Amanda Murphy

Changes, Challenges, Achievements

Computers in the University Classroom

www.aracneeditrice.it
info@aracneeditrice.it

via Raffaele Garofalo, 133 A/B
00173 Roma
(06) 93781065

ISBN 978–88–548–1871–2

1st edition: July 2008

Ai miei maestri

Every day you may make progress. Every step may be fruitful.
Yet there will stretch out before you an ever–lengthening,
ever–ascending, ever–improving path. You know you will never
get to the end of the journey.
But this, so far from discouraging,
only adds to the joy and glory of the climb.

Sir Winston Churchill

Table of Contents

Introduction

This collection spans ten years of experience in teaching English at university level in two universities in Milan. It represents a personal itinerary in terms of research interests and experimentation with computer-assisted teaching and testing in the classroom, while simultaneously charting the development of teaching practice in university. Three of the chapters have already been published elsewhere, while the fourth appears here for the first time. The chapters are all self-contained, and have their own references sections, written for the original publication. They are linked, however, by the common theme of how computers can contribute to the learning/teaching/testing process in university contexts.

The first chapter, *Autonomy and awareness in language learning/testing*[1], describes the building and piloting of a computerized test of English as a means of promoting autonomy and language learning awareness among students. In 1998, computerized testing was in its early stages in third-level education in Italy: a few universities were devising tests with specially bought platforms such as QuestionMark (see *Test your English*), which had a limited typology of questions. Ten years later, in the Catholic University in Milan, it is by now normal practice across almost all the Faculties to use the online platform *Blackboard Academic Suite*™ as a teaching and testing aid (described in the third chapter of this collection). *Blackboard* offers a wider choice of test items, uploads sound files with minimal problems, can incorporate the International

[1] Originally published in *Le lingue nell'università del duemila*, Csillaghy A e Gotti, M. Forum, Udine 2000. 243-255.

Phonetic Alphabet (although still with slight difficulty), tracks the progress of all students, giving immediate or delayed feedback, as well as providing space for delivery of materials, a calendar for the course, email facilities to all enrolled students, among many other services.

The second chapter, *A multi-modal approach to language learner difficulties*[2], describes successful strategies recommended to learners who come to a halt in their language progress in university, such as investigating their language learning habits, and encouraging them to follow their favourite learning styles and also helping them diversify their way of studying the language. A combination of individual attention and advice and specially chosen multimedia materials proved to be a way of helping students develop as adult language learners and decrease their dependence on the language teacher. At the same time, the figure of the teacher-cum-language adviser was introduced and proved to be extremely useful for students in this situation. The most tangible development since the original paper was written is the fact that language advisers now exist as part of the language centre staff, and they implement the kind of strategies advocated here. This testifies to development in the field of language teaching and a greater understanding on the part of language teachers of the need to respect individual learning styles.

The third chapter, *Computer-mediated communication in University Courses*[3] presents the rationale, methods and results of an action research initiative which included Computer-mediated communication (CMC) in three university English Linguistics courses. In a crowded classroom situation where interactivity was limited and the learning environment largely defined by the lecturer, the introduction of an asynchronous

[2] Originally published in *Anno Europeo delle lingue: proposte della nuova università italiana, Atti del II Convegno AICLU*, edited by Carol Taylor Torsello, Maria Catricalà, John Morley, TerredeSienne editrice, Siena, 2002. 221-230.

[3] Originally published in *Studies in Communication Sciences*. Special Issue New Media in Education, March 2003. 135-156.

dimension to teacher-student communication via the Internet infrastructure software (Blackboard) brought an increase in teacher-student dialogue and a broadening of the learning environment. The benefits of incorporating CMC in the courses are deduced partly from a quantitative analysis of student answers to a questionnaire, as well as from a qualitative analysis of the lecturer's personal experience. The costs in terms of personal effort and time are considered to be high, but the overall effect for both students and lecturer is evaluated as extremely positive.

The last chapter, *Exploring phraseology and lexical items through corpora,* reflects some of the challenges facing language teaching in the era of corpus linguistics, including how to transform scientifically interesting insights derived from this type of language research into pedagogically useful exercises, and how to empower and motivate students to investigate language in ways in which they are the protagonists of the discovery process. It illustrates two experiments with third year students from the Business Language stream of the Faculty of Languages at the Catholic University in Milan using a combination of reference works like monolingual dictionaries and both reference and specialized corpora to investigate phraseology in English and Italian and pairs of words that are either false friends with Italian, or similar between themselves. The outcome of both experiments, and the generally positive feedback, suggests that although hands-on corpora investigation is not suitable for all students, given the technological component that still blocks some of them, many of them gain immeasurably in terms of their perception of the complexity and subtlety of language, and the element of discovery is sometimes refreshing for students who have been studying English for at least 10 years.

