Innovating assessment in an Italian language course: first experiences

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This paper examines a new academic’s initial foray into the realms of innovative assessment. The paper begins by outlining the principle reasons for innovating the assessment scheme which include:
1. a desire to promote deep learning in students;
2. the necessity to have a more transparent connection between the aims and objectives of the course and assessment tasks;
3. the need to challenge the notion that language is easily compartmentalised into distinct skills - writing, reading, speaking, listening, metalinguistic - implicitly conveyed by traditional assessment tasks.

The unit in question was a full year ab initio Italian class. Students were cleanly divided into two camps: mature age and non-mature age with the former showing significant reservations in the face of non-traditional assessment methods. I discuss both the successes and failings of the new scheme from my perspective as well as from that of students. Notably, by the end of the unit, some of the students’ initial responses to innovative assessment have been challenged in such a way as to have effected a change in thinking.

Preliminary comments

Student resistance to […] change is to be expected, irrespective of the potential learning benefits… (Åkerlind & Trevitt 1999)

The assessment of students is a serious and often tragic enterprise. (Ramsden 1992:181)

Even a cursory survey of assessment procedures in language programs in many tertiary institutions reveals a predilection for “traditional” models: end-of-semester written and oral exams, regular grammar and/or vocabulary exercises, compositions and translation. The tragedy to which Ramsden may have been referring is the failure of these methods to promote an approach to learning which is fulfilling and engaging and which allows students to develop to their full potential. In the most extreme case, “inappropriate assessment methods may push students towards learning which is ineffective and dispiriting” (Ramsden 1992:70).

An interest in promoting a deep approach to learning and closing the gap between the formal and the hidden curricula led me to restructure the assessment program for my ab initio Italian language unit, Italian I, in 1998.

A deep approach to learning involves active participation in and engagement with the learning process, a desire to understand and to see connections with real life, and an holistic appreciation of the relationship between parts in a connected way. By contrast, a surface approach to learning privileges memorisation and promotes the view that learning is simply a quantitative increase in knowledge (see Ramsden 1992, 1997; Marton & Säljö 1997; Hounsell 1997; Åkerlind & Trevitt 1999). Although it is unclear whether it is possible to cause students to adopt a particular approach, according to Marton & Säljö (1997:49)
Now that we have found a difference in the way students learn which we believe to be of fundamental importance, and since this difference goes between two approaches to learning, of which one is clearly preferable to the other, should we not try to make students who tend to adopt the less appealing approach, change to the more highly valued one?

Sambell and McDowell characterise the hidden curriculum as “…the shadowy, ill-defined and amorphous nature of that which is implicit and embedded in educational experiences in contrast with the formal statements about curricula and the surface features of educational interaction” (1998:391-2). In my experience of language courses, this clash is most evident in the design of assessment tasks. In innovating assessment, I attempted to ameliorate this disjunction.

A further crucial motivating factor behind my choice to innovate relates to what I perceive as a value of paramount importance underpinning higher education: an experience which not only adds to knowledge and understanding but has the potential to impart life skills. As Stefani (1998:349) says:

One of the major goals of higher education is to inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels, and to support the intellectual growth of learners such that they are well equipped for the world of work, can contribute effectively to society and also achieve personal fulfilment.

This paper begins by describing the innovative program I instituted. I then summarise the reasoning behind the choices made. Based on diary entries and course evaluation questionnaires, I survey and discuss student responses to the innovations.

The restructured program

After consultation with staff of the ANU’s Centre for Educational Development and Academic Methods (CEDAM), I settled upon a scheme which would include:
1. four assignments (two per semester)
2. a full year group project
3. a learning journal aimed at tracking group work and assisting students in better understanding their own learning styles.

The diary would be written in English initially, with gradual conversion to Italian. In this way, it would provide an informal forum for language use. The aim of the group project was not only to furnish students with an opportunity to interact in the language in a meaningful context but also to allow the development of “life skills” such as negotiation, team work and time management. The assignments, while privileging one linguistic ability (reading comprehension, aural comprehension, written production, oral production, metalinguistic ability), would each involve the use of all linguistic abilities and were designed to be more representative of authentic language use. This program was underpinned by notions of promoting deep learning and giving students the confidence to embark on a voyage towards becoming flexible, autonomous learners. November (1996), O’Rourke (1998) and Woodward (1998) discuss the usefulness of journals in achieving this goal.

This innovative assessment program was presented to the students in the first weeks of the first semester accompanied by a detailed description of aims, objectives and tasks. The plan was accepted with minimal discussion, although I gave an open invitation for a
fuller debate. In response to student comments during the first semester, an additional component was added to the scheme in the second semester - five tests - and the function of the diary was modified. I discuss this further below.

