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Assessment of competences in designing online preparatory materials for the Cambridge First Certificate in English examination

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Abstract

The implementation of the competence-based approach set out by the Bologna Declaration within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) entails important changes in learning processes and brings new approaches to content teaching and learning, inevitably affecting planning, methodology and assessment (Cano García, 2008). Such is the case of the design and development of the *First Certificate in English Online Course & Tester* at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia (UPV) by the CAMILLE research group. These materials, published through *InGenio*¹, are split into two parts: a preparatory course and a tester platform. This article explores some of the key competences to be included in these preparatory materials, taking into consideration the course and tester and their innovative features in terms of content, design and navigation, with a special focus on how they contribute to the adaptation to the new requirements specified by the Bologna Process. It also illustrates the ways in which these new requirements may influence how teachers and students use these materials when it comes to preparation for the FCE and addresses some important issues concerning competence-based learning and assessment and some of the strategies and tools which have been taken into consideration.

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Keywords: competences; FCE preparatory materials; content; methodology; assessment

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¹ *InGenio* is a free online content delivery and management platform with a number of language courses available. Among them are: Intermediate Online English, *Valencià Interactiu – Grau Mitjà*, and beginners and elementary courses for learners of Czech and Slovak. The system has been developed by the CAMILLE Research Group led by Dr. Ana Gimeno (Department of Applied Linguistics – Universidad Politécnica de Valencia). See <http://camilleweb.upv.es/camille> for further information.

1. Introduction: Competence-based learning and assessment

The Bologna Agreement is seen as a reform to devote efforts to “preparing students for the multifaceted challenges of the marketplace” and has put pressure on universities to foster “general competences and qualities such as professional and ethical responsibility, critical thinking and accountability for one’s own learning, communication skills, etc.” (Fortanet-Gómez & Räisänen, 2008: 1). The debate and research on the role of competences is not a new aspect within the field of higher education. In fact, Wolf provided a definition of “competence-based assessment” as early as 1995, considering it as “a form of assessment that is derived from the specification of a set of outcomes” (p. 1). It is therefore necessary to have a clear definition of this set of outcomes – both general and specific – right from the very beginning of the process in such a way that assessors, students and other parties involved are enabled to achieve those goals more reasonably. Thus, when designing new language learning materials, the authors should try to provide future students with opportunities for real learning so that they can reach those final outcomes while helping reduce the obstacles that still remain and which make the mobility of students, teachers, researchers and other workers more difficult.

Wolf (1995) highlights the importance of carefully delimiting the tasks and functions involved in the learning process and the fact that assessment should take place not only at the moment of facing a particular exam, but also during the training stage. This is closely linked to the concept of formative assessment (Zúñiga, 1997), i.e. bearing in mind the relationship between assessment and training. This continuous assessment is possible through the *InGenio* feedback utility, which enables materials writers to adjust the messages, advice and other information that the student receives while progressing through the course.

According to Villa and Poblete (2007), the introduction of the competence-based approach is closely linked to the idea of fostering positive attitudes during learning: autonomy, personal responsibility and collaboration. Competence-based learning has focused on the need to establish competences closely linked to today’s world. Some of these competences can be considered as transferable or generic skills (instrumental, interpersonal and systemic) while others are more specific.

2. Generic or transversal competences

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) distinguishes between an individual’s general competences and communicative language competence. According to this framework, the learners’ general competences consist of “their knowledge, skills and existential competence and also their ability to learn” (Council of Europe, 2001: 11). The knowledge acquired by the individual is considered to be relevant to language learning as considerable importance is attached to the relationship between knowledge and communicative competence. According to the CEFR, a communicative language competence comprises several components: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic. Linguistic competence mainly includes lexical, phonological and syntactic knowledge and skills and the way in which this knowledge is activated, recalled and made available.

The definition of the competences to be included and fostered through these FCE preparatory materials has been partly based on the work of Villa and Poblete² (2007). It is thought that generic competences are closely linked to human values and principles. The high level of autonomy provided by the *InGenio* online materials makes the assessment of some generic competences a hard task and in most cases the students would have to determine autonomously whether they have accomplished their initial personal

² These authors are heading a project aimed at categorising competences in order to more efficiently implement the innovation and quality standards fixed by the EHEA at the Universidad de Deusto (Spain).

aims, as well as the goals described throughout this paper. For those cases in which the materials are used in a completely autonomous way, the materials writers would try to provide students with guiding clues so as to allow them to check their final achievements.

