4 Competence Evaluation in German as a Foreign Language for PR

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4.1 Aims of this research

The relevant institutional context is the Public Relations Course of the University of Udine, which, at both the undergraduate (BA) and postgraduate (MA) levels, focuses on linguistic, culture-specific and domain-specific competences in two foreign languages, so as to exploit their intercultural communication potential. This strategic approach that distinguishes Udine from other academic PR courses in Italy, characterizes all face-to-face classes as well as the online modality. Besides the compulsory subject 'English for PR' students have to choose another language among French, German and Spanish; both languages are taught up to the first year of the postgraduate course.

My contribution, based on data gathered during the academic years 2006-07 and 2007-08, investigates the competences required, the level of performance achieved and further progress in 'German as a foreign language (GFL) for PR'. The following aspects are crucial:

- Which competences must be acquired by Italian students of GFL who are expected to interact successfully in the field of Public Relations in the German-speaking area?

- At which degree are these competences actually present in the classes analyzed?

- Which outputs and outcomes of L_2 reading/written and discourse competences can be measured and what is their relation?

- Is there any competence awareness or does it have to be induced?

- How can self-assessment, as a basic tool for effective lifelong learning, be implemented?

Anticipating some of my principal findings illustrated in chapter 3-4, I wish to stress the fact that most students have not yet developed an adequate competence awareness and consequently present a satisfactory output in GFL for PR but hardly reach the orientational and procedural knowledge level, evidencing in many cases a deficit of learning outcomes which rely on and further enhance a reflective judgment ability in Immanuel Kant's terms.

4.2 Research project and methodology

4.2.1 Approach

Since, in the timespan considered, I taught two third year BA-classes as well as MA-classes, I planned to measure competence development both within the individual courses and in the upgrading passages, in order to seize at least the mid-term effects of the formative process initiated. In addition, I wanted to compare the face-to-face classes with their online homologues (which are limited to the undergraduate course).

However, I had to modify this original plan in the light of some objective factors which could not be changed: thus, only few participants in the first BA-group continued their studies at the MA-level, among whom only three students attended classes from the start in the subsequent first year. In the online course, the number of participants active in the learning process was insufficient to identify a significant sample.

As I wanted the learning and evolution processes activated to be highlighted and further fostered by the evaluation of competences, enabling the learners to have an insight into their actual level of performance and to develop their potential as well as to overcome weaknesses still hindering them, I concentrated on the analysis of process-oriented data. Also considering my position as teacher involved in the individual groups, I chose a multiperspective approach which took into account participative observation of classroom interaction, including the use of video tapes, as well as the analysis of the written and oral documents produced, the students' self-reflection and motivational-affective characteristics which emerged from the thematically focused learner biographies of the single performance profiles. Such data triangulation was meant to facilitate the explication of causal-functional links which is crucial in evaluating competence, in order to deduce if, in a given context, language competence related to professional purposes is adequately supported or, conversely, hindered (Schnurer 2005).

Table 1: Sources of data processed

a)   Performance-oriented data

Orality:

- video-tapes of selected classroom interactions between individual learners, within the   group(s) and with the teacher
- video-tapes of specific learning outcomes (i.e. presentations based on teamwork)
- video-tapes of oral exam sessions (chosen as representative for frequent stressful situations in the professional context).

Written text production:

- texts produced (by single participants or in a team, as classroom exercise or homework)

- power point presentations

- essays

- specific PR text types produced in exam sessions.

By the way, most of these data also allowed to investigate process-oriented factors.

b)   Process-oriented data:

- written annotations and reflections of the participating teacher

- e-mail exchanges with single participants

- students' reflections emerging from informal conversations (in pairs, within the group(s) and with the teacher)

- learner biographies.

My usual didactic approach is based on investigative learning, realized in social forms like pair and teamwork, where presentation and discussion phases simulate future professional situations. Thus I had no difficulty in integrating the normal teaching activity with data gathering. At the beginning of classes I informed participants about the project and what it implied for them (viz. that I would videotape them during interactions and the final exam); in order to reduce anxiety, I insisted on the anonymity of data, granted by rigorous codification. All groups were genuinely interested in the project, someone even asked if and how they could access the final results of the study. I could even observe a long lasting motivation effect, due to the students having realized that they would both contribute to a useful piece of research and benefit from it by improving their own competences. I tried to get the students to participate actively in the evaluation process, following Gillen's suggestion (2003: 13-14) that the individuals involved in the learning process have to measure and evaluate the competences within the context of their learner story and related choices. However, this happened only in a limited number of cases.

Initially the students proved shy in front of the camcorder, but soon all groups intensified their participation, which not only confirms but even goes beyond Lamnek's observation (1995) that participants will ignore registration tools after the first five minutes. Here I have to mention that the classrooms were not equipped with video recording appliances, so I had to videotape the interactions with my camcorder which, in the year 2006-07, did not yet meet the technical standards required (i.e. the microphone did not cover the whole room). In 2007-08 a new

camera equipped with a hard disc permitted a more extensive use of videos. The fact that the movies show interactions, which in most cases were between teacher and learners, only from my own static perspective derives on the one hand from my status as a participating observer, on the other hand from the disposition of space (fixed rows of tables and chairs, where interactants could neither move nor place a tripod). This drawback has been considered in the evaluation of the tapes.

