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Redesigning a Language Module for Finalists to enhance grammar acquisition

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This article is based on my own experience of redesigning the Italian final year language module (ITAL3010) at the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies of the University of Leeds. The changes were introduced in the academic year 2008-9 and the module is still running with the same structure today due to the very positive feedback we continue to receive from our students. At the time of the restructuring of ITAL3010 the Italian unit had been recognised by the University for the excellence of its teaching (with the award of three Faculty Teaching Development prizes since 2004) and had just received an impressive 96% satisfaction rating for its Learning and Teaching in the National Student Survey of 2007. In this very positive context the final year language module represented a problem since in the previous year the External Examiners for Italian had noted that student performance in Italian was lower in language than in 'content' modules. The revision of module ITAL3010 therefore became a priority of the Italian unit. In this article I will retrace the steps that together with my colleagues I took to rectify this imbalance and improve the final year students' performance in Italian language.

My article is divided into three sections. In the first I provide the context by describing the module before the change and identifying its problematic areas. In the second section I explain the rationale behind the restructuring as well as the proposed changes for the academic year 2008-09. In the third section I evaluate the strengths and

weaknesses of the new revised module and reflect on possible improvements. The article focuses on the process of reshaping the teaching, methods and material to enhance learning in a Level 3 language module, but it also inevitably deals with the introduction of new learning technologies and with specific aspects of academic and pastoral support.

Section I: The context
i) The module in 2007-8: numbers, teaching and learning environments, objectives

The module ITAL3010 is compulsory for all students of Italian (both Single Honours Italian and Joint Honours). In 2007-8 the total number of contact hours was 52, which comprised one written and one oral class per week plus one translation class from Italian into English every fortnight. The number of students attending the module in that year was 54. They were divided into four groups for the written classes and six for the oral classes (where smaller groups facilitate conversation and interactional activities). There were six tutors involved in the teaching: two English mother tongue colleagues for the translation into English classes and four Italian mother tongue colleagues for the remainder (consisting of our two Language Fellows plus two Lecturers including myself). It is already clear at this stage that the high number of people involved in the teaching of this module presents a challenge which is that of maintaining communication between colleagues and guaranteeing coherency within the curriculum.

The students who attend this module constitute only approximately a uniform group. The majority of our students start their degree without A-level Italian (Beginners), while others do start with an A-level (Advanced students). The Advanced students who are enrolled for Joint-Honours programmes with another language spend in Italy the term after the Easter holiday of their second year. Whereas all the others – Advanced Single Honours, Advanced Joint Honours with a non language subject and Beginners – spend a full Year Abroad in Italy in their third year. This should be enough to level up the distinction between Advanced and Beginners. Indeed what we find is that the linguistic performance of the

students in the final year varies considerably depending not on whether they started as Beginner or Advanced but rather on the way they profited from the year abroad, their attitude to study, and also their natural predisposition and their exposure to the language in previous years. The Module Catalogue available on the Italian website sets out the learning objectives of this module: 'further consolidation of written and oral aptitude at an appropriately extended level, through familiarity with sophisticated literary and non-literary linguistic constructions in a variety of registers'.[1] These objectives condense very succinctly point 7.16 of the Benchmark Statements of 2007 for 'Languages and related studies', which state that 'students should have achieved level C2 (Mastery) in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* and should be able to:

- communicate fluently and appropriately, maintaining a high degree of grammatical accuracy, in the target language(s) with competent speakers of the target language(s)
- be able to exploit for a variety of purposes and, as appropriate, to contextualise a broad range of materials written or spoken in the target language(s)
- be able to apply effectively and appropriately their language skills in a professional context'.[2]

My task as convenor and tutor of ITAL3010 for the year 2007-8 was therefore that of observing closely but with a critical mind how the teaching and learning processes were happening in this module in order to understand why our students were performing less well in language than in 'content' modules and how the achievement of the module objectives, as per the 2007 Benchmark statement, could be better pursued. It is important to underline that the reform of Italian Language teaching in Final Year analysed in this article focused

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1   See http://webprod1.leeds.ac.uk/catalogue/dynmodules.asp?Y=201011&M=ITAL-3010
2   See http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/statements/languages07.asp

exclusively on the existing 20-credit module dedicated to this subject, but looking at possible synergies with existing content module in the non-language part of the curriculum. In finding a way to improve students' results, I had to use all the inputs available, including student feedback on the old module, and combine all the facts in a dialogical, non-hierarchical and open-minded way, yet placing research on language learning at the centre of the process.

ii) Identification of problematic áreas

At the end of the academic year 2007-8 it was possible to have a clearer picture of the strengths and weaknesses of our Level 3 language module. Let us begin with the strengths. These were:

- the oral classes
- the translation classes from Italian into English
- the teaching staff (the fact that my colleagues were all expert and enthusiastic teachers and were keen to work together).