Chapter I
Autonomy and awareness in language learning/testing

1. Introduction

This chapter presents the steps taken in the construction of three parallel versions of *Test Your English* (*TYE*), a multimedia test of communicative language ability created at the English Institute of the Università degli Studi di Milano[4] in collaboration with the Mediateca, the results obtained from the volunteers who have taken it so far and the prospects that have opened up since the project started in 1997. The test is part of a range of initiatives, including self-study itineraries and questionnaires regarding needs analysis and learning expectations.

2. The *TYE* context

The situation of English language teaching in most Italian universities offers ample scope for experimentation, due to the large number of students enrolled, and the *Corso di Laurea in Lingue Straniere Moderne*[5] at Milan's state university is no exception. Over the last few years, the number of students in the first year English courses in question has fluctuated between

[4] The test was created by a team who collaborate with M. Cecilia Rizzardi in the Institute of English.

[5] The Università degli Studi di Milano offers a Corso di Laurea in Lingue Straniere Moderne within the Facoltà di Lettere.

450 and 600. Six language courses were offered in 1998-9 (to be reduced to five in the current academic year); the consequent crowding of classes exerts obvious constraints on the effectiveness of frontal language lessons, making the need for technological contributions to the language learning process almost imperative. The technological facilities available, however, hardly meet the needs of the situation: there is no *Centro Linguistico* at present, and students have access to a traditional language laboratory with 48 places, and a *mediateca* with 9 computers and 8 video recorders, used two days a week by the History of Art Department.

In 1997-8, our intention was to create a test that could divide up the first year students on their arrival and place them in an appropriate course according to their level of language proficiency. However, the Institute's practice at the time was to allow students to enrol in any language course that suited their weekly schedule (course clashes being a major timetable problem). Compounded with the fact that any self-respecting test with a claim to validity must go through a lengthy piloting phase (during which it is taken by volunteers), this state of affairs made it obvious that a few years would be needed before the test could be proposed as a reliable instrument at the service of the Institute. Our aim thus became that of creating a general proficiency test, to be used as a diagnostic tool which would help students realise where their weaknesses are and guide them into self-study itineraries in language areas they need to concentrate on. Volunteers have so far been numerous, with 160 students in 1997-1998 and 325 students the following year, and this would appear to indicate an encouraging trend: students perceive the need for help and wish to supplement their normal language classes with guided self-study activities.

3. A preparatory survey

One might ask if it is worth creating a new English language test, when the market abounds with new products for learning English. To see whether there was anything comparable to what we aimed to do, we examined five existing tests, of which two were on paper (the Nelson/Longman Quickcheck Placement Tests and the Oxford Placement tests[6],) and three were computerized (the *Seminar*[7] placement test, the test created at the Università Commerciale Luigi Bocconi di Milano[8], and the Computer-Adaptive-Test from Itembanker™). While it was extremely useful to see the choice of linguistic items included in these tests, the relatively arbitrary decisions regarding their level of difficulty, the length of the tests, the question formats, and the management of the testing process, we could not find a computerized general proficiency test. Most of the tests we examined were limited to discrete-point testing of structural elements, and this confirms Baker's affirmation (1989:102) that it is normally sufficient to test knowledge of grammar alone in order to form homogeneous classes of students. Since we were not aiming for a placement test, the survey confirmed the fact that it was worth creating a new multimedia test that could be used diagnostically with regard to general language proficiency.

Contemporaneously to our empirical survey of existing tests, we were looking for a model of communicative language competence as a basis on which to build. As Alderson and North remark in their survey of language testing in the 90's, "the profusion of competing and contradictory models, with very slim empirical foundations, inhibits the language tester or applied linguist from selecting the "best model" on which to base his or her language test," (1991:9). The most exhaustive and challenging model we found, within the tradition of

[6] Cf. Fowler and Coe (1995) and Allan (1992).

[7] Created by Information Transfer, Computer Assisted Learning System, Cambridge, England.

[8] This test is largely the work of Giuliana Garzone, who kindly allowed us to observe an afternoon of testing at the Università Commerciale Luigi Bocconi.

componential models of communicative language competence started by Hymes (1971), Munby (1978) and Canale and Swain (1980) was Lyle Bachman's Communicative Language Ability (CLA) model, published in 1990.

