**Andrea Zhok**
**University of Bristol**

**Aiming for the 'perfect blend' – A blended approach to assessment: introducing comprehensive online assessment practices in teaching and learning Italian language at advanced level**

## Introduction and rationale

First of all, what do we mean by 'blended learning'? Here are two very broad definitions: 'learning which combines online and face-to-face approaches' (DET, 2003); 'Blended Learning refers to a mixing of different learning environments. […]. Blended learning gives learners and teachers a potential […] to learn and teach more effectively.'[1] (Wikipedia) The latter definition adds a positive, progressive element, which is central to deciding whether or not to embrace blended learning – its potential for improving the learning experience. Whether or not this is intrinsic to blended learning remains to be seen; one cannot deny, however, the persuasive power of a changed social and therefore educational context. Mixing traditional contact time with the new frontier of digital Information Technology, opening more opportunities for language learning and creating a continuum of different teaching and learning modes, which are not mutually exclusive but mutually enriching, is both a necessary challenge and a huge opportunity for all learners and practitioners.

Concurrent social and institutional changes, such as the availability of digital media, the widespread adoption and rolling out of VLEs by HE establishments, as well as the unstoppable success of social networks, all provide a compelling rationale for changing and refreshing traditional programmes by tapping into new student habits and expectations. The role technology plays in students' daily lives and routines nowadays requires an even greater switch of emphasis on the part of educational providers towards facilitating learners' autonomy and stimulating a sense of responsibility and ownership for one's learning by creating viable independent learning tasks.
These have been the drivers underpinning a culture change in the approach to Italian language teaching at Bristol in recent years.

## Background to the project and learning context

The decision to embark on a project of comprehensive e-assessment provision arose from the Department's already extensive use of *Blackboard* and the need to increase language assessment opportunities. The original pilot project was facilitated by funding from the Faculty of Arts, consisting of one-hour teaching time relief for the project co-ordinator. The project was also closely linked to the university's choice of adopting *Questionmark Perception* (a market-leading e-assessment software product) to extend institution-wide e-assessment practices and, in turn, ensure substantial support opportunities for parties interested in trialling it.

---

[1] For a more in-depth discussion of blended learning definitions, see Neumann (2011: 274-6).

The project was run by departmental language-teaching staff, namely our permanent Language Tutor, Paola Celant, under my guidance as project co-ordinator. Training and continuous technical support and pedagogical advice was provided by Roberta Perli, from the University of Bristol Education Support Unit (ESU), in whom we were fortunate to have an advisor with a significant background in language teaching.

Student participation involved Y2 and Y4 Italian language degree students, with an average of 50-55 students per year. These would include a minority of Single Honours (Italian Studies) or Joint School students (Italian with one of the following: Drama; History of Art; Music; Philosophy; Politics) and a majority of Joint Honours language students (Italian with one of the following: Czech; French; German; Portuguese; Russian; Spanish).

The project aims were to introduce extensive and comprehensive e-assessment opportunities closely linked with, and integral to, curricular activities to test grammar and aural comprehension. The project included the whole gamut of assessment modes – diagnostic, formative and summative. The initial 2007-08 pilot consisted of creating a diagnostic grammar test at second- and final-year level from scratch, in order to assess students' start-of-year knowledge, 're-awaken' their grammatical awareness through identification of strengths and weaknesses, and provide a benchmark for measuring end-of-year added-value. The plan also comprised continuous formative assessments for ongoing practice and preparation prior to summative assessment alongside summative tests (including low-stakes second-year tests and high-stakes final-year exams).

These very ambitious goals (considering the resources available) were intended to test the feasibility of introducing a significant summative element, while expanding formative opportunities. In evaluating the pilot, the original plan was recognised as overambitious, and a change of emphasis from summative to formative was decided for the following session. In the revised plan in the project's second year, the diagnostic test was retained and updated with a change of delivery from synchronous to asynchronous, date-restricted and remotely accessible. The formative tests were retained, updated and expanded; the summative tests were dropped. In its third year, the diagnostic tests were retained and updated, the formative tests were retained, updated and expanded – especially final-year listening tasks. For the summative element, there was a partial re-introduction of low-stakes Y2 grammar tests, which were deemed deliverable and 'cost-effective' in terms of workload.

This was due mainly to improvements since the initial launch, including: better server reliability; a higher degree of familiarity with the VLE in students; better infrastructure.

Let us now consider some of the advantages of e-assessment versus paper-based testing.

For students, an obvious benefit is the increase in their learning autonomy through the co-ordinated and integrated range of activities that complement traditional contact-time content. Logistically and organisationally, another huge improvement

offered by online activities is their availability with open access 24/7, both on campus and remotely, i.e. during vacation or while on the Year Abroad. Other beneficial features of online activities include instant and personalised feedback, the possibility of multiple attempts and the removal of the marker's subjective bias.

