

Special Issue on Selected Best Papers of the XI International SEDLL Conference

Guest Editorial

It is an increasingly acknowledged fact that we are currently living a time of immense upheaval in higher education. On both sides of the Atlantic, the same forces, similar challenges, and practically identical responses are shaping tertiary language education. In Europe, the substantial changes which language teaching is currently undergoing at the post-secondary stage are being channeled via the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). For many (e.g. Benito & Cruz 2007; Blanco 2009; Poblete Ruiz 2006), the cornerstone of the transformation being effected by the EHEA is to be found in the application of competency-based teaching. As Rylatt & Lohan (1997: 18) rightly foresaw, “It can confidently be said, as we enter a new millennium, that the business of improving learning competencies and skills will remain one of the world’s fastest growing industries and priorities”. In our specific European university context, the introduction of the concept of competencies has been considered “one of the major changes in university education in Europe in the last five years” (Pennock-Speck in press).

Despite a progressive and firm acceptance of this concept in academic and professional contexts (Benito & Cruz 2007), its concretion is still vague, given the complex and multifaceted nature of the term. Important questions thus continue to arise regarding the definition, methodology, and evaluation of competencies, largely due to the fact that we are still sorely lacking in empirically-validated proposals for their implementation and assessment, an area which is in urgent need of research (Pérez Cañado (coord.) 2010). It is thus the precise moment to offer such practical specifications to integrate, teach, and evaluate a competency-based model in language teaching, as the newly designed language degrees are starting to be implemented across Europe. This is precisely the aim of the present monographic volume, which comprises a selection of articles from the *XI International SEDLL Conference* on the preparation for and development of competency-based language teaching.

The first section of the volume centers on the use of digital competence as a vehicle for developing other generic and subject-specific competencies and for expediting linguistic competence acquisition. In this initial part, **Andrés Canga Alonso** reports on an interesting experience incorporating the use of e-mail tandem to promote five key competencies in a group of Spanish High School students with learning difficulties. This two-year study matched Spanish 4th- and 5th-graders of Compulsory Secondary Education with students from a private boarding school in West Sussex. After undertaking a set of well-structured tasks in both Spanish and English, the results evince that general competence development was indeed promoted vis-à-vis communication in the mother tongue and foreign language, learning to learn, and digital competence. However, the results as regards intercultural competence were not as auspicious, an avenue of research which the author suggests pursuing in future investigations.

María Inés Casado Antoniazzi, in turn, presents ORALEX, a computer-assisted system for formal aural-oral assessment of English language competence. It represents a major breakthrough in communicative language testing, as it constitutes an innovative, cost-effective, and user-friendly tool which allows quantitative and qualitative evaluation of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discursive competence via a vast gamut of communicative activities, whilst concomitantly favoring student ownership in the testing process. The author showcases sample exercises, expounds on the most conspicuous traits of ORALEX, and points forward to future fine-tuning of the program and research on its effects.

Jesús Garcá Laborda also presents an assessment project entitled PAULEX, which deals with the design and validation of a computer-based university entrance examination for Spanish universities including measurement of both oral and written competence through tasks on the four communicative skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing). After an initial overview of computer-based language testing, in which the author underlines the lack of research in this area in Spain, he fleshes out the design and implementation of the project as regards technological advances, attitudinal observations and results. The article concludes by endorsing the academic feasibility of the project, although the author also pinpoints limitations, such as the need of a greater governmental support and professional training, and the limited number of projects of this type in Spain.

Another project with the title of I-AGENT (Intelligent Adaptive Generic English Tutor) is the object of study of the article by **Pilar Rodríguez Arancón**, **Elena Bárcena** and **Jorge Arús**. This is an on-going endeavor which blends individual and collaborative work using innovative ICALL software combined with face-to-face instruction, with a view to addressing the limitations of computer-based assessment in relation to open-ended tasks and thus fostering mutual reinforcement of linguistic aspects in a blended learning scenario. A detailed sample unit is offered, which presents a communicative and intercultural focus on language.

