity is currently being assessed by educators around Europe and to what extent ‘generic’ or ‘non-linguistic’ competencies are being attended to in assessment procedures. As there is a dearth of literature on the area of assessing online foreign language learning, I carried out a survey among 20 experienced university level foreign language educators who regularly use online activities such as telecollaborative exchange and online publishing in their courses. The results of the survey are combined here with the few reports which do exist in the literature on this area.

The survey was aimed at establishing, firstly, what educators evaluate when they engage their students in online interaction and, secondly, how they evaluate these aspects. The subjects were asked to respond to the following questions via email:

What do you assess of your students' online activity when they take part in online exchanges?

Levels of Participation (e.g. no. of posts written)?

The linguistic level of their writing/speaking in the L2?

Their ability to interact?

Their electronic literacies (e.g. ability to produce a blog)?

Their Intercultural Competence (skills, attitudes, cultural awareness)?

Secondly, how do you assess their online exchanges?

Proof of participation? (e.g. print-outs of their interaction)

Products of interaction (blogs, websites, essays)?

Reflection on learning (portfolios, diaries)? Any other methods?

Out of the twenty educators who were contacted, nine responded to the questions. Despite the relatively low number of responses, the survey enabled me to make some initial observations as regards how online assessment is carried out and what is actually being evaluated.

Firstly, it was observed that a great deal of online assessment is linked to participation. Many educators reported giving marks depending on the number of times a student sent emails, posted messages in online forums or wrote entries in their blogs. Two representative comments demonstrating this approach are the following:

I consider how much and how often they interact with each other. I usually say something like: 'You have to at least respond to two or three posts and make comments or ask questions.' You kind of need to do this because most of the students are not very motivated. [Respondent 1]

For a base grade I assess their level of participation in terms of posts of original sentences each week. In other words, if they are saying the same thing over and over again, it doesn't count. [Respondent 3]

This tendency to evaluate the quantity of participation has already been identified in the literature and has received considerable criticism for various reasons. For example, writers have questioned the inherent assumption that participation is equivalent to learning and that students who do not write will not learn. In other words, little sympathy is shown for 'receptive-only' participation (Lamy and Hampel, 2007). Goodfellow (2007) also questions the quality of a learning activity which needs to oblige learners to participate:

[...]Look at the widespread practice of linking participation to assessment. 'You must contribute at least 5 messages in order to pass the course.' Why would we need to say this, if we had an engaging and effective tool for interaction to offer them?

A second significant finding from the survey is the great importance attributed in online assessment to what could be referred to as 'affective aspects' of online interaction. Many respondents mentioned marking students' online performance according to their ability to interact with others in a sensitive way, to develop positive relationships and to develop dialogic exchanges which referred to and expanded

previous messages. Some examples of this emphasis on the type of interaction which students engage in can be found in the following extracts of my survey:

I look to see if they have demonstrated social competence, *responding to people thoughtfully, expressing interesting ideas [...]* [Respondent 4] (My italics)

How much did they exchange and *how well they do it*. Did they push the envelope or did they stay with the tried and true (and trite)? Did someone *share a personal experience* (not touchy feely, but 'this happened to me when I was in a foreign country'...) [Respondent 7] (My italics)

Further evidence of this approach can be found in research reports in the literature which describe the assessment criteria used in their studies. Anderson-Mejias (2006) proposes a scheme, for example, in which the content of online messages is judged according to which of the following characteristics they contain: a) new ideas, b) restatement of previous ideas with changes, c) restatement of previous ideas without changes, d) acceptance of ideas of others, e) rejection of others' ideas and suggestion of new ideas or e) rejection of others' ideas with proposing new ideas. Arnold and Ducate (2006) awarded a quarter of the marks for an online discussion task for the ability of students to explicitly respond to group members' postings and integrate them into their own responses. Similarly, Weasenforth, Biesenbach-Lucas and Meloni (2002) explained that students were evaluated on the following criteria:

Each message that you write should be a response to previous messages. This means that each contribution must build on previous contributions. Your contribution should not be a separate, independent message without a relationship to messages from others in your group.

A final outcome of the survey was an admission of the problems which practitioners are encountering with regards the evaluation of intercultural communicative competence. It is

clear that, while educators contribute great importance to this area, they are finding great difficulty in establishing how it can be assessed appropriately. One of the comments reflecting on this issue included the following:

Question: Do you assess their Intercultural Competence (skills, attitudes, cultural awareness)?

Response: It is the main topic of the course and the scenario is built around it. However the "measure" of IC skills is only done posthoc and by researchers. It is still a research issue. [Respondent 2]

Generally, educators seem to use portfolios as the most effective approach to assessing intercultural competence. This evaluation tool enables learners to reflect at length on cultural issues and to demonstrate growth and development of intercultural awareness:

First, I should mention that all assessment in my course was done via portfolio - both formative and summative portfolio. The main emphasis of the portfolio assessment was "development" - students could choose their own areas in which they wanted to develop and then they needed to document that development in their portfolio entries by showing change over time. Usually students used annotated email and chat transcripts as entries in their portfolios to document their change over time. [Respondent 9]

CONCLUSION

This short paper has aimed to highlight the need to identify how online foreign language learning activity can be effectively and accurately assessed within the new approaches to education outlined

in the EHEA. It is clear that further research is necessary in various areas.

Firstly, there is a need to identify in greater detail the different approaches to assessment of online foreign language interaction and to investigate the theoretical, ethical and practical issues which foreign language educators face in this area. This will be achieved by carrying out a more comprehensive international survey of online foreign language teaching practitioners and establishing what are the current trends in the assessment of online foreign language learning activity.

Secondly, it is important to identify the areas of intercultural communicative competence and electronic literacy which make up some of the non-linguistic competencies which are inevitably the focus of online communicative activity. Using the guidelines offered by the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) and the European Language Portfolio (Council of Europe, 2000), empirically validated descriptors for the assessment of levels of certain (non-linguistic) skills and online communicative activities could be drawn up. Descriptors for such areas have not yet been developed even though they are widely considered as important aspects of the modern foreign language curriculum.

Although the literature on the EHEA rightly acknowledges that competencies will be assessed differently according to local and national educational contexts, I believe that the establishment of common guidelines for assessment procedures in this and other areas of foreign language education will facilitate student learning across borders and lead to greater cohesion in European approaches to foreign language education.

Notes

¹ These are online texts that integrate writing, speech, images, colour, sound, animation and thereby combine logics of time and space – e.g. blog entries, webpages, etc. (Kern, 2006).

² *Summative assessment* refers to assessment which takes place at the end of a course of study. Its aim is to measure a learner's performance and thereby to provide information as to how much learners have progressed during the course. In contrast, *formative assessment* refers to the ongoing process of gathering information on the processes of learning, the extent of learning, and on strengths and weaknesses and which provides learners and tutors with information for future planning to meet an individual's needs (Hunt, 2001).

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