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Foreign Language Testing Through Competence Assessment Rubrics And Oral Interviews In The European Higher Education Area
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Abstract

We address the dimensions of competence-based assessment in the learning of a Foreign Language (FL) within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) at tertiary level: assessment target, results and products, assessment criteria, self-, peer- and co-assessment, techniques and assessment tools, prospective feedback, centring on how to assess and self-assess the FL through an oral semi-structured interview, collaborative work rubrics, and communicative competence rubrics.

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1. Introduction

The object of evaluation according to the recommendations of the Bologna Declaration is the development of skills. In the Berlin Communiqué of 2003 (White 2007), it was sustained that the evaluation should focus around skills and learning results (p. 5). Gairin Sallán et al. (2009) explain the interest in the development of skills for different needs: "employability of graduates"; "establish common benchmarks for degrees"; and "emphasize the results or teaching objectives." So, we describe competences and language users’ competences, we explain the characteristics of competences assessment, the assessment strategies for competence development and the assessment procedure (FL).

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2. Competence characteristics

All definitions of competence have in common the fact of referring to the ability to perform tasks. For Cano (2008), the elements present in the definitions of competence are the following:

• "To integrate knowledge, capabilities, skills and attitudes and know how to combine them.
• Perform actions.
• Act adapting to the context and knowing how to do it autonomously, thoughtfully and responsibly.
• Long-life learning" (p. 11).

In the working document of the Ministry of Education and Science (MECD 2006), the competences are understood as "the combination of knowledge, skills (intellectual, manual, social, etc.), attitudes and values that qualify the graduate to deal with problem solving guarantees or in the intervention in a given academic, professional or social context". According to De Miguel (2006), the underlying characteristics to competence are very different: "reasons, personality traits, self-concept, knowledge and skills" (p. 22).

Thus, as stated in the document Marco of MECD (2003) for the adaptation of the Spanish university system to the EHEA, competences can be basic, transversal (also called generic) or specific. Transversal competences are shared by all subjects; specific competences are related to particular disciplines. A subject must include both, specific and transversal competences. Transversal competences can be classified as instrumental, personal and systemic. Instrumental competences are those that measure the skills and training of the graduate. Personal ones measure the skills of social relationship. The systemic ones measure individual qualities and motivation when working. Among specific competences, we can distinguish the academic, concerning theoretical knowledge; the disciplinary or practical skills required for each professional sector (faire); professional ones including both communication and inquiring skills, and knowing how to apply them to the praxis of a specific profession (p. 7).

Antonio Bolívar 2007 explains about basic competences:

(…) The European Union (2005; European Commission, 2004) has established a European reference framework of eight key competences: communication in the mother tongue; communication in foreign languages; mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; digital competence; learning to learn; interpersonal, intercultural, civic and social competences; entrepreneurial spirit, and cultural expression. In Spain, in the annexes of the Royal Decree (RD) which establishes the minimum teaching contents (2006), it is set out a sample guide of those competences (p. 134).

The core competences in the Libros Blancos and Tuning are in González and Wagenaar (2003):

INSTRUMENTAL
Capacity of analysis and synthesis
Organization and planning capacity
Oral and written communication in the mother tongue
Knowledge of a foreign language
Computer skills related to the field of study
Information management capacity
Problem solving
Decision making

PERSONAL
Teamwork
Working in an interdisciplinary team
Working in an international context
Interpersonal relationship skills
Recognition of diversity and multiculturalism
Critical thinking
Ethical commitment
SYSTEMIC
Autonomous learning
Adaptation to new situations
Creativity
Leadership
Knowledge of other cultures and customs
Initiative and entrepreneurial spirit
Motivation for quality
Sensitivity to environmental issues (p. 83).

In RD 55/2005, where it was established the structure of university teaching and the regulation of the official university Degrees, it is proposed: “(...) Promote students’ attainment of university education that meets basic general knowledge and general skills related to their comprehensive education, along with specific skills and knowledge oriented to their incorporation into the labour sphere”.

3. **Language users’ competences**

De Ketele (as cited in Figari and Achouche 2001) describes competence as:

“The ability to mobilize (to identify, to combine and to activate) a set of knowledge, of savoir-faire and of savoir-être to solve a set of problematic situations [...] or, if it is language learning, to produce meaningful speech acts (i.e., where the addressee takes into account factors such as recipient, message, and communicative context)” (p. 42).