The weekly oral classes and the translation classes from Italian into English worked well and were highly praised by the students for their clear focus and the interactive quality of the teaching. Particularly appreciated were the lively debates on current issues organised in the oral classes. The problem therefore lay in the weekly written classes where the Benchmark target of 'high degree of grammatical accuracy' was not always achieved. My hypothesis was that this was happening for several reasons:

- lack of stimuli in the way grammar was taught, met at times by a corresponding lack of motivation on the part of the students (a certain weariness on the part of both students and teachers might be inevitable since the same grammatical topics must be covered several times)

- lack of focus in the curriculum: there were too many written tasks to master (translation, essay, and summary) and too many activities during each session (grammar explanation, correction of written task, grammar revision exercises)
- lack of coordination between the tutors, particularly in the way of providing feedback
- gap between the language module and the content modules of Level 3.

Soon it became clear that to resolve these problems the best strategy was a combined effort that is a strategy that could count on the energy and inventiveness of all the tutors teaching the module as well as the inputs and collaboration of the Subject Leader and other colleagues. It also became clear that to be effective our response had to tackle the issues at different levels, which included the adoption of a more pronounced learner-centred approach, the emphasis on language awareness and self-reflexive techniques in the teaching of grammar, a more structured and clear system of feedback provision and the implementation and/or better use of new technologies. The way all of these aspects were integrated in a coherent curriculum will be explained in the next section.

Section II: Redesigning teaching, methods and material to enhance learning in ITAL3010

i) Principle behind the new planning

My first thought when I set about my task of redesigning the written part of this module was not (paraphrasing Butcher, Davies and Highton, 2006, p.55) 'about content', because this was already given in the Italian grammar, but about the students. The Level 3 students are a particularly pleasant group to teach: they have just come back after their year abroad, an experience which makes them significantly more confident and motivated, and eager to make the most of their final year. Their language abilities have also improved enormously but not evenly: some of them have done better than others; all of them have perfected their speaking, listening and reading skills but not their writing (this is due in part to the particular

experience in the Italian universities where most of the exams are oral and where the opportunities to write are rare). It is no surprise that the grammar can still present a problem. Their learning needs are quite specific and mostly have to do with the phenomenon linguists and SLA researchers describe as 'fossilization', that is 'when a learner's L2 system seems to 'freeze', or become stuck, at some more or less deviant stage' (Mitchell and Myles, 1998, p.13). According to Ellis (1997, p. 131) this constitutes one of the two most interesting puzzles in L2 acquisition studies: that is the situation in which 'learners appear able to develop fluency in the use of L2 while fossilizing linguistically'. Ellis' 'fluency-accuracy puzzle' describes exactly the challenge faced by the language teachers at Level 3 dealing with students who are very fluent and very confident speakers and who however have internalised some recurrent errors. How can we eradicate these errors? And also how can we make the students go back to the grammar avoiding a sense of weariness or boredom for a topic they have studied and revised in the same order many times during their degree programme? In short, how can we keep in the language module the level of enthusiasm and motivation that the students show in the content modules? My intuitive idea was that we had to make the study of grammar intellectually engaging and fun: the grammar in its complexity, and not in the isolation of its grammatical rules, had to become the object of their attention, the ground where they were asked to test their knowledge and creativity. This meant that we, as teachers, had to focus and devise strategies in order to tackle those recurrent and automatised errors.

ii) The planning process

The changes proposed for the revision of ITAL3010 were the following:

- abolition of the summary
- changes to the essay writing exercise
- more reading activities from Italian academic sources

- introduction of grammar lectures for the explicit teaching of grammar

- constant feedback and different feedback: encouragement of self and peer assessment

- introduction of a VLE area

- creation of a handbook.