4.2.2.   Definition of samples

As the composition of groups depended on external factors which I could not modify (e.g. I could not foresee which resources for generating synergies would be activated or aggregated in the single classes or academic years, or whether the resulting constellations would continue or change in the following year), I was able to define profiles and sizes of the samples only after full data collection. The characteristics of comparable units had also to be related to their respective population (the single classes) as well as to temporary groups (i.e. project teams within a given unit). The samples consist of those students who attended classes, while no systematic data about students enrolled but not present in class were collected; outputs/outcomes referring to those are however discussed if meaningful when compared to samples.

In defining the samples I applied the following criteria listed according to their decreasing relevance: presence of many and diversified data, differences between outputs and outcomes (for instance, comparing the grammar-based language test with the production of textual typologies for PR purposes), strong variation of oral and written competences. The testees were divided into three performance profiles, 'very good', 'average', 'sufficient', henceforth respectively referred to as A, B, C. It has to be said that neither during classroom interactions nor in exam situations did attending students fail to reach the global performance level expected, while this was sometimes the case in the not attending groups. I tried to ensure comparability in terms of size between samples and their populations, as well as a somehow constant distribution across the three performance profiles, obviously with greater success in the BA-groups which included more members.

From the first group of 26 attending students (a third year BA-class in the academic year 2006-07, henceforth referred to as BA3_07) I chose 15 people (S1), which corresponds to a percentage of 57.7%. The second sample (S2) consists of 11 learners (= 57.9%) out of the group of 19 attendants BA3_08 (third year BA-class in the academic year 2007-08). In the third sample (S3) are included 5 (=55.6%) of the participating postgraduate students of the year 2006-07 (out of a total of 9 students, MA_07), while the fourth sample (=S4) comprises 6 of the 10 postgraduate students 2007-08 (=MA_08), accounting for 60%.

Table 2: Composition of the 4 samples

	S1	BA3_07	S2	BA3_08	S3	MA_07	S4	MA_08
Participants	15	26	11	19	5	9	6	10
%	57.7	100	57.9	100	55.6	100	60	100
A (%)	40	29	45.5	53	20	11	33	30
B (%)	40	58	36	35	60	33	33	20
C (%)	20	12.5	18	12	20	55.5	33	50

4.2.3 Competences to measure

Considering that not only the complex, knowledge and competence oriented society we live in (Mittelstraß 1999), but also the specific PR needs require that individuals as well as organizations develop a learning culture based on continuing competence acquisition and refining (cf. Erpenbeck & von Rosenstiel 2006: VII; Erpenbeck & von Rosenstiel 2007: XX; European Qualification Framework 2006), which fosters domain-specific, methodological, personal and socio-communicational competences, I shall adopt the definition of competence provided by Erpenbeck and von Rosenstiel (2007: XI), in whose view competences are "(…) solche Fähigkeiten oder Dispositionen, die ein sinnvolles und fruchtbares Handeln in offenen, komplexen, manchmal auch chaotischen Situationen erlauben, die also ein selbstorganisiertes Handeln unter gedanklicher und gegenständlicher Unsicherheit ermöglichen." Like these researchers, also Kappelhoff (2004) and the Commission of the European Communities (2006) stress the effects of competences in enabling a reflexive, responsible and creative problem-solving approach in complex, chaotic and uncertain settings. This definition of competence is, on the one hand, a logical consequence of the international tendency towards the employees taking responsibility for their employability (cf. Kauffeld 2006: 5, Wegerich 2007: 163); on the other hand, it suits PR needs at the top management level (cf. Röttger et. al. 2003, Bogner 1990).

Among actual diagnostic instruments for competence evaluation I took into consideration the Kasseler-Competence-Grid (original acronym: KKR), which, by measuring simultaneously all 4 competence areas mentioned above, ascribes the same weight to the personal competence, neglected by other patterns. It supports perfectly my proposals as, thanks to its feedback about the situation analyzed, it increases self-responsibility, problem awareness and problem-solving skills in participants. I concentrated on elements of the grid which are not only relevant when groups are asked to optimize their organizational setting (cf. Kauffeld & Grote 2006: 310), but are also valid in my interactional context. However the role played by the observer involved is different, insofar as in the KKR he/she has to

be ignored by participants (cf. Kauffeld & Grote 2006: 312), while I took part in class interactions and was often the main interlocutor.

In order to assess the students' language competence I adapted the tools developed in "Profile deutsch" by Glaboniat et. al. (2005) on the basis of the Common European Framework of Reference. I modified the proposed professional scenarios relevant for the group profile 'German for business employees', the global can-do-descriptors as well as the related learning and linguistic strategies, in order to fit the needs of Italians interacting with German-speaking partners in PR-specific situations. In this context, I took into account particular organizational conditions of our setting. For instance, I reduced the scenarios 'strategic planning and realization of negotiations' and 'participating in a fair', originally inserted at C1 level, and adapted them to B2, the highest level students can realistically reach by the end of the undergraduate course.

In Erpenbeck's and von Rosenstiel's terms (2007) the can-do-descriptors correspond to the skills acquired, while the single competences result from their self-organized and strategically used combination. By way of example (for details see 4.3.2), in our domain 'PR practiced in GFL' domain-specific competence means to be able to apply PR knowledge in new contexts, in an autonomous and goal-oriented way, i.e. to chose among the speech acts to perform in the foreign language, such as describing, narrating, resuming, explaining, arguing, asking for clarifications, correcting, proposing, or combinations thereof, which will realize the addressor's intention at the highest degree, in a given communicative situation where some given actants have to be effectively reached. As regards the methodological competence it is crucial that interlocutors should possess the proper linguistic means for managing successfully the unfolding of discourse, clarifying the information exchanged and the results obtained. This is also linked to social competence, which focuses especially on the communication managing function based on feedback asking and feedback giving. Personal competence should basically enable participants to choose linguistic structures which suit the proactive and dispositive modelling of one's working environment that includes interactants belonging to the foreign culture.