In order to demonstrate language proficiency, two new competences have been added to the traditional competences mentioned in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001): mediation (translation, interpretation, summary and reformulation of texts) and oral or written interaction. Classic skills that reveal the mastery of a language have different names and expand their content: comprehension (oral or written) is renamed as reception activity, and expression (also oral or written) receives the name of production activity (p. 18).

According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001), the user/learner’s competences are the following:

1. **General competences:**
   1.1. Savoir: Knowledge of the world; Sociocultural knowledge; Intercultural awareness;
   1.2. Skills and know-how to (savoir-faire); 1.2.1. Practical skills and know-how to; 1.2.2. Intercultural skills and know-how; 1.3. Existential competence; 1.4. Ability to learn (savoir-apprendre); 1.4.1. Language and communication awareness: General phonetic awareness and skills; Study skills; Heuristic skills (ability to adapt and to put into practice other competences such as observation, interpretation, memorization, etc.).

2. **Communication competences:**
   2.1. Linguistic competences: lexical competence; grammatical competence; semantic competence; phonological competence; orthographic competence; orthoepic competence (ability to pronounce with correction). 2.2. Sociolinguistic competence: Linguistic markers of social relations; politeness conventions; expressions of folk wisdom (use of proverbs, idioms, etc.); register differences; dialect and accent. 2.3. Pragmatic competence: discursive wisdom; functional competence (p. 101-126).

The use and learning of a language requires the development of all the competences listed above (Council of Europe, 2001, p.15). Hence, if the competences above are what a student of a foreign language brings into play, then they all must be evaluated.

4. **Assessment competences and planning**
The competence assessment in the socioformativ e approach is, according to Tobón (2010), "the PROCESS by which it is determined the level of mastery of a competence based on agreed CRITERIA, EVIDENCE to establish achievement and areas for improvement, challenging the person to continuous improvement, through METACOGNITION" (p. 16). It consists of four steps as also stated by Tobón (2010, p. 3):

1) “Be clear of the competence to assess;
2) Develop rubrics with criteria, proficiency levels, and instruments;
3) Apply the assessment through the learning process and give students feedback;
4) Promote metacognition in students” (p. 20).

Competence assessment is planned, according to Zavala (2003), by building assessment rubrics, while projecting initial, continuous and final assessment as well as didactic strategies, and, besides, observation and learning control instruments are developed. Competence assessment rubrics determine (Zavala 2003) the level of the students’ achievements in relation to the competence. They consist of the following aspects:

- “Competence or competences to be assessed: It refers to the competences to be evaluated with the rubric.
- Module product or products: It refers to the results for determining the qualification or suitability level of the students at the end of the training process.
- Indicators: They are specific performance parameters to evaluate products.
- Achievement: It refers to the levels of quality in the indicators (in the Tuning project, they are the quality descriptors of indicators).
- Punctuation: sometimes you need to give a different mark to the achievement levels in order to account for its importance.
- Evaluation activities: activities to verify the indicators” (p. 1).

5. Definition and characteristics of competences assessment.

Competence-based assessment, also known as authentic or action-based, is designed “from the analysis and appraisal of performance tasks that reflect or simulate as much as possible real-life situations” according to Benito and Cruz (2005, p. 92). To develop competences, it is necessary to change teaching and assessment methods.

Benito and Cruz (2005) state that competence-based assessment is developed through authentic tasks, and it is to be valid, reliable, transparent, with criteria for what it is considered an expert performance, keeping a record of examples of performance levels, while students self-assess, and are given the opportunity to retake tests, getting familiar on how to improve outcomes, and the different achievement levels (p. 95-6).

