THE CERCLU PROJECT:
language certification in Italian language centres

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Abstract

Nowadays language centres are expected to provide high quality services not only in teaching foreign languages, but also in testing proficiency levels. This article describes the CERCLU project, which aims at certifying Italian language centres. Such certification is based on the Threshold and Vantage Levels established by the Council of Europe. Stress is laid on the evaluation of the ability to use the language communicatively. Much use is made of computerized systems in the preparation, administering and correction of the tests. The project is expected to last three years, and should lead to the drawing up of tests to evaluate the level of proficiency in two languages, English and Italian, as well as the creation of a data bank. In the future it is envisaged that such certification will be matched at the European level by a similar type of certification coordinated by CERCLES, the European Association of University Language Centres.

Nowadays language centres are expected to provide high quality services not only in teaching foreign languages, but also in testing proficiency levels. The most recent European Community programme in the field of higher education emphasizes its recommendations concerning quality issues, envisaging the introduction of quality assurance methods in higher education and the promotion of European cooperation in this field. The document suggests the establishment of transparent quality assessment and quality assurance systems, to be based on a number of common principles. There is general support for the introduction of efficient and acceptable methods of quality assurance which take into account European and international experience and the possibility of cooperation. The directives of the European Community also emphasize the need for higher education institutions to fix common levels of language proficiency to be reached by their students, based on shared parameters and criteria.

The Italian university system is currently undergoing a radical reform process, based on new legislation requiring each student to possess competence in at least one foreign European language, with specific credits to be given to
students who have acquired such knowledge and skills. The Association of Italian University Language Centres (AICLU) is willing to promote specific measures in the near future so as to facilitate the implementation of the reform of the university course structure envisaged in the new university legislation which is soon to become operative.

A similar need is felt by Italian university language centres, which are convinced that it is very important to adopt common principles and practices for the evaluation of competence in the various languages tested by them. The results of such tests are generally required for different purposes: as entry requisites, for placement purposes, for the evaluation of a language course or the assessment of language proficiency for occupational purposes.

Moreover, there is a steadily increasing demand for standardised certification to be issued as a result of these testing procedures, since this certification – usually based on objectives set by an external institution – has the advantage of making the following steps easier: 1) evaluation of the language competence of entry students coming from different institutions and from different countries; 2) quality assessment of the entire language teaching apparatus of the university through an external test; 3) the issue of certification based on recognised international standards for purposes of mobility and employment.

In particular, there is a need to establish a system of certification with the same structure for all Italian language centres and, as far as possible, for all European centres. At the moment various commercial systems are available in order to make this procedure feasible; these, however, may not be the best solution for language centres, as they have not been designed specifically for the needs of universities or are often offered at high costs.

This is the reason why AICLU has decided to create a system for testing language proficiency in its centres, basing the levels to be certified on those established by the Council of Europe. It has not yet been decided whether or not each student who applies for certification will be charged a small fee, but if so it would be a very small amount, and definitely considerably less than they would pay for other well-known certifications.

The CERCLU project

The name chosen for AICLU’s certification system is CERCLU, an acronym for ‘Certificazione dei Centri Linguistici Universitari’ (i.e. University Language Centres Certification). At an initial stage the levels to be certified will be those established by the Council of Europe as Level Two (Threshold Level) and Level Three (Vantage), since these are the two levels most commonly required in Italian language centres at the moment, as a specific survey has confirmed.
Since they will be based on levels fixed by the Council of Europe (Threshold Level and Vantage), the tests produced by this project may be administered in different settings and the results used for different purposes: the tests could serve as entry tests, placement tests, basic language tests, evaluation at the end of a language course or as external tests to evaluate language proficiency. The results of these tests will also be valid for the selection of candidates for ERASMUS and SOCRATES programmes, as well as for the certification of the language competence acquired by the incoming foreign students taking part in those programmes.

The research project will be carried out by representatives of university language centres, all of them members of AICLU, most of whom are part of the steering committee. Their goal is to create a common system for testing language proficiency. The group also acts as the AICLU commission for the provision of a solution to the problem of language certification in Italian language centres. Padua has been chosen as the site of the pilot programme to validate the system which will be created. AICLU aims to make available to the member university language centres a system of testing of the levels of proficiency in various foreign languages (including Italian as a foreign language).

A large database of validated testing items will be created, to be used following established protocols in creating the tests to be administered in the individual centres. Each item will have a score, so that the person examined can be given clear information about their position relative to the level of the certification. For both levels, test modules will be created corresponding to the four communicative skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) which can be evaluated separately.

The intention is to introduce some possibility of choice between the tests according to the subject macro-area of the candidate (humanities, social sciences, physical sciences). Even though the final purpose is to extend the system of certification to other languages, in the first stage of the project it will be limited to English and Italian. Basing the levels of certification on the parameters set out by the European Community makes it possible to insert the Italian tests into a system of reciprocal recognition with those of the non-Italian countries in which they are accepted, following international codes of practice.

The Italian project would be developed in close connection with analogous projects developed by other members of CERCLES such as the AKS (the Association of German Language Centres) UNICERT Project which is at present in use in Germany. The AICLU certification issued by the Italian language centres which adopt the system proposed in this project will be recognised by their non-Italian partners, according to mutual agreements. This project makes it possible to take a first step toward internationalisation, which
should then spread its influence and become consolidated thanks to further research projects and cooperation.

Moreover, further funds, which it is hoped may be applied for and received from the European Union, would make it possible to build up a far greater database of test items rapidly and extend the project to other European languages; the AICLU certification initiated through this project would thus become widely known and accepted, and could gain importance as an instrument of certification to be used internationally. It is hoped that the level of reciprocity will become complete with all the various European university language centres which are members of the national affiliates of CERCLES thanks to a common project for the creation of testing systems based on the levels defined by the European Union.