The following table lists the most relevant professional scenarios for PR oriented to cross-cultural cooperation, presenting thus the most typical situations which PR-undergraduates have to cope with as PR practitioners in Röttger's (2003: 157-161) sense; postgraduates on the other hand make greater use of the coordinating and strategic functions in each scenario. The activities indicated represent the performances to achieve and so the outcomes expected from the learning process; they are articulated in single actions required (elements in "Profile deutsch"). The activities performed allow to measure the competences which they are based on (cf. Erpenbeck & von Rosenstiel 2007: XVIII). Establishing if skills and elements are outputs or outcomes depends on the measure in which they refer to declarative or procedural knowledge, allowing or not allowing a functional transfer to different situations.

Table 3: Scenarios – PR performances

1. give a presentation

2. participate in an event/ a fair

3. organize an event

4. participate in a negotiation

5. coordinate a negotiation

6. process text types within a range from highest expertise to popularization for non experts.

7. produce press releases

8. create and actualize the German version of the news section on the organization's homepage

9. participate in a press conference

10. coordinate a press conference

11. coordinate fireside chats with journalists

12. do qualitative content analysis of German press reports

13. organize an open day

14. produce promotional material (insertions, posters, brochures, online presentations etc.)

15. plan, together with a German-speaking partner, a communicational product suited to the target culture

16. project/ localize a campaign

17. interact with stakeholders (stakeholder care)

18. handle complaints (complaint management)

19. outsource and verify specialized translations (i.e. annual reports or social reports, including letter to shareholders).

To provide a concrete example of which elements may compose a single scenario, the following are relevant for scenario 15: to formulate guidelines, give instructions, articulate in-depth questions and give feedback, produce oral and written reports about single phases or realization of the localizing process, questionnaires, checklists, schedules/flow charts. As for point 17, the following elements are needed: to give interviews, answer press questioning, write target-oriented letters, ghostwrite speeches, have personal (PR-related) small talk.

4.3 Evaluation of competence in the learner groups investigated

After having measured a relevant selection of the above-illustrated activities and elements for each participant in each sample, evaluating the underlying competence constellation, the average incidence of every skill, ability and competence observable was deduced for each learner and rated in a specific evaluation grid. Finally, the individual results were compared to detect tendencies. Before discussing the grid structure and the findings, it is worth presenting the peculiarities of one population, essentially based on learner biographies, which allows inferences between performance- and process-oriented data and highlights some aspects strongly related to the deficit of outcomes observed. For this purpose, let us focus on the largest group, whose trends are, however, representative of those of the other populations.

4.3.1 Characteristics of the group BA3_07

In order to define the group's background and build the learner biography of each participant, a semi-structured questionnaire was emailed to all attending students (response rate: 18). It consisted of three sections aimed respectively at investigating personal data, their approach to the German language and their perception of the language acquisition process. The items, herein numerated in brackets, used both close-ended and open-ended questions and were formulated in their expected mother tongue (Italian), using the first person singular, in order to foster a very personal approach, which would get as close as possible to the individual: as Pöppel suggests (2000: 39), this makes interactions and contents relevant to the interviewees, and increases their willingness to reflect thoroughly and reveal intimate aspects.

In the second section part A was dedicated to their acquaintance with foreign languages. (1-2) Besides English, compulsory for all students, and German, the second foreign language chosen by the group, 33.3% knew French, learnt at school, and 22% knew Spanish (about half had learned it at school, and more than half continued studying it at university). One person had studied Russian at school, another knew Slovenian, while one person indicated Friulian as a foreign language.

(4) The question investigating the motivation for having chosen these languages clearly revealed the dominance of the utilitarian approach. The prospect of better job possibilities offered by the two main languages, English and German, was determining in 44.4% and 55.6% of the cases respectively. 38.8% also indicated English as important for international relations of all kinds, while only one person referred to this aspect for German. 22% stressed the usefulness of the German language within their social context (living, as they do, in regions near the Austrian border). Another 22% continued studying German as their foreign language because they had started it at school. A low rate of 22% had an affective relationship with German (made of passion, pleasure – even if mixed with the difficulties caused by grammatical rules; or related to recall childhood memories in

one case). The passionate-affective element was relevant for only 11% of the English learners.

Part II B analyzed the students' relationship with the German language. (1) As for the potential they associated with using this language, the answers confirmed the impression formerly given: 88.8% hoped in broader professional opportunities, 55.6% welcomed the possibility of communicating with people from the German-speaking area as well as from other countries (22% of them, from regions near the Austrian border, specified that it would facilitate contacts with German-speaking tourists); 11% wished to get into another culture; one person indicated the stimulus to deepen the knowledge of the language itself.

(2) In response to the item about feelings/sensations associated with the German language, 27.7% talked about difficulties (a generic feeling, but more often specified as learning difficulties); one person mitigated these difficulties by referring to 'low commitment'. 11% expressed their fear to fail and make mistakes. Half expressed positive feelings. 16.6% had mixed feelings: the negative aspects mainly referred to linguistic elements like lexicon or grammar; the positive impressions were based on their personal experiences with exponents of the other culture.