Motivations for change

One aspect of a deep approach to learning is an holistic appreciation of the relationship between parts in a connected way. The stated aims of many language courses echo the desire to see a gain in overall linguistic ability. By contrast, it became clear to me that traditional assessment tasks transmit to learners of Italian as a foreign language that language is something which can be neatly dissected into competing competencies: production (writing, speaking), reception (reading, listening), metalinguistic (grammatical and lexical knowledge), etc. This is clearly not the case as language is necessarily the simultaneous instantiation of these linguistic capacities, not to mention the para- and extralinguistic. Many conventional tasks lead to surface approaches which privilege memorisation and learning in a disconnected fashion. For instance, vocabulary is often learnt as lists of acontextual items in preparation for tests which require nothing more than the association of a word in one language with its translation in another. There is no requirement to understand the item as it would occur in everyday usage, one just has to regurgitate it. This is clearly far removed from the living use of language. Furthermore, this example eloquently illustrates how assessment can transmit a message to the student which is completely different from the stated aims of the course. As Ramsden (1992:72) points out:

> assessment methods that are perceived to test the ability to reproduce accurately large quantities of information…tell students that our fine aims for conceptual understanding are but a veneer on the solid material of recalling facts.

To redress these issues I replaced the common separate oral and written exams with integrated tasks which would involve the simultaneous use of as many competencies as possible. This would better reflect the real-world use of language and align more clearly with student expectations of becoming competent communicators in the language. This expectation is not one I have arbitrarily constructed but is clear from responses to a formative questionnaire which poses the question “why study Italian?” that I administer at the beginning of the unit. Thus, the four assignments and project sought to integrate rather than isolate linguistic abilities.

The project would assist students in reaching their objective to become proficient communicators by furnishing a collaborative environment in which to exercise their developing language skills. To increase interest levels, which impacts on intrinsic motivation in turn promoting deep learning (Ramsden 1992; Marton & Säljö 1997), each group was given complete freedom in the choice of type and topic of the project. However,

> freedom in learning brings with it greater responsibilities. Lack of structure and clarity in the goals of study may defeat the intentions behind the greater choice, at any rate for some students. (Hounsell 1997:207)

And this was indeed the case to some degree for some students. I examine this further below.
A system of self and peer assessment, in addition to assessment by the instructor, was developed to address issues relating to group work such as equity of marking in reference to individual participation (Falchikov 1998; Gibbs et al. 1988).

The diary was initially conceived as having a dual role. First, it would provide a forum for a different, less formal type of writing, eventually in Italian. Second, it would be a powerful tool for self-reflection which would allow students to come to a greater understanding of themselves as learners with the aim of facilitating a deep approach to learning (November 1996; Gibbs et al. 1988; O’Rourke 1998; Woodward 1998).

There was also the opportunity to sit an optional exam in the following two scenarios: to allow those who may have failed the assignments the possibility of modifying their final grade; for those students who may have been unhappy with their results in the four assignments, the exam could be taken and then the higher of the two marks chosen. Notably, no student opted to do the exam.

A final component consisted of, what I term, a hurdle requirement. There was no mark assigned to this task, but in order to receive a final mark, students had to complete exercises in the workbook which accompanied their text. Some opposition to doing work which did not receive a mark was expressed to me informally by a number of students.

The final scheme went some way towards addressing the problematic issues raised earlier and, in addition, avoided my perception of the “bitsy” nature of traditional assessment schedules in language programs. These can consist of written and oral tests/exams, continuous assessment (that is, regular grammar, translation, comprehension, etc. exercises), tests (vocabulary checks, dictation), (large) compositions, (large) translations, and marks allocated to attendance and/or participation.

**Student responses to alternative assessment**

The student group was neatly split into two camps in their responses: mature age students versus non-mature age students. The older students were uniformly against “new” assessment methods and chose to express their concerns to me in private away from the more public forum of the classroom. Two students in particular had grave doubts. The younger students on the other hand seemed to have no qualms, or at least they did not indicate any, in fact some expressed relief at the absence of exams. This final sentiment is illustrated by the following diary comment where a student is describing the volume of work building up at the end of first semester:

> It’s just great that I don’t have an Italian exam!
> (Diary, Student H)

The opposing views both related to issues of workload: paradoxically, older students expressed the view that the projected workload would be vastly larger when compared with the anticipated traditional final exam model while, some of the younger students saw an opportunity to do less work than in other units. The following excerpt from the diary of another of the mature age students summarises the general view of mature age participants:
Assessment; FREAK OUT! The only assessment I am used to at Uni level in languages is translating both ways, oral talks, essays on literature, lots of 3-hour exams in all aspects of lang/lit.