Several authors have analysed the differences between traditional assessment and competence-based assessment (Gonzci 1996; Feltcher 1997; Mertens 2000; McDonald 2000; all of them cited in Villa and Poblete 2007; Crespo Fernández 2011). Competence-based assessment presents characteristics that diverge from traditional assessment methods. Poblete (2007) compares and outlines the differences between both:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVALUATION OF KNOWLEDGE.</th>
<th>COMPETENCE-BASED ASSESSMENT.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>summative.</td>
<td>formative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>takes place in a precise moment (often at the end of the teaching period).</td>
<td>is a continuous planned process.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
is based on parts of the program or in its entirety.  
the contents of the program items count as one more aspect to evaluate.

is based on numerical scales.  
is based on the achievement of competence levels

is usually done in writing or simulated exercises.  
is focused on evidence of competence performance.

compares the individual with the group.  
it is individual.

those tested do not know what they are going to be asked.  
the evaluated know the areas that will cover the evaluation.

the evaluated are not involved in setting the assessment objects of the evaluation.  
the evaluated are involved in setting the assessment object of the evaluation.

does not include knowledge beyond the program.  
includes previous knowledge or skills.

is fragmented.  
is globalizing.

the evaluator monitors the realization of the test.  
the evaluator plays the role of a trainer.

Competence must meet certain particulars:

1) Innovative. Diversifying the means and instruments to assess both learning and performance: Essays, free-response or applied tests instead of traditional exams. At the same time, we use classroom observation, interviews, inquiry activities, debate, triangulation, class diaries, tasks (Álvarez Méndez 2001, p. 182).

2) It will consist of a performance appraisal (Benito and Cruz 2005, p. 92).

3) It includes diagnostic assessment, based, for example, on the self-assessment, to give evidence, as is done in other countries, of competences acquired in non-academic ways, that is, they are innate or acquired throughout work experience or own personal experience (Cano, 2008, p. 12).

4) There must be coherence between the teaching, learning and assessment of the competence.

5) It requires the development of contextualized complex activities that go beyond textbooks and traditional performance tests (Monereo Pozo 2007).

6) Competences must be assessed in an integrated manner (McDonald et al. 2000 in Yániz and Villardón 2006, p. 98), including knowledge, skills and attitudes.

7) It should be available with an extensive range of performance evidence to infer the competences (McDonald et al. 2000 in Yániz and Villardón 2006, p. 98).


- Assessment tasks must be authentic, based on previous and recent learning to solve problems that occur in real contexts.
- Assessment process should involve students throughout peer-assessment and self-assessment, in order to build their capacity to make decisions and guide their learning process.
- Performing a prospective feedback or feed forward, which means the student, is directed to modify his or her level of performance.
6. Assessment strategies for competence development.

For learning and competence development, two assessment techniques are recommended: the portfolio and the reflective journal (Benito and Cruz 2005, p. 98), apart from an "individual monitoring and feedback which ensures the knowledge of the changes required by the student to maintain his/her motivation and his/her emotional involvement, as well as to ensure accountability in the learning process." These latter aspects are particularly important for the development of competences, because they are composed largely by personal and attitudinal characteristics (for example, general competences such as "flexibility", "collaborative work", "interpersonal communication" (Benito and Cruz, 2005, p. 93).

The portfolio is used to replace traditional exams, to support learning and as a tool to assess at the end of a teaching and learning period. It includes documents for training, certifying documents and documents for presentation. As for the disadvantages, it takes time to make and it is difficult for the teacher to draw conclusions. However, concerning advantages, the student's motivation is increased since it is not linked to rote-learning, and the learner regains self-confidence in him- or herself. The portfolio should detail, as indicated Galán Mañas (2009, p. 245) in her doctoral thesis read on the UAB, and directed by Amparo Hurtado Albir:

- Competences to be acquired.
- The relationship of the subject with other materials.
- The overall objective of the subject.
- The structure of the subject.
- The methodology of the subject.
- Objectives.

7. Assessment procedure (FL).

The assessment practice now takes on new shapes: Self-assessment which implies motivated self-grading (Álvarez Méndez 2001, p. 4); peer assessment, shared between students; co-assessment, shared between teacher and students. It is necessary to expand the repertoire of assessment tools. Competence-based rubrics are the most didactic-oriented. They are used as formative assessment tools for application in the observation-evaluation, for self-assessment and peer assessment. They make explicit the assessment criteria and provide feedback (Andrade 2005, Metler 2001 in Fernández March, n. d.).

Knowledge assessment strategies, procedures, and attitudes that should be implemented and always combined are, among others.