(3) When asked if their expectations have been fullfilled, 33.3% said 'yes', 11% answered 'yes, enough', 11% 'partly', 11% 'not under all aspects'; one person 'scarcely', 16.6% said 'no'. (4) For half of the sample, the main difficulties were related to grammar. 38.8% had lexical problems, such as memorizing terms, using them in the right context or register. One person indicated difficulties encountered during the initial period of a stay abroad; another one had difficulty in maintaining the level of linguistic performance gained living in the target culture; one mentioned oral and written production; one experienced difficulties in all fields of language acquisition and practice.

(5) The students also had to identify themselves with some of the statements about the German language proposed. The hints revealed the following view of the language which confirms the utilitarian approach and perception as a source of difficulty: German is useful (83.3%), difficult (83.3%), favors communication with people from this area (77.7%), is precise (66.6%), will help me in my job (61.1%), will help me find a job (61.1%), I will use it for my job (50%), it is interesting from a cultural point of view (50%), it is difficult but useful (44.4%), it is a beautiful language (38.8%), it is hard (38.8%), if you know German you have the quid (38.8%), I like German because it is useful (27.7%), I like how German sounds (22%); German allows me to use logic (16.6%), German is too cerebral (11%). Two students used the possibility to add their own statement: one of them said that this language makes it possible to express certain thoughts better than Italian; the other appreciated the challenge German still represents.

Section C investigated their German language acquisition process. (1) At first, they were asked to self-evaluate their competence level, referring to the level descriptions of the European Common Framework attached. The prevalent competence scheme which emerged can be summarized as follows: listening comprehension B1, reading comprehension B2, oral production B1, written production B1. This means that the linguistic goal set for the end of the third year class (B2 for all abilities) was not reached.

(2) The next item highlighted which activities/ instruments students may recur to in order to improve their learning outputs and outcomes. The single percentages do not always add up to 100 because not all learners signed up for all items. While attending courses students dedicated their energy to the following activities, in decreasing order: grammar exercises (50% twice a week, 33.3% once a week), studying lexical terms (44.4% twice a week, 22% once a week), reading texts (33.3% twice a week, 38.8% once a week), (re)writing lexical terms (33.3% twice a week, 22% once a week), writing texts (16.6% twice a week, 44.4% once a week). They seldom or never listened to the audio material related to the textbook used (72.2%), cooperated in tandem (66.6%), read German magazines (61.1%), watched German TV channels (55.6%), did pronunciation exercises (50%). Rarely they surfed German websites (50%) or (re)wrote lexical terms (27.7%).

When there were no lessons, both the range and significant rate of activities were low: only 27.5 % and 22%, respectively, watched German TV channels and wrote texts quite often against 50% and 44.4% who did it rarely or never. They never or only on rare occasions listened to the audio material related to the textbook or read German magazines (72.2%), surfed German websites (66.6%), read texts (61.1%), cooperated in tandem, did pronunciation exercises or (re)wrote lexical terms (55.6%), did grammar exercises or studied lexical terms (50%).

The activities done most often reflect, on the one hand, the deficits they signaled in other parts of the questionnaire and, on the other, reveal their lack of strategic awareness: the tools related to informal and incidental learning, capable of increasing and improving their thesaurus and variety of structural chunks, were mostly ignored. As far as the use of these tools is concerned, no significant difference can be seen between the two periods. Major didactic activities which were very present during the teaching term, were instead abandoned during the period in which there were no lessons, thus confirming their own admissions that they dedicated too little time to the language learning process. Concluding, they were aware of their learning weaknesses but not of the adequate concrete correctives (as also shown by C3, 4 and 6 where they were asked to give indications about what would have helped them in succeeding better. 66.6% related their answers to the amount of time and intensity they dedicated to studying German, whereas only 11% made explicit reference to specific instruments of acquisition).

(3) They were asked to indicate something that contributed to a better language acquisition. 55.6% stressed the relevance of authentic communication settings, preferably abroad, allowing the transfer of theoretical knowledge into competence.

These data once again confirm that they did not internalize acquisition strategies: in spite of the results due to a positive authentic experience, most of them did not try to recreate these conditions by using specific instruments. Even the low percentage of those reflecting on language acquisition mechanisms emerging from the next item supports this interpretation of the data. 33.3% indicated the attendance of the specific courses offered. The remaining answers concerned single activities, i.e. repeating what one is studying out loud, or knowledge constellations such as assimilating better syntactical rules by knowing other languages, especially Greek and Latin.

(4) When asked whether knowing other foreign languages was an advantage/ disadvantage when studying German, 38.8% answered that it was advantageous and stressed both the usefulness of having methods of language acquisition and knowledge about the processes involved, as well as the mind opening effect. 11% thought it meant both: similarities in lexicon and grammar may be of help but also cause disturbing (lexical) interferences. 11% did not perceive any advantage or disadvantage. 27.7% did not give any evaluation. Only one person saw lexical interference as a clear disadvantage. Implicitly, the low rate of 38.8% reflecting on the relevance of language acquisition mechanisms reinforces the impression of lack of strategic awareness illustrated in C2.