General advantages for tutors have included: valuable development of a permanent/growing questionbank (timesaving in the mid/long term); added flexibility in updating and creating questions *ad hoc*, forcing tutors to rethink assessment and develop a fresher approach by concentrating on the student experience; no marking (well, almost…!). Specific advantages locally have included a positive impact on the curriculum at intra- and extra-departmental level (from pioneering and piloting to widespread adoption in other language departments); increase in upskilling and in-service professional development for tutors involved; increased collaboration with colleagues; the creation of a special interest group for dissemination of best practice (the Technology Enhanced Language Learning Interest Group - TELLING - was born in the summer of 2010).

Advantages of *Questionmark Perception* versus other e-assessment programmes (available at the University of Bristol) included: comprehensive and dedicated e-assessment support and advice (both hands-on and pedagogical); suitability and robustness for formative as well as summative purposes (avoiding certain limitations of *Blackboard* and *Wimbacreate*); powerful scoring tools; flexible and comprehensive range of question types. Types of questions supported by *Questionmark Perception* include, among others, 'drag and drop', 'fill in blanks', 'multiple choice', 'true/false', 'yes/no' as Figure 1 (below) shows:
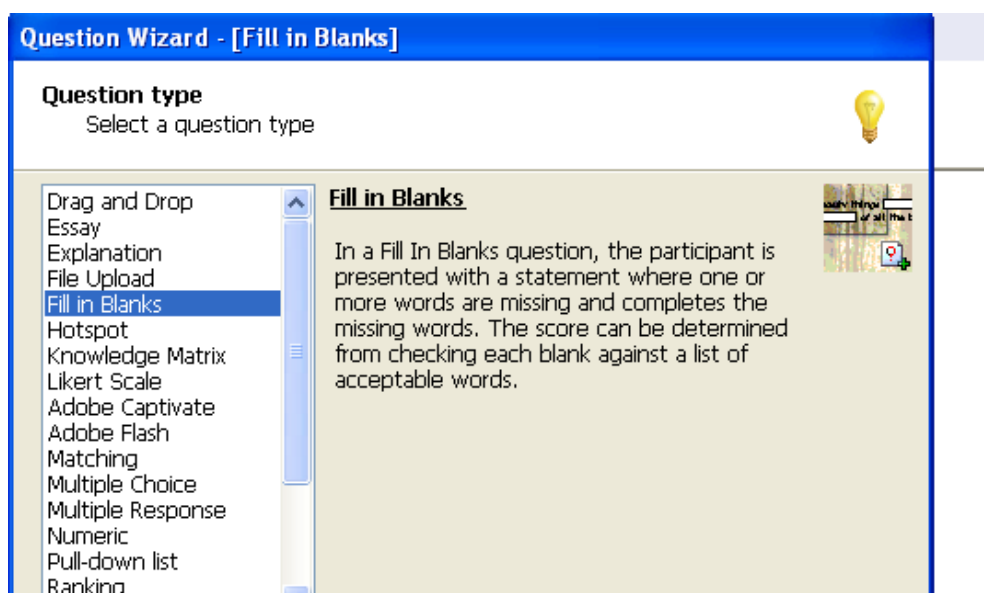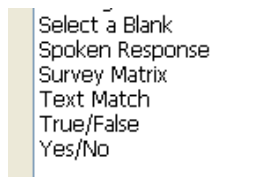
Figure 1 - Range of question types in *Questionmark Perception*

## Question typology, domains and skills

Grammar

Grammar tasks were underpinned by a contextualised approach – keeping language current and relevant to the given level. For instance, the emphasis on argumentative text types in the final-year curriculum was reinforced with tailor-made activities, exploiting the medium's inherent flexibility and customisability to allow for testing in as specific a manner as possible. Grammar activities were designed to be consistent with the language level expected of students in their written production tasks and to be recognisably useful for modelling.

Tests were designed to make final-year students progress throughout the session. The diagnostic test focused on getting advanced students with high levels of confidence but often serious accuracy issues 'back to basics' following their Year Abroad. Activities would insist on 'basic' topics while using increasingly sophisticated contexts, domains and lexis. Example topics would include: agreements, articles, prepositions, numerals, conjugation (active and passive indicative) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Examples of grammar revision tasks

This would be followed by tests focusing on more complex structures, especially verbal modes and manipulation of syntax (including metalinguistic competence). Activities would concentrate on communicative value and typical interference problems (incorrect use of the gerund, etc.).

The latter activities would reinforce reading and writing activities in order to develop independence in creating argumentative texts.

**Sintassi del periodo. Scegli la definizione giusta per ogni frase**

1. Per capire la crisi dei rifiuti in Campania

bisogna considerare il ruolo

che ha giocato la camorra in questo campo.