The abolition of the summary was proposed on the suggestion made by tutors that the summary task required having to work in depth, first of all, with a text in English. This was seen as pedagogically distracting for the students. The suppression of the summary had the great advantage of allowing both teachers and students to concentrate more profitably on translation and essay writing, which are the most important writing skills to be tested at this level. Moreover, the number of translations from English into Italian was now equal to those carried out in the translation classes from Italian into English, creating a more evident link between the two translation activities.

The second change concerned the essays, which were going to be based not only on general topics but also on the more academic subjects found in the content modules of Level 3. The reason for this change was twofold. First, we were going to encourage the students to work on language at a more sophisticated level for example, by reading, analysing and familiarising themselves with samples of essay writing from Italian critics that should provide them with models for their own work (this was not an option in the past and in particular good students who wanted to improve their vocabulary and style were penalised because they could rely simply on sparse newspaper articles since the essay titles covered only very general questions). Writing on a topic of their content modules was also going to motivate them to make more use of the bibliographical sources in Italian which were provided, but often neglected, for these modules. Secondly, genuinely believing that the the teaching of language and the teaching of literature enrich each other, we made a concrete link, and therefore bridged the gap, between the work done in the content modules

and the language work, so that the students could transfer their knowledge of Italian literature and culture into their study of the language and finally see the two competences of part of the same coherent project[3]. This has been strongly promoted by the Benchmark Statements of 2007.[4]

The third change, that is the implementation of reading activities from Italian academic sources, was closely related to the essay writing exercise. It was born out of the belief that in order to write well one needs to read a great deal: therefore to write essays in Italian, students needed to read more examples of Italian essay writing. The academic articles introduced as homework were selected from among those which treated translation and essay writing as their subject matter. This was deliberately done to stimulate discussion and reflection upon the two writing skills practised. For the list of reading material specific to each content module, as well as for new essay titles, I had asked the collaboration of all my colleagues teaching in Level 3: they provided, alongside specific essay titles, also examples of good academic writing in Italian in their subject area. These articles or essays were meant to be a linguistic support for the student, providing examples of essay writing in Italian as well as the appropriate technical vocabulary (an article on cinema, for example, will show them how to use words including 'sequence', 'close up', 'framing', 'pan shot', etc.). We did not want them to quote from this critical material but to work on them, analyse and

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3   On the correlation between the teaching of language and the teaching of literature see: Brumfit, C. and Carter R. (1986): *Literature and Language Teaching*. Oxford University Press, Oxford; Carter R. and Long, M. N. (1991): *Teaching Literature*. Longman Publishing, New York; Bassnett, S. and Grundy P. (1993): *Language through Literature: Creative Language Teaching through Literature*. Pilgrims/Longman, Harlow.
4   See point 2.2 of *The Benchmark Statement* for 2007 where the two competences of language studies are underlined: 'The first is a focus on the acquisition of competence in the target language, which requires a wide range of knowledge, understanding and skills of a subject-specific and generic nature. The second component is the study of aspects of the cultures and societies associated with the language studied, whereby the nature and scope of such studies will vary according to the aims and objectives of the programme'.
        http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/statements/languages07.asp

familiarise themselves with their structure, their style, and their vocabulary so to improve and enrich their own written Italian.

The introduction of a series of Grammar Lectures, to be held every fortnight for the whole group of students, responded on one side to the idea to optimize and make more effective the revision of grammar (these single sessions aimed at the explicit teaching of difficult grammatical points, which before was left to the initiative of the single tutor within her/his weekly class) and on the other to allow teacher and students in the small weekly classes to concentrate on what Ellis referred to as 'interpretation tasks' and 'self-conscious tasks' (Ellis, 1997, p.152), that is, tasks that encourage the students to discover by themselves the grammatical principles involved and reflect upon them. If the 'interpretation tasks' are designed to facilitate the noticing of a grammatical feature that otherwise might be ignored, the goal of 'consciousness-raising tasks' is 'explicit knowledge of grammatical structures, including some metalingual knowledge' (Ellis, 1997, p.160). This means that the features of grammar discussed in class were those that the students noticed and deduced from the analysis of their own production, either in the form of translations or essays. Once a grammatical feature was noticed, students were encouraged to compare it with the equivalent structure in their own mother tongue as well to their knowledge of other linguistic systems. The idea was to raise language awareness and to make the students reflect on the role played by grammar in the creation of meaning in any language. Also, by relating the new discoveries with their previous knowledge, the students were able to appreciate more the process of learning and engage with it – it became particularly clear to me that to enhance new learning it was fundamental to 'help students discover what they already know from their own experience' (Main, 1985, p.83). The fact that the grammatical features the students noticed and discovered came from their errors and their reflections upon them, explains why as teachers we started basing our methodology on the analysis and discussion of errors, not only because 'making mistakes or errors is an integral part of the