(10) In their own perception of progress made (which corresponds to my evaluation), during the last three months (coinciding mainly with the period reserved for classes) half of all students had improved their oral (production) competence, 33.3% had enriched the lexical base, while 22% indicated respectively grammatical competences, elaborating written texts, processing texts, listening comprehension. This point, related to (12) where 55.6% intended to further improve their oral production (in relation to accent, fluency and adequateness) against 16.6% who wanted to improve grammatical knowledge which in B4 and C2 emerged as major concern, suggests that students had an intuitive view of language competence and got aware of the interplay between single skills, in order to perform an adequate communicational act, but, as other answers show, they did not yet make the reflective effort to explicate these relations and search for useful strategies.

4.3.2 Evaluation grid

I evaluated all data collected by means of a specific grid articulated in three parts: the first one dealt with the personal profile of participants, reporting if their learning process was rather formal or informal or a combination of both (and to what degree). In addition, it investigated which personal characteristics and communicative abilities among those discussed in Erpenbeck & von Rosenstiel (2007: XXII) as well as in Kauffeld (2006: 8) were present and to what extent. The first category referred to: play instinct, imagination, tenacity, acceptance of

destabilization and change for the worse, ability to cope with stress, commitment, motivation. The second category included sociability, empathy, capacity for teamwork (liked only by 27.7% as resulted from the learner biographies).

The second part analyzed qualifications which in Erpenbeck's and von Rosenstiel's terms (2007: XIX) refer to knowledge and skills verifiable in exam situations. Knowledge concerned facts, theories, practices, rules etc. in the following areas: general PR literacy and PR literacy related to the German-speaking area, German language, German for PR. They were rated as missing, present, present at a high degree and integrated. It was not possible to systematically investigate theoretical knowledge about learning strategies and techniques. Skills were based on the classification of the Common European Framework of Qualifications: cognitive skills included logical, intuitive, creative action potentials (i.e. make a working hypothesis and verify/modify it), while practical skills indicated the methodological and instrumental smartness. Both categories were rated as above for the PR and the linguistic area.

The last part, dedicated to competences recognizable in self-organized actions (cf. Erpenbeck & von Rosenstiel 2007: XIX), evaluated in both the PR and the linguistic area the domain-specific, methodological, social and personal competences, which could be lacking, be present, balanced with others, integrated with others obtaining synergetic effects. As for the methodological competence, referring to the KKR, this means cognitive abilities useful for problem-defining and solving as well as for decision making in general (cf. Kauffeld & Grote 2006: 314). It is well developed if the actor structures and optimizes processes, formulates the main goals, sets priorities, specifies his/her contribution, resumes information and goes straight to the point. Following Sonntag & Schaper (1992: 188), social competence includes all abilities helpful in successfully planning, setting goals and reaching them in situations of social interactions, whereby the action, from a communicative and cooperative point of view, is self-organized. The KKR considers personal competence as willingness/readiness, embedded in a group situation, to shape one's working environment in a constructive and dispositive way, to assume responsibilities (cf. Kauffeld & Grote 2006: 314). Subsequently, I focused on the intercultural, learning, textual, and problem-solving competence as transversal competences and rated them in the same way. They integrated the four competence areas described above as well as each other. I am going to briefly illustrate their characteristics, related to PR activities in GFL.

Above all, I focused on the intercultural competence because, on the one hand, it matches the needs of organizations and employees stimulated by actual globalization trends of societies and markets and is one of the key competences for lifelong learning, on the other hand, it is essential for PR purposes, insofar as it fosters mediation and knowledge transfer between different social sub-systems. This competence refers to different languages and national cultures but concentrates as well (even mainly for PR) on successful communication between different social groups or participants, as also outlined by Scollon & Scollon (2003:

539): "(…) we take 'intercultural communication' to signal the study of distinct cultural or other groups in interaction with each other». In my analysis, for PR students this means that they are not only aware of their own cultural standards and are ready to admit the possibility that differences exist (Tiittula 1999: 178), but that they search for them systematically as essential indicators of critical moments in Candlin's sense (2002) which serve as triggers for mutual learning. This implies that the addressor has to develop strategies for both anticipating possible aspects/moments of non-compliance with standards or expectations of the other (organizational, group etc.) culture and restoring consensus-oriented, cooperative relations, aimed at helping the public grasp the diverging perspective and express its own frames and scripts which will be processed for further interaction.

Every speaker as an individual and a member of diverse social groups and professional settings is bound and moved by different frames and scripts. This means different cultural and personal components whose combination can also vary in the same person, during one's life or work history (cf. also Siegfried 2003: 2). Among the profession-specific communicative strategies implied in realizing the proactive management of this kind of alterity, the most indicated seem to be those "designed to expand participation in the communication" (Candlin 2002: 31). Therefore, I formulated these indicators for intercultural competence: do students detect critical moments? Do they specify strategies for this? Do they patronize a participatory communication style (their exhortations/working instructions avoid the imperative form in favour of the present tense indicative in the first person plural, as well as modal verbs, describe the activities to be done, paraphrase complex content, periodically resume significant statements made, make the point and show possible further development; they use cues aimed at signalizing turn-taking)? Are they aware of the unconscious conventions of interpersonal communication interlocutors apply (cf. Gumperz 2003: 226), in order to detect, repair and prevent interactively produced misunderstandings? Do they know how to negotiate communication modalities and ways to reach a consensus with their interlocutors, i.e. by foregrounding and backgrounding differences (cf. Bondi 2004: 54)? Are they aware of possible culture-bound differences in main speech acts like presenting facts or making arguments? Do they consider different textual standards (referring to linearity of the macro-propositions versus digressions, grade of integration of data or examples)?