Competences to be tested

The competences to be tested will be highly operational and will relate to the communicative aspects of both written and oral interaction. Such competences will be described according to criteria similar to those defined by the Council of Europe, which are based on the principle of ‘being able to do with a language’ and with an emphasis on language seen as an instrument of social interaction. Such competences derive from the analysis of language in use in terms of the strategies used by learners to activate general and communicative competences in order to carry out the activities and processes involved in the production and reception of texts dealing with particular themes; these competences will enable the learners to fulfil the tasks facing them in the situations which arise in the various domains of social experience.

This approach implies a detailed description of the fields of knowledge, various skills (linguistic, socio-cultural, pragmatic), abilities (being able to do, being able to learn), processes (e.g. planning, execution, paralinguistic behaviour), strategies (e.g. interaction, negotiation) and themes (topics dealt with) needed for the linguistic performance suited to a specific socio-cultural environment and a particular communicative context. From this viewpoint, communicative language ability is conceptualized not only as mere linguistic knowledge or competence, but as the capacity of implementing this competence in appropriate contextualized language use.

The communicative situations taken into consideration will be those which most typically concern the communicative needs of Italian students requiring the use of a foreign language both in their own country and abroad. As regards competences connected to specialized contexts of use, the CERCLU project will not take into consideration the various specialized disciplines taught in Italian universities. The topics dealt with in the tests will refer to one of the following
three multidisciplinary areas: the humanities, social sciences and physical sciences.

Administration and correction

In order to avoid a waste of resources and guarantee maximum productivity for all the items collected and stored in the database, the most useful procedure is thought to be via the use of computers, able to adjust output automatically to the levels required and assure the highest degree of flexibility, as well as being able to individualize each test (thanks to their randomisation facilities) and give adequate feedback, thus being of great use also for diagnostic and placement purposes. The adoption of a computerised system will be of great help in all cases where the numbers of students tested are high, a situation which is very common in university language centres, and will thus facilitate both the administration and the correction of the tests.

The recourse to computerised procedure will also provide maximum uniformity in the various operations of the whole certification process, thus avoiding discrepancies between various universities and different sessions and guaranteeing the greatest degree of objectivity and uniformity. The experimental phase will therefore be used to identify the hardware and software available in the various language centres and to integrate them with the appropriate purchase of compatible equipment.

The intervention of human testers is, however, foreseen in the assessment of the spoken skills and of written production. To guarantee maximum uniformity of evaluation and a minimal degree of subjectivity, accurate selection and preparation of testers will be carried out, as well as the writing of detailed guidelines to be given to them before each testing session. The format of the tests and their construction and correction criteria will be amply publicised and made known to the candidates themselves.

Duration and phases of the project

The project will be carried out over a three-year period. In the first year information about the various systems of certification at present in use in Europe will be acquired through a series of meetings and study and training groups. A detailed bibliography on testing and systems of certifying linguistic competence will be compiled. A web-site will be created for the materials collected and the documents produced by the group.

The software will be identified for the writing, storage and retrieval of test items, for the production of tests according to the agreed protocols and for the
analysis of statistics relating to the results. The objectives related to the European Threshold and Vantage Levels and target language use domains and text types will be closely examined and the test constructs will be defined.

The design format and the elements necessary to consider an item adequate for a particular level and a particular objective will be defined. The protocols for the creation of the tests will be detailed. The hardware and software for the management of the database of items and for the tests themselves will be prepared. Meetings with non-Italian partners will be organised to formalise the bases for the reciprocity of recognition of certification and of double certification which may be requested.

In the second year a large databank of items for all the kinds of tests envisaged for Italian and English certification will be created. These items will be stored in a database in a server. The protocols which have been devised will be tried out. Tests will be created using the established parameters and the tests will be used experimentally in AICLU language centres. On the basis of the results of the experimentation, the protocols will be modified where necessary. Unsuitable items will be eliminated or substituted. The meetings with Italian university partners and non-Italian partners will continue. The methods of publicising the certification will be decided on and a publicity campaign undertaken.

In the third year the number of items in the data bank will be increased in order to ensure that the certification system may be used by a large number of people. The experimentation of the system will continue and adjustments will be made according to the results. During this third year the intention is to offer the students of the universities involved – according to a programme that will be agreed upon among the structures responsible for the teaching of languages – recognised tests of their level of proficiency in English, while foreign students on mobility programmes in these universities will be offered recognised tests of their level of proficiency in Italian. The certification will be recognised at an international level and it will be possible to have the corresponding non-Italian certification on request.

At the end of the project, there will be an evaluation of the usership of the project and of the impact of the testing of language proficiency on the various universities and on the section of university reform concerned with students’ proficiency in language.

Expected results

The main expected results are the following:
1) The consolidation of the professional knowledge of language testing issues on the part of the development team (Directors and Presidents of Italian
language centres) and of their capacity to act together as leaders in the creation of a standardised system for the assessment and certification of language proficiency.

2) The design, development and description of a test for the assessment of two languages, English and Italian, which can be used to extend the project to other European languages.

3) The creation of a large databank of items for language assessment, of protocols for the setting up of test design and a blueprint for the implementation and administration of tests and for the collection and analysis of statistics concerning the results.

4) As from the third year there will be an official assessment and certification service for the benefit of the institutions using it.

For the first time there will be a system of assessment based on levels established by the European Community created ad hoc for Italian university students. This system will be designed specifically for the national needs of universities and will represent a significant saving for Italian universities compared with commercial solutions. The certificates will bear the name not of an individual university but of AICLU. In future, such certificates may find correspondence in another certificate valid at a more general European level coordinated by the European association of university language centres (CERCLES).

Selected bibliography