learning process' (Arthur and Hurd, 1992, p.49) but because as Ellis (1997, p.108) pointed out referring to the findings of Lightbown and Spada (1990) 'the teacher's treatment of learner error, may increase the salience of selected features, thus enhancing their noticability and learnability'. This means that by working creatively on errors we were able to raise awareness of the recurrent problems and help the students to control them and break the 'fossilization' barrier.

The emphasis on the analysis of errors implied also a change in the way the feedback was delivered. The feedback needed to be regular and contextualised. Admittedly, there were 'controversies over whether the provision of negative evidence is necessary or helpful for L2 development' (Mitchell and Myles, 1998, p.16). However, it is now generally agreed in SLA literature that 'active correction (that is provision of explicit *negative evidence*) contributes to increased accuracy in learners' target language production' (Mitchell and Myles, 1998, p.136). On this regard, 'both implicit (covert) and explicit (overt) feedback are effective' (Ellis, 1997, p.81). For ITAL3010 we envisaged that explicit feedback had to be delivered almost every week for the translations and the essays given for homework (not only marks but a list of recurrent errors); implicit and explicit feedback was to be given during the class discussion. Others forms of feedback had also to be implemented, in particular peer assessment: for example when students were asked to comment and analyse in pairs photocopies of their reciprocal work before being given their original work that had been marked and assessed. Self assessment was also implemented: special exercises were to be introduced in the curriculum including a specific self-reflexive exercise on an already written language essay.

As part of this joint strategy a successful bid was made for TQEF funding, by the Italian Subject Leader and the two Language Fellows. The project, which drew on synergies with other resources (such as the new VLE and Learning Support post in the Language Centre), aimed to present feedback to finalist students in a new way, requiring them to

analyse their mistakes with a view to increasing self-awareness and motivation and to creating independent language-learners. The 'Independent Language Learning for Finalists' area became available at the beginning of the academic year 2008-9 and since then it has proved to be an exceptional interactive resource for Level 3 students who can practice and revise their Italian in a range of different learning strategies and in a fun and self-reflexive way. It is divided into four work areas: 1) Italian Language & Culture (7 units on different topics each with different grammatical and stylistic tasks); 2) *Italian Grammar for finalists* (units of exercises on specific grammatical points); 3) *Discussion board for finalists* (where articles from Italian newspapers or websites are made available for general discussion and comment); 4) *Language Learning Diary* (an excellent tool where students identify and reflect on their recurrent errors and check their progress).

Finally, the creation of a handbook, provided the framework where all the different parts of the module (grammar lectures, weekly oral and written classes, translation classes, the VLE, independent study) were linked together to form a coherent and cohesive whole. It was also very useful to ensure that the same material and the same methodology was used by the several different tutors.

Section III: Evaluation of the work done

By the end of the academic year 2008-9 I was able to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the revised module. The feedback, which was obtained through student questionnaires and via the staff-student committee, was very positive about the new features of the written part of the module. In particular, the students found helpful: the use of the handbook, the introduction of the Grammar Lectures, and the creation on the VLE of an Independent Language Learning zone. Interestingly, they also mentioned the class discussions on grammar as one of the most efficacious learning and teaching methods. On the other hand some of the students found difficult the activities on models of translation

with errors and the self-correction and consciousness-raising exercises (one even expressed the view that a more traditional or explicit teaching of grammar was to be preferred).