The learning competence as a basis for lifelong learning concerns the capacity to infer information, hints, criteria, instruments from professional and personal experiences, both explicit and implicit, as well as to elaborate them in order to make them available for new contexts. It is related to the intercultural competence in the sense that the management of alterity (thus of the news to be integrated in pre-existent frames) has to create new knowledge (and competence) in the process of accommodating the distinctive discourse worlds involved (Candlin 2002: 30). It is also linked to the textual competence which implies that the subject is able to

process, integrate, deepen or modify knowledge, by processing and producing texts. Learning competence in our field may therefore be measured by the following reflections (cf. Engberg 2005: 286, 288): Is the subject able to autonomously define his/her learning objectives? Does he/she strategically process new material (discourses, written texts) in order to infer useful data/tools etc.? Does he/she combine explicit and implicit approaches? Which learning strategies and techniques does he/she use (are they adequate)? Is the self-organized learning environment efficient (timing, tools, social forms, preventing of disturbing factors etc.)? Does he/she reflect on strategies applied, learning process and results obtained? Does he/she evaluate learning outputs/outcomes? Is there evidence of later autonomous application of outcomes in new situations?

Text competence for PR purposes embraces efficient processing of all relevant text types, created by internal and external publics, of domain-specific or general social concern, as well as production of target-oriented, informative-appellative texts which convey the intended message inducing the receivers to acceptance and cooperation. Although it may also regard oral texts, as discourse competence, I concentrate here mainly on written texts. Thus indicators for a high graded competence will be: the learners are able to get the knowledge/information relevant to them? Do they grasp the intended message, as well as the tenor and eventual presuppositions? Do they get the lexical, syntactical or text organizational markers which stress relevant content? Are they able to reach a given interlocutor, this means to foster the knowledge transfer by choosing adequate discursive or written text typologies, activating proper communication strategies, selecting the most functional knowledge aspects (cf. Kastberg 2005: 145), marking by the textual organization and its semantic-syntactical realization the most significant points, which especially non experts need (cf. Gruber & Ziegler 1990: 179; Martin & Rose 2004: 214), helping the recipient to orientate him-/herself (cf. Hoey 2001)? Do they demonstrate their intention, values and the perlocutionary effect they want (cf. Petersen 1986)? Do they give clarifying background information and help the others organizing their thoughts by questioning them (see Lay 1999: 211)? Do they organize the contents with a clear focus which makes the characteristics relevant for the addressee, rather than for the author/ promoter (cf. Bathia 2002: 49)? Do they anticipate and stimulate the expectations of the audience by cohesive ties, such as deictic, anaphoric or cataphoric elements (conjunctions, reiterations or general nouns), a logical tense structure, specific lexical items or grammatical features in a given utterance which function as presupposition triggers (cf. Hoey 2001: 20)?

If a text is meant to be reliable for the target culture, the receivers' expectations, relying on individual as well as collective stereotypes, have to be fulfilled; therefore a text of a different culture has to bear characteristics of its origin (Knoblich & Treis 1991: 31). Nevertheless, in order to permit a long lasting identification between addressees and text, its organization must primarily offer orientation cues which in the receiving culture assure the coherence of a given text type, while coherence principles of the other culture are less relevant. Stressing too intensively

the strangeness by diverging too much from the coherence principles of the own or the other culture only allows the arousal of a punctual interest, which suits product advertisement, but not PR text types (cf. Bolten et. al. 1996: 420-422). For instance, in our context the fictive public from the German-speaking area listening to a professional presentation given by an Italian in GFL would expect and thus appreciate as spontaneous a broad use of non verbal communication like gestures and facial expression, even quite different from those performed by themselves, they would also accept Italian interjections, while their successful processing and acceptance could be hindered by a logical (culture-specific) structure too different from the type they are used to. So further competence indicators – which are strongly related to the intercultural competence – should be: do learners respect German text type conventions or are their texts guided by their mother tongue standards? Do they use expositive and argumentative patterns of the other or their own culture? Do they use elements of their own culture in a functional way, making their texts more attractive and convincing for addressees?

Problem-solving may concern disparate fields and challenges, such as lack of language competence and related repair strategy, applying theoretical, interdisciplinary knowledge to practical cases (i.e. preparing a power point presentation, recognizing both elements of theory in authentic texts and their linguistic realization), organizing resources at one's disposal in order to reach a set goal, including timing, best instruments, cooperation modalities. In all cases, problem-solving competence is based on searching strategies like evolution and gradient strategies, among which Erpenbeck and von Rosenstiel (2007: XXII) consider only the former as the real kind of self-organizing strategy, where the solution to be formulated at the end of the searching process is often unknown and does not exist before its creation during the process. Evolution strategies are mainly articulated in: self-reproduction of good solutions, mutation processes creating new types of solutions, ability to maintain and expand the acquired solutions in a goal-oriented way. For evaluating this competence, I verified which kind of strategies the students used; which of the evolution options they preferred; which instruments they used; how much time the process took; if the solution produced was acceptable, adequate, good.

Finally, I assessed learning outputs and outcomes, observed within the collected data, as adequate (insofar as expected for the level to reach), inadequate or (positively as well as negatively) astonishing. For instance, an adequate output, related to B2 grammar, may be the correct transformation of a relative clause into a participial construction, while an adequate outcome could be the correct stylistic interpretation of the communicational potential of this complex syntactical structure occurring in a given text, or to not use it in informative texts addressed to publics which may have difficulty in understanding (i.e. children). Positively astonishing could be an adequate output when the well performed (new) linguistic utterance has not been drilled, or an unexpected outcome.