The assignments read ok but I think there could be more of the same.
I would prefer a component for attendance/participation and workbook exercises.
I would prefer some exam component.
The diary is very worrying!
I HATE peer and self-assessment.
Almost as much as I hate plays and drama.
The group project worries me heaps…
Without formal exams does the Faculty come to regard the course as a bit Mickey Mouse?
(Diary, Student J)

This extract graphically illustrates the situation which ensues when students’ expectations and conceptions of education are challenged. Ramsden (1992, chapter 5) highlights this. Åkerlind and Trevitt (1999) discuss this and more generally the difficult nature of educational innovation for students. In their words (1999 forthcoming),

[a]s educational innovators, when we aim to increase learner independence and autonomy, we think that we are providing an opportunity for enhanced learning with the development of new learning skills. In reality, we are also setting up a situation of potential conflict with many students’ part experiences and associated attitudes and values around teaching and learning.

In the blaze of enthusiasm with which I undertook the overhauling of assessment, I failed to recognise that the students were not similarly caught up. “Forced change is how most innovation occurs within courses, as an edict from the instructor…it can […] be the most stressful approach” (Åkerlind and Trevitt 1999). The almost hysterical tone of this comment from the same student’s diary sums up this feeling:

The methodology is different, the work content is different and the assessment is “modern”. (Diary, Student J)

A concerted attempt was made on my part to include students in the discussion on assessment at all stages and I provided detailed information both outlining the tasks themselves and the reasons for adopting such a program. This was clear to some students while others constructed another reading of the situation all together (See Ramsden 1992, chapter 5 for an insightful discussion on student perceptions). The following comments from course evaluation questionnaires (ANUSET) demonstrate the diverse interpretations of the situation.

[The instructor is] willing to listen to comments on assessment and make changes (ANUSET)

More class involvement with setting of assessment. I felt that I just had to accept it even though there was token involvement. (ANUSET)

The second of the above quotes typifies the feeling of resentment of students compelled to accept educational innovation. These feelings can be particularly strong “where students are not unhappy with their previous learning experiences [which produces] little incentive for change” (Åkerlind & Trevitt 1999).

There was a general anxiety relating to group work with many students finding the prospect daunting due to inexperience. The mature age students found the idea
problematic, one student expressing it privately to me like this: “I don’t like foisting myself and my views on the younger kids”. The following observations are taken from student diaries. I use {} to indicate my translation from Italian to English.

Some of {the other students} are confused {about groups for the project}. {Many} have not had experience in {group work} and do not know how to get started. I am glad that {other students} are open to talking about these issues with one another.

(Diary, Student C)

I have been thinking about group dynamics and my own participation. {For example, in the past} I have tried to be so cooperative and agreeable, making sure [… ] I was not demanding or bossy that I readily agreed to almost anything. Unfortunately towards the end of the project I realised that I had not been honest with myself or others and {that} I had ideas and desires that had been left unsaid…I want to have the subject from an area that we are familiar with, with easily accessible resource material, corresponds with my interest {and…is fun!}

(Diary, Student C)

Specific problems with the project related to time management, group dynamics and use of technology. These are exactly the type of “life skills” that I was wanting to integrate. A strong opposition to this emerges in the form of the argument that these types of skills are not appropriate for inclusion in university courses. This is blindingly clear in the indignant entry of Student K.

{ my group has decided to meet Friday at 12 to talk about the project. It’s impossible before then…my daughter is sick and I can’t go to university…I hope that she is not sick on Friday, otherwise I won’t be popular with the group!…I realised that I don’t have the phone numbers of X,Y and Z. It makes communication after-hours very difficult}

(Diary, Student C)

{…there’s a problem. I’ve prepared my written part but the others haven’t finished their research yet. I’ll have to wait until they’re ready. I feel frustrated because when the others are ready, it’ll be next semester and then I’ll have more work than this one!}

(Diary, Student C)

Our group assignment…turned out to be an organizational disaster. Due to the fact that we could never get together as a group we chose to do a magazine so all could work separately on their own part and then it could all be put together and presented to the class…I’m afraid I don’t totally agree with group work, I found this experience stressful, upsetting and harder than it should have been. Uni students are very busy and {have} different lives, getting together as a group is somewhat more difficult than it would be in the workplace or at school. I realize teamwork skills, ability to share the workload etc. are very important however in the workplace it is an entirely different situation…

(Diary, Student K)

The problem with the project is that it’s most important aspect could end up being the technology you use to produce it. I am not happy with this.