Some of the most important competences to be developed have to do with the students' capacity to work with ICT, to work autonomously, to solve problems, to plan efficiently bearing in mind their personal goals, priorities, methods, etc., and to manage time in order to make the most of it and be as productive and efficient as possible. The use of technology in education favours the students' management of the resources and time available, thus enabling them to practise new concepts and to acquire new knowledge in an individual and personally adapted way. According to Gimeno (2009: 81), the "modern classroom" should be seen as "an environment where the learner gathers information from different inputs (both technological and human)". The student would then "process this information, integrate it with previously acquired knowledge and expand existing knowledge." The materials provided through this type of learning environment favour students' "active knowledge" by trying to engage them in their own learning process. Designing materials for completely autonomous learners leads us to "include as many tools as possible in order to support self-access learning", for example, by providing more reference materials, additional explanations and hints, further reading, offering the appropriate feedback according to the student's performance, communicating the results automatically through progress reports, offering printing-enabled screens, etc. (Gimeno, 2009: 86)

Other generic competences are based on the need to develop an analytical, critical and systemic mode of thinking. As most of the typologies of exercises which are part of the FCE Examination are based on texts, the texts and questions chosen to be part of the contents of the *InGenio FCE course* deal with actual and current issues of the world, in an attempt to make students think critically and analytically and develop a justified or well founded opinion about some of the world's most important or interesting facts and events, also fostering the skills to understand them and try to face reality through several global patterns (Villa & Poblete, 2007). Other competences have to do with creativity and the need to foster a more creative, reflective, logical, and practical mode of thinking, a set of competences that has a dominant role in the practice of writing and speaking.

3. Specific competences

Other classifications of generic competences include the development of oral and written communication skills or the need to speak at least one foreign language, something which has been borne in mind when dealing with the design and creation of abovementioned language learning materials. We therefore separated the specific competences that concern the skills and aims that suit the CEFR's B2 (independent user) level³ to which the official Cambridge FCE Examination is equivalent.

But according to the framework, the contents to be learnt in a foreign language are not only linguistic, but also socio-cultural. The *FCE Online Course and Tester* allow for this by introducing texts which on many occasions are related to cultural and social aspects of today's world. According to Gimeno (2009: 80), the use of technologies in education opens up a myriad of opportunities for designing creative learning environments, for instance, by using authentic video or audio excerpts which could also bring students closer to a particular language speaking context. The main purpose is to facilitate socially and culturally-specific contexts and to combine them with other communication devices or tools which facilitate contact with English accents and other national cultures. Another goal is to favour the expansion of their communicative skills not only by introducing written channels and information, but also by

³ Further details are available at the CEFR Common Reference Levels – Self-assessment grid for B2 level (Council of Europe, 2001).

fostering the practice of oral skills through corpora of audio excerpts (listening) and voice recording systems (speaking). These recorded utterances can then be sent to a tutor who can assess them and provide corrective feedback in return.

During the development of these new materials, we analysed previously published B2 level preparatory materials (both printed and online) and tried to respect the design and contents of the official FCE exam by selecting the most adequate *InGenio* templates to accomplish the aims of the course or of a particular exercise. We therefore aim to present varied, coherent and consistent exercises and attractive, interactive and dynamic contents in order to make the practice of English as a second language more interactive than the repetitive grammar exercises found in traditional materials. *InGenio* offers a variety of tools and resources which allow materials writers to achieve this aim since it provides a number of useful options⁴ such as automatic correction and feedback, reference materials, glossaries and links to external sites to retrieve more information about a particular topic or linguistic issue, tips and windows that open up instantly to reveal relevant explanations, immediate progress reports, limitation of the number of attempts (especially useful for the tester tool), the combination of text, audio, graphics and video, etc.

4. Conclusion

As far as language learning and assessment is concerned, one of the main consequences is that teachers will leave behind the kind of old-fashioned assessment focused on behaviourist activities such as repeating and memorising in which marking was only based on the grade obtained in traditional pen-and-paper tests (Barberá, 1999). That way of assessing will be replaced by a new approach focused on higher cognitive abilities drawing on the use of more complex and diverse learning tools and strategies. Materials writers must take care of each and every detail when drafting the general structure of the course and when trying to determine which activities or competences should be included. The main goal set forth by the authors of the *InGenio FCE Online Course and Tester* is not only to comply with the aims and skills evaluated through the official exam but also to cater for the aims and skills fixed for the B2 level according to the CEFR, finding the best way to practise, improve and achieve them. This article shows how we have tried to offer objectively illustrative descriptors of the competences which should be practised and developed when using the resulting materials. This has been a difficult task, but the results can be considered as a very useful point of orientation in order to develop more effective materials. We have listed the competences and organised them into two main categories, general and specific, taking as a basis a variety of resources including the CEFR (2001) and Villa and Poblete's work (2007).

The *InGenio FCE tester* will be used to assess the students' level of acquisition and achievement of competences in both modalities of assessment: self-assessment or assessment by a human tutor. These materials, like the other materials on the *InGenio* platform, have been designed to encourage high quality learner participation (Gimeno, 2009). After the publication of these materials, a process of validation will begin to test their effectiveness and efficiency and their potential as a suitable channel for the appropriate acquisition of the competences listed in this paper.

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⁴ The list of utilities of *InGenio* is based on the description of the platform included in Ana Gimeno's publication: How can CLIL benefit from the integration of information and communications technologies (2009).

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