4.4 Results

Comparing the individual results of the evaluation grid, it is possible to observe the following trends for all samples: as expected, those students who usually combined formal and informal learning processes (ca. 30% for BA, 20% for MA) showed a higher degree of the personal characteristics listed above, cognitive abilities, the four competence areas and especially the transversal competences discussed. As suggested by Erpenbeck and von Rosenstiel (2007: XXII), there was a strong relation between acceptance of change and evolution searching strategies. Among them the most frequent was self-reproduction of good solutions.

These students had mostly adequate learning outputs and outcomes, sometimes even positively astonishing, like in case of testee S2_3 (profile A) who during the oral exam, asked about the communicative implication of city marketing, not only organized correctly her answer which was exhaustive at the content/ domain-specific level and formulated in good German, but introduced an arguing perspective, discussing a critical point which had not been focused during the lessons. Conversely, those who lacked these aspects often had inadequate or negatively astonishing performances. Negatively astonishing are outputs/ outcomes which show a regression some time after a positive performance, being again inadequate although the training or guided reflectivity has continued. Sticking to the case of S2_3, indeed, the student was not able to recognize critical aspects and keep the argumentative perspective in her final paper investigating her favorite topic, still city marketing, in a contrastive analysis between the Italian and German area. This gap, evidenced by the testee, may not be caused by hindering personal characteristics - they were indeed positive - but rather by organizational (and eventually social) factors which block the process-oriented reflectivity initiated by specific didactic stimuli.

Well developed communicative abilities were mainly relevant for results obtained in classroom interactions, but empathy affected, besides the social competence, also the intercultural and textual competences. PR-knowledge related to both the Italian and German area was high in all samples, but it was rarely integrated (this was especially evident within the MA-samples). General language knowledge was adequate for the expected level by the end of the undergraduate course (B2), but did not generate a corresponding language competence. It was inadequate for the final postgraduate level (C1). As far as this aspect is concerned, I wish to underline that from a mere linguistic point of view the B2-level (the only one realistically reachable in our case) will be sufficient for most of the speech acts we may expect. Because of organizational factors, C1 remains an illusion, because high fluctuation between BA- and MA-courses, the very different curricular background of external students enrolled on the MA-course, as well as the fact that internal students going on to postgraduate studies often wait for a full year before attending the German class, make it impossible to build on a homogeneous and consolidated basis of knowledge and competences. Knowledge about PR-specific German language was

present but showed some deficits (especially for the lexicon and in the MA-samples).

As for the competence areas, they were balanced in all samples (none of them was particularly dominant), apart from the methodological competence which was scarcely developed (major lacks concerned structuring of processes, just its catalyzing function for all competences). Generally, they were acquired to a moderate degree; in ca. 15% of the cases, regarding performance profiles A and B of all samples, they were integrated. I had to state a global lack of competence awareness, confirmed also by the survey of learner biographies where 66.3% somehow perceived that language proficiency is based on competences build up and verified in an authentic setting, interacting in real communication (for 88.8%), but most students' competence awareness was limited to what I discussed as skills, insofar as they ignored both a reflection-based, goal-oriented, self-guided approach and specific tools. Therefore, in most situations, they did not produce (long lasting) outcomes, based on *reflective judgment*.

The importance of the reflective capability for all competences relies on allowing, thanks to awareness of strategies applied and projection toward a solution path, a better interconnection of memorized information and its transfer into new contexts. This process is illustrated very well by testee S4_3 who, during her BA-term, 2 weeks after a classroom activity aimed at investigating political campaigns of the major German parties, answered my question about the reasons for having chosen German as second foreign language by adducing better job opportunities, as stated in another context by the CDU ("Weil, wie die CDU sagt, ich habe so bessere Zukunftschancen"). Her facial expression as well as her quoting the source suggested that she was aware of the underlying acquisition process, based on the ability to analyze the functional-semantic relevance of the new element and to collocate it correctly in her mental model. She obviously associated this ability with being able to use an item in new situations.

Many students seemed to omit this passage, thus presenting consistent problems in all transversal competences. As for the intercultural competence, all samples had developed strategies (more or less efficient in German) to repair interactional misunderstanding and negotiate communication modalities in order to reach a consensus, but they ignored more specific PR-oriented aspects like exploiting critical moments and culture-bound text conventions.

The problem-solving competence was scarce in two thirds of all students. They applied mainly gradient strategies (also showing low acceptance of destabilization and low ability to cope with stress), searching for the minimal steps in reaching the solution known as optimal.

Both the receptive and productive aspects of text competence were sufficiently developed within the BA-samples, although students did not always recognize the linguistic-textual markers which stress relevant content. In their own texts,

following good practice examples from the target culture, undergraduate as well as postgraduate learners were able to reach the public addressed, but did not exploit cohesive ties, markers or functional foreign origin effects. In the MA-samples, the (written) text processing competence was clearly the weakest. Students often failed to extract the relevant information or to identify the linguistic-textual realization of the underlying PR message or strategy. Thanks to focused questioning by the teacher two thirds detected in a step-by-step process these elements, but during the final exam, when they were asked to structure this analysis by themselves, in 80% of the cases their performances were much lower as in the classroom interactions.