The subsequent three articles focus on competence development in a tertiary setting. **Aintzane Etxebarrá**, **Urtza Garay**, and **Asier Romero** foreground the significance of developing social strategies in the student-centered higher education classroom. After framing this type of strategy against the backdrop of some of the most acknowledged classifications, the authors focus on its development via the course management system Moodle. They report on a qualitative instance of classroom research on the use of Moodle tools to work on *asking, cooperating, empathizing*, and

practicing. The outcomes point to the scarce use of this web-based environment to develop such social strategies in language learning. This leads the researchers to suggest an original proposal of how to employ Moodle instruments to enhance social strategies within L2 learning at university level and to underscore the desirability of conducting further research into their efficiency at this tertiary stage.

Dolores Fernández Martínez then sets forth an original and well-grounded framework to develop a central generic competence in Higher Education students –critical thinking– via discourse analysis. She takes critical discourse analysis (CDA) from theory to practice by laying out a three-pronged proposal which walks the reader from the basic parameters of study involved in discourse analysis to the tools it employs and the hands-on analysis of texts. The practical examples provided of CDA via slogans, ads, songs, interviews, or e-mails constitute invaluable instances of how to encourage critical analysis of social situations and cultural aspects which acquire a particularly sharp relief in the competency-based language teaching scenario propounded by Bologna.

Finally, **Roberto Martínez Mateo** describes an experience which integrates some of the latest student-centered methodologies –CLT, TBLT, CALL– to develop oral-aural skills at tertiary level. Framed against the backdrop of the European Higher Education Area and its promotion of a meaning-based, action-oriented, and dialogic pedagogy, the experiment is unraveled from its rationale and preliminary stages, to its results and effects. A BBC-controlled site is employed to hone the oral skills of university freshmen and sophomores with largely positive outcomes in terms of aural-oral performance, self-directed and lifelong learning, and connection to real-world contexts, something which, the author concludes, makes a compelling case for the replication of similar projects on a larger scale.

A third section includes a miscellany of aspects from a competency-based perspective. **José Cuadrado-Moreno** and **María Reyes-Fernández** present a teacher training program whose aim was to train a secondary education teacher of English to identify common reference levels in written production activities. The study comprises an initial phase of familiarization with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR); a second phase in which the participant assessed the written production competence of a sample of year-9 pupils of English; and a final third phase in which several reliability coefficients were obtained. The quantitative analysis evinced that the proposed training program can be adopted as a model to familiarize secondary education teachers with the CEFR, to teach them how to identify pupils' common reference level in written production activities, and to obtain reliable scores when rating, notwithstanding the limitation of the study to a single trainee.

Ana S. Jovanovic and **Gorana G. Zecevic Krneta** look into abductive reasoning and second language learning and present the results of a quantitative study on the processes that motivate initial hypothesis-making and their possible repercussions for the L2 instruction in a group of Serbian university freshmen. The study reports on the use of word inference strategies used by students –based on their L1 knowledge and that of other foreign languages– and the necessity to develop them from the early stages of language learning.

The last two articles show a predominantly linguistic focus. **Päivi Pietilä** examines the relationship between lexical and syntactic competences of advanced Finnish learners of English in a translation activity from L1 Finnish into L2 English. The results indicate that lexical and syntactic competence do not seem to develop in parallel, for even the best candidates with almost faultless syntax produced a considerable number of lexical errors. According to the author, this ultimately proves the necessity of introducing teaching techniques which could help to strengthen the lexical competence of students during their studies, and, in turn, the desirability of striking a more appropriate balance between the fluency triggered by communicative language teaching and linguistic accuracy, of which lexical precision is just an example.

Finally, the article by **Roberto Mayoral Hernández** deals with Spanish as a foreign language, and more precisely with the teaching of subject position, which may either precede or follow the verb. Given the dissimilarity with regard to other foreign languages in which the subject has a fixed position in the sentence (as is the case of English), the author contends that the issue is not appropriately addressed in many textbooks and dictionaries, and hence proposes a detailed study of three structures that are frequently associated with postverbal subjects: verbs of psychological affection, the impersonal passive, and unaccusative verbs. Several communicative task-based activities are also presented, in order to ensure that L2 learners of Spanish are able to recognize postverbal subjects as a common phenomenon.

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