“Objective tests (true/false, multiple choices, matching elements...). Short answer tests, Long answer tests. Oral tests (individual, group, presentation of issues-essays...). Works and projects, Practice reports, Evidence of actual and/or simulated tasks, Self-assessment systems (oral, written, individual, group). Attitude scales (to collect reviews posted, values, social and managerial skills, interaction behaviour...). Observation techniques (records, checklists...). Portfolio” (De Miguel 2006, p. 47).

To issue the final grade of students in foreign language, and considering that works may be numerous, we recommend at least:

- The portfolio, which will allow us to identify both previous knowledge and the knowledge acquired during the actual learning process, and to appreciate authentic assessment tasks.
- A rubric developed to account for production, reception, mediation, and oral and written interaction skills. Students will make use of it to assess their communicative competence in the foreign language. This will be used to practice self-regulated and lifelong learning of the FL, and teachers will also use this to perform prospective feedback.
- Semi-structured oral or written interview to be held three times during the course, in which the students will expose the conditions and learning process, their potential, and their motivated self-assessment. We will detect previous knowledge and those acquired during the students process of learning, as well as their skills and attitudes.
Concerning the conditions and the learning process, we will bear in mind all the issues related to their participation, task structure, motivation, interest, learning context, as well as their potential performance, cognitive autonomy of action, ability to follow the Degree, willingness to work, intelligence, excellence in the subject, and future possibilities.

- The reflective journal will also be analysed in order to correct the knowledge obtained through interviews and the assessment rubric.
- Assessment rubric referred to collaborative work. Teachers and students will assess the learning to learn competence and the existential competence.

It is necessary to evaluate general competences, as well as to bear in mind that competences related to collaborative work are essential to achieve the competence for "learning to learn" (Fidalgo 2009). For this reason, and from the data presented by the cited author, we elaborate an assessment rubric into three levels (lower, basic and higher). The top one comprises the following:

- **Leadership.** He or she has initiative and involves the rest of the group; selects topics, proposes them to his/her peers and persuades others to be part of the group. He or she makes the rest of the members perform their duties, coordinates and organizes wikis, forums, teaching panels and emails. The leader gets in contact with the teachers when someone refuses to do his or her own work.
- **Effectiveness.** He or she cooperates with the group members to improve the result of work of each individual as well as the final outcome. Communication with the group is high, it is not limited to perform his or her part of the task. He or she finds useful information for the rest and shares it. He or she improves the initial proposals. He or she discusses the issues somebody else may suggest when having a doubt on his or her part of the work. He or she gives encouraging messages as deadline approaches. He or she offers to help when his or her part of the work is done.
- **Individual responsibility and participation:** He or she does the assigned work (that can be checked in the forum). He or she participates regularly. He or she writes his or her part of the work on wiki. His or her folder contains the list of references and drafts, which may be numerous or interesting.

If the communicative competence of a foreign language student is to be assessed, we may use an assessment rubric made from a competent user data (taken from Guillén et al. 2009, p. 9s). Descriptors to assess the mediation come from Waddington (2000), once aspects related to professional translation and interpreting have been removed.

- **Table 1. Rubric to assess competence in Foreign Language mediation in the EHEA.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competence.</th>
<th>- Basic user.</th>
<th>- Independent user.</th>
<th>- Competent user.</th>
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<td>Mediation (translation competence, text summary and reformulation) (Waddington 2000).</td>
<td>“Distorted or very faulty transmission for omissions or erroneous interpretations. Almost all of them sound like a translation, multiple terminology, grammar and spelling mistakes. Manifests difficulty to express adequately”</td>
<td>“Almost complete transmission of the information from the original text, or transmission of the general idea(s) but with gaps and inaccuracies. Fragments or most of them are read like an original, but others sound like a translation; some”</td>
<td>“Complete transmission of information from the original text. Possibility of some non-significant omission. All, or almost, or most of it reads like an original; minimal or isolated terminology, grammar and spelling mistakes.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8. Conclusion

In a nutshell, competence-based assessment must focus on the development of capacities and be based on authentic tasks; assessment criteria should be specified, and different techniques to assess learning should be used. From continuous assessment we move on to self- and peer assessment and from the progress analysis to prediction. Prospective feedback, which means to supply information to achieve the needed changes and emotional involvement of the learner, is the key element that guarantees autonomous learning. Global rubrics of competence assessment are useful for the Foreign Language self-assessment. These help self-regulated learning.

9. References

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