As results from learner biographies, individual conversation and observation, the weak learning competence, due mainly to a strategic deficit, was spread in all groups analyzed. This fact is noticeable when we consider that those students have been acquainted since at least two years, in all English and German classes, with learning strategies and useful techniques. There is little probability that the deficit depends on the fact that these strategies had not been sufficiently made clear and trained. Indeed it would be surprising if 13 teachers had committed and systematically repeated the same error. It rather may derive from a synergy between different factors as adverse constellations of personal characteristics and consolidated learning habits, among which we may underline the influence the approach used in secondary school for subjects such as Literature and Latin still has on foreign language teaching and acquisition, by focusing on grammatical rules and promoting declarative knowledge, while ignoring, sometimes even hindering the development of integrated competences.

4.5   Conclusions and further research desiderata

I found a strong bond between lack of competence awareness, insufficient methodological competence and lack of development of most competences, as in the emblematic case of testee S1_N (profile C), who showed a very basic understanding of competence limited to knowledge and application of rules. Although she was aware of her problematic situation and evaluated correctly the level reached (A2), she lacked methodological, problem-solving as well as learning competence, inasmuch as she did not recognize the functional dependence between her weaknesses and the fact that she neither used the learning tools offered to her nor approached informal learning.

These first results show that deficits do not refer so much to the language area as to the other competence areas, thus revealing a not completely achieved development of the learners' personality, hindered not only by adverse constellations of personal characteristics but also by organizational factors referring on the one hand to secondary school level, on the other hand to the academic setting still ignoring this influence which causes a sort of cognitive dissociation. It has to be analyzed if similar influences are acting at the academic level itself and if these factors reflect a tendency of Italian society. In addition, possible curricular approaches in order to neutralize negative habits have to be investigated.

As for competence acquisition in GFL for PR, we have to consider that many skills located at level C1 in "Profile deutsch", following thus the Common European Framework which links the single levels with thematic contents suitable to determinate age groups, can already be realized at level B2, obviously with fewer linguistic means. Otherwise even at C1 level or at native speaker level they cannot be performed if the learner does not have the necessary methodological, personal, and social competence based on goal-oriented and process-evaluating reflectivity. I am thinking of performances like 'to coordinate the communication flow in a group of some consistence, giving the floor to some interlocutors or inviting others to participate', 'to link different topics', 'to give a presentation the right conclusion' or 'to hold a well structured lecture' (cf. Glaboniat et. al. 2005: 175, 184, 186). As the case of S2_6 (profile B) shows, in spite of a limited language proficiency it is possible to fulfill in a satisfactory way the professional task assigned, producing a learning outcome consolidated in the mid-term perspective: MA-students were asked in 2009 to evaluate and comment professional presentations given by their German homologues from University of Jena. Although the testee had not practiced the language for six months, forgetting great part of the lexicon acquired, she was able to activate functional strategies to succeed in both content and presentation aspects.

The didactic goal for GFL tied with PR purposes is therefore to induce, in strategic collaboration with relevant disciplines as EFL for PR, Italian linguistics, production of texts in the native language, theory and practice of PR, first of all an adequate competence awareness which will make evident for learners the relevance of determinate personal characteristics – and these have to be trained – as well as of combining formal and informal learning. Consequently, they will be able to reflect on their competence building process, searching for adequate instruments, and evaluating the results obtained. By doing so, they will transform single learning outputs into outcomes. At this point they will also exploit successfully the linguistic tools available. Self-evaluation may be implemented by proposing can-do-descriptors, as students proved to use correctly those related to language levels. These should re-formulate in the first person singular the indicators developed for the four competence areas and the transversal competences and rate them by 'no', 'yes', 'moderately', 'to a high degree'. When particularly relevant for fostering a certain competence, the grid should contain the advice to check up the related personal characteristics and the kind of learning process pursued. Students should be sensitized to survey periodically these latter aspects by associating, in a sort of diary, their positive or negative realization with concrete actions they carried out. In case of negative results, they should formulate three behavioral strategies to be applied in order to improve these aspects, as well as define the timespan after which they want to verify the issues.

I wish to outline once more the gap between the formative relation of outputs and outcomes and its realization within my samples. Outcomes are associated with orientational and procedural knowledge and build on outputs, which concern the learners' declarative knowledge, by learning and application processes. Theoretically speaking, a didactic approach based on the situation-adequate imitation of useful habits enhances the cognitive seizing of a given problem and therefore the correct processing of semantic-conceptional patterns (cf. Multhaup 2002). This inference can be fostered by explicitly induced reflectivity. Referred to the correlation between the general and the specific, this seizing is also the crucial point of Kant's educational concepts which underly the topics discussed in the present volume: attempting to subsume the specific to the known general (rules, principles), the subject activates the "determinative judgment", while he/she needs the "reflective judgment" when starting from the concrete case the relevant general has to be found (see Zeidler 2008: 219). As my empirical findings revealed, there were remarkable deficits in this process leading from item learning to system building, in spite of the above didactic approach.

Many testees, not able to process declarative knowledge in the correct way, did not realize the expected transfer, or they succeeded only temporarily. I intend therefore to complete this study by aggregating the collected data taking into account single sub-cultures, in order to analyze if helping or blocking forces which drive or hinder movement toward the didactic goals set are significantly influenced by factors related to these constellations. The sub-cultures comprise, among others, the groups of all students following one of the four possible curricular options within the Degree Course, the group of bilingual students, the group of learners who already had participated in an Erasmus students exchange program in the German-speaking area. Finally, I want to define which weight has to be attributed to these factors, in relation to individual or organizational factors, in developing the reflective capability focused on processes as a crucial basis for learning outcomes.

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