Bachman's CLA model identifies three main areas of language ability, which interact with a person's general knowledge in a given context:

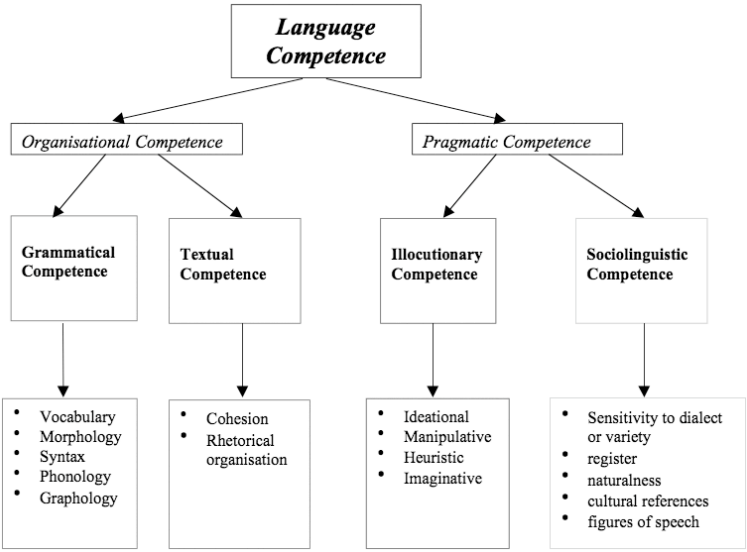
- language competence (knowledge that is used in communication through language)
- strategic competence (the mental capacity to enact linguistic competence in a communicative context)
- psychophysiological mechanisms (the neurological and psychological processes involved in the production of language as a physical phenomenon).

Bachman himself (1990) declares that his model should be used as a guide, and that it would be impossible to verify in one test. On examining the model, it appeared to us that testing strategic competence would involve a very high level of interaction, which was not feasible with the software at our disposal (Questionmark Design for Windows, Version 2). And although we understood the necessity to include psychophysiological mechanisms in a communicative language ability model, we thought that since these mechanisms regard communicative ability in one's native language too, there is no particular need to test them in a foreign language proficiency test. However, we decided to adopt at least the part of the model regarding language competence (illustrated in Fig. 1) since its map of the various abilities and functions involved is extremely comprehensive and their division is innovative. The fact that a communicative use of language is characterised by the interaction of all the factors present in communicative language ability[9] meant that, in our view, the two sections left out of the

[9] The model deliberately avoids the word "competence" in its title, because in Bachman's view competence equals knowledge, which is only part of communicative

model would be inevitably included in a test of language ability, although their performance could not be singled out or tested specifically.

Figure 1. Language Competence in Lyle Bachman's model of Communicative Language Ability.



Bachman divides language competence into two broad categories: organisational and pragmatic. The former includes competence in areas concerning the formal structure of the language, i.e. the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences, understand content, and organise thoughts and sentences into texts. These organisational abilities, considered to be productive competences, are subdivided into two fairly independent categories: grammatical and textual competence.

---

ability since it leaves out the performance element. One can only test knowledge - or competence - by seeing it enacted, and so, when enacted, as in a communicative test, these competences can only be observed as part of communicative language ability.

Grammatical competence includes lexical, morphological, syntactic, phonological and graphological competence, while textual competence, which concerns knowledge of the conventions which join sentences, making them into a text[10], implies correct use of cohesion and rhetorical organisation.

The second broad category within this section - pragmatic competence - concerns the relations between the utterances produced by a speaker and the characteristics of the context in which they occur. Illocutionary competence (ideational, manipulative, heuristic and imaginative) is distinguished from sociolinguistic competence, which covers the speaker's sensitivity to context - cultural and social - such as differences of dialect and jargons, register, naturalness of expression and the ability to understand cultural references or rhetorical figures.

4. Content and structure of *TYE*

Having studied Bachman's model, our next aim was to identify the content we wished to include in *TYE* and the format in which to present it. These choices were inevitably conditioned by the software (Questionmark Design for Windows) available in the Institute. This software is a multimedia authoring programme for the creation and administration of tests. As such, it is relatively flexible, offering six different screen formats (of which we used three: Multiple Choice, Gap-fills - called "Text" format - and Explanation screens allowing for long passages of written text), multimedia links (video/sound files), a randomization function allowing questions or sections of questions (grouped into "libraries") to appear in a different order on each computer, a timer, and the recording and analysis of scores. These characteristics meant

[10] "Text" in this model is considered to be a unit of spoken or written language, consisting of two or more sentences which are organised according to the rules of cohesion and rhetorical organisation.