(Diary, Student D)

While the preceding comments demonstrate the difficulty with group work, some students found the experience very valuable:

{Writing the project is really good for practising Italian and for getting into the spirit of the language…we work very very productively together…although we complained about the project in the past, now we all agree that when it is over we will miss doing it.}

(Diary, Student O)
{Before, I didn’t like the idea of a project…I’d had no experience with group work and was scared of giving a presentation. But…I feel happy with the results. Now, X and Y are good friends of mine and I think the project was good for my rapport with others in the class.}

(Diary, Student C)

It is notable that in the case of Student C, a mature age student, initial difficulties and uncertainty were transformed into a positive outcome. The student sees the project as having facilitated closer social ties with other class members but does not mention, however, any clear beneficial learning outcomes. Student O, on the other hand, emphasises the utility of project work as an opportunity to use Italian.

From the point of view of the author, the diary was not a complete success. Few students (in a group of approximately 30) managed to use the diary as a means of reflection. Student J, despite initial strong reactions presented above, was the only student who consistently utilised the diary to probe learning related issues. This was due, I believe, to a background in education and prior experience with reflective journal writing during training. In the following entry, Student J records a change in position with regard to allocating marks to all tasks. This refers to the workbook hurdle requirement.

[I’VE CHANGED MY MIND
A mark for everything: I recently read that university study must be ‘self-directed, self-propelled and self-disciplined’ and that the student must assume the responsibility for this.
I thought about it a lot and finally agree that you don’t need to give marks for all tasks.]

(Diary, Student J)

Another mature age student initially expressed horror at the thought of the diary and failed to see any value in the exercise. Two months later this had changed completely.

It wasn’t until last Friday that I understood we had to keep a diary and I was, frankly, horrified. I simply can’t see how this is going to make me speak Italian more easily and understand its grammar better. Whether at my age I’m going to become more self-aware, or find a “deep approach to learning” […] only time will tell.

(Diary, Student D)

How strange! I had got used to writing in this diary and found that I missed it.

(Diary, Student D)

For the other students, the diary became a disjointed collection of pieces in Italian with perhaps a comment on the course here or there. In second semester, I agreed to change the focus of the diary and reduce its weighting in the overall assessment from 25% to 12.5%. The diary evolved into a set of ten written pieces in Italian on topics I set from week to week. Instead of a reflective learning journal, it became a type of writing portfolio. I firmly concur with O’Rourke (1998:403) that “the learning journal is a powerful tool for developing student confidence and cognitive ability in ways which embed and extend learning”, nevertheless it is a method which must be introduced methodically and with “infinite care” (Ramsden 1992:73). November (1996), O’Rourke (1998) and Woodward (1998) give detailed accounts of how this should be approached while Åkerlind and Trevitt (1999) provide useful comments on reducing student resistance to non-traditional approaches in general.

At the end of first semester, students expressed a desire to have regular checks of their progress and knowledge as they felt that the assessment as it stood was not letting them
know what stage they had reached. In response I introduced tests in second semester. The following comment from the course evaluation questionnaires illustrates this view:

- More checkpoints to check our progress
  (ANUSET)

A related reason for introducing the periodic test was students’ desire to have an explicit motivation which would force them to concentrate their efforts. These students saw the role of assessment as “the big stick”. Again, the need to complete some tasks without receiving marks from the instructor was also difficult to reconcile for some students. These views were expressed via course evaluation questionnaires:

- Set specific tasks that have to be completed to make us work - this would help greatly with my undisciplined approach to language learning.
  (ANUSET)

- I know we shouldn’t only do things when marks are involved but it is hard when you have four demanding subjects and a job and everything else, there is not enough time in the day to do everything you need to do!!
  (ANUSET)

The test were structured, in common with other assessable tasks, in such a way as to make use of as wide a range of linguistic abilities as possible. Thus, they did not simply focus on the written lexical-grammatical dimension but involved aural and reading comprehension, use of visual cues rather than straight translation to test lexical knowledge, and a range of written production exercises.

Although a number of difficulties and a general level of anxiety were registered, some students clearly appreciated the innovative assessment program as having positive effects on learning:

- The wide range of assessment tasks meant that students could enjoy or if not enjoy receive a good grounding in all aspects of the language
  (ANUSET)

- Assignments were helpful/aided well the learning outcomes
  (ANUSET)

**Conclusion**

As the saying goes “you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make it drink”. We can expose our students to a range of learning experiences with a view to optimising their experience but, in the end there is no sure way of ensuring this occurs.

- Can we instruct students in the use of deep approaches?…the answer is probably no.
  (Ramsden 1992:63)

This is not to say we should not try! The factors which most greatly affected the effectiveness of the innovations described above relate to student (pre)conceptions and expectations of assessment, their prior experiences, and logistic issues such as conflicting personal commitments and time constraints. Some students resent the imposition of skills which they do not see as pertinent to the course in question. Whether these have wider personal benefits is beside the point. On a brighter note, anxiety in the face of innovation
can be reduced (Åkerlind and Trevitt 1999) and there is always a handful of students who will enjoy the journey alongside you from the outset.

References


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