My reaction to this was two-fold. On the one hand I was really pleased with the success of the class discussion on the grammatical features raised by their translations or essays. I was pleased because having the students debating passionately about grammatical points corresponded exactly to my intention to work on the language at a more sophisticated and creative level. This meant that instead of having a teacher re-explaining a grammatical rule, the students were asked to self-correct their essay or translation, alone or in pairs, and then to bring their questions or doubts about their errors into the class discussion. The teacher's role was that of summarising and highlighting, often using PowerPoint presentations, the most common and recurrent errors, and guiding the discussion. However, for what concerns the tasks that some of them found difficult I was compelled to think over and I made different decisions. Regarding the translation with incorrect errors (that is a translation with deliberate grammatical errors) I concluded that the students were right. Perhaps in my enthusiasm for a methodology that pivoted around the analysis of errors I had devised a task for which they were not ready. Readiness is an important concept in SLA in as much the success in teaching a new grammatical feature 'much depends on the learners' stage of development' (Ellis, 1997, p.72). If the students were not ready, this type of exercise was not useful and could lead to confusion. For this reason and in agreement with the other tutors I decided to drop this type of exercise from our outline. I took a different decision instead regarding the resistance that some students manifested towards consciousness-raising tasks. This is because it was only a small minority who did not feel at ease with them, while others referred to them as the most useful teaching methods. Hence I decided not only to keep them but to increase them, provided that we give the students enough explanation and time to adjust to this type of exercise.

Similarly I did not consider the idea of going back to explicit teaching of grammar: not only because this was done during the Grammar Lectures, but also because I was too keen to preserve the space and the format of grammar discussion in our weekly classes.

During the period of reflection I also did extensive reading in SLA. I found it very interesting that language teaching theories – which Stern (1983, pp.453-473) summarised as the traditional method, the direct method, the reading method, the audiolingual method, the audiovisual method and the cognitive theory – developed only relatively recently and alongside the prevailing psychological and philosophical approaches. I was aware of the role played by Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar in linguistics but I did not consider until this time the influence that his theory had on second language acquisition. The cognitive theory, influenced by Chomsky, seemed to me the most persuasive in explaining the importance of conscious grammar teaching, 'meaningful practice, and creativity' (Stern, 1983, p.470). Similarly Long's Interaction Hypothesis theory for which if 'learners have the opportunity to negotiate communication breakdowns, the interactional modifications (e.g. requests for clarification and confirmation) which arise in the discourse make grammatical features salient so that they can be acquired' (Ellis, 1997, p.49) appeared to me as a brilliant explanation of the kind of learning situation which I was trying to established in the class. Very enlightening were also those studies which tried to bridge the gap between the teaching of language and the teaching of literature which reflects directly my experience as a teacher (Bassnett and Grundy, 1993; Carter and Long, 1991; Maley and Duff, 1990; Bromfit and Carter, 1986). Very useful too were the studies on the importance of reflection and self-assessment (Boud, 1985 and 1995; Cowan, 2006) as well as on what it means and what is entailed in teaching today in higher education (Biggs and Tang, 2007 and Butcher, Davies and Highton 2006). The great merit of these studies was to make me reflect on my own practise of teaching and give a name and an explanation to the things that intuitively and through many years of experience had become part of my methodology. Now I was

able to recognise with more confidence and more knowledge the principles behind the teaching I had envisaged for ITAL3010: teaching that was learner-centred (that is from outcomes to content), which promoted deep learning and language awareness, and was research-led and research-informed (in the sense that it was to stimulate an inquiry approach in the students) and last but not least a teaching that emphasised the pleasure that learning can generate.

The success of the revision of ITAL3010 was further demonstrated by student performance in the final language examinations. In the academic year 2007-8 (before the revision of the module) only 34% of students achieved a grade of 60% or above. In 2008-9, the first year of the revised module, 57% of students achieved 60% or above, and in 2009-10 54% of students achieved 60% or above. When the module was redesigned in order to rectify the imbalance between the language and the 'content' modules, a target threshold of 50% of students achieving a grade of 60% or above was planned, and so the redesigned module has proved successful from this viewpoint as well[5] .

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5   The positive trend has been confirmed in the following years where the number of students achieving a grade of 60% in the redesigned format of ITAL3010 only once went below the target threshold (and only just): 54% in 2011, 49% in 2012, 63% in 2013, 64% in 2014, and 71% in both 2015 and 2016.

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