2. Il calcio è uno sport        | principale |

che mi lascia indifferente

infatti non ho mai capito

perchè tanti lo amano così appassionatamente.

principale
coordinata
causale
temporale
interrogativa indiretta
concessiva
condizionale/ipotetica
relativa
avversativa
dichiarativa
consecutiva
comparativa
finale

3. Essendo un tifoso di rugby

credo

che questo sport in Italia riceva meno attenzione

di quanta ne meriti,

considerata la qualità della squadra nazionale italiana.

4. Pur amando molto tutti i film di Fellini

trovo *8 e 1/2* il suo capolavoro assoluto

invece Antonioni non l'ho mai capito.

Completa le seguenti frasi coniugando i verbi tra parentesi utilizzando il *periodo ipotetico* corretto, (il tipo è indicato tra parentesi):

1. (**usa il 1° tipo**) Molti dicono che se in futuro l'aeroporto di Bristol (estendere) _____ , il paesaggio (distruggere) _____ e questo (provocare) _____ un danno alle comunità locali e all'ambiente.

2. (**usa il 2° tipo**) Altri invece sostengono che se si (bloccare) _____ lo sviluppo dello scalo aereo, le conseguenze (risultare) _____ molto dannose per l'economia dell'intera regione.

3. (**usa il 3° tipo o misto**) Se Napoli e la Campania (governare) _____ bene, non (esserci) _____ nessuna "emergenza rifiuti".

ive, gerund, participle, if-clauses, conjunctions, etc.

<u>Listening Comprehension</u>

In this skill area a major change in test format occurred as a result of the adoption of online testing. The old format consisted of totally open-ended and discoursive types of TL questions and answers on a given video excerpt (see Fig. 5). This tended to test written production as much as actual comprehension of discrete elements, which was problematic.

## Y4 AURAL-LISTENING COMPREHENSION EXERCISE

ASCOLTA L'ESTRATTO E RISPONDI **IN ITALIANO** ALLE SEGUENTI
DOMANDE. SCRIVI SEMPRE DELLE **FRASI COMPLETE**, **USANDO
PAROLE TUE** PER ESPRIMERE QUELLO CHE HAI CAPITO E RICORDATI DI
USARE UN **ITALIANO CORRETTO**:

**Video tratto dalla trasmissione** *Gli Scempi Edilizi* (Rai3 2001)-durata 9'15''
circa

1. Che cosa è successo nel 1966 ad Agrigento e perchè?

2. Il signor Zanardi legge un articolo di Jemolo. A che proposito?

3. Che cosa afferma V. Consolo?

4. Che cosa è successo all'interno e all'immediato esterno della Valle dei Templi?

5. Che cosa rappresenta per Cervellati la Valle dei Templi e perchè?

6. Che atteggiamento ha Arnone rispetto al futuro?

Figure 5 – Example of old listening comprehension task format

The new format (see Figure 6) consisted of a range of mainly closed questions to test actual content and a couple of open questions to test ability to understand and express more complex, interpretative issues from the video text. In switching to the new format it was important to carefully grade and weight each question to give reliable results. This made the type of testing much more precise and targeted. The advantage for students was also the wide range of preparatory tests available through *Blackboard*, allowing for instant feedback on closed questions, as well as on open questions through plentiful supporting material, which was also useful for vocabulary retention, explanation of specific cultural points, etc.

1 of 18

In che regione ci troviamo? Ci troviamo [        ] .

2 of 18

Che tipo di disastro è successo? Il disastro era [        ▼] .

un'inondazione

3 of 18

4 of 18

Ci sono state vittime?

○ Sì
○ No

5 of 18

Arturo Carlo Jemolo ha pubblicato un articolo che commentava la situazione del territorio italiano. Quando è stato pubblicato? (scrivi la data esatta in cifre. per esempio 02/02/1899) La data è il [        ] .

6 of 18

Per Zanardi, Agrigento è un esempio perfetto del forte [        ] tra i monumenti e il [        ] che li contiene.

7 of 18

Secondo Consolo, quando si è iniziato a parlare di protezione del territorio? Si è iniziato [        ▼] .

dagli anni '50
troppo tardi
dagli anni '60

8 of 18

Una volta, secondo Consolo, Agrigento era una città di tradizione [     ▼] .

Figure 6 – Example of new listening comprehension task format

**Difficulties**

Various hurdles were encountered in the setting up and running of the project. Most derived from a poor understanding of the labour intensiveness of the front-loaded work and the training needs required (in the short term) to author questions. Other difficulties included: a significant need for quality assurance post-assessment; infrastructure issues (finding suitable spaces for synchronous summative testing); poor integration with Blackboard for access to scores by students; non-subject-specific software (accented letters/special characters, etc.); potential for human error (inexperience/low IT literacy in students, etc.); technical failure during high-stakes summative exam leading to a higher anxiety level/loss of confidence in students affected.

It also became clear that testing grammar at higher levels demands a prevalence of open questions (fill-in-the-gap type) which can often lead to multiple correct answers, making it more difficult when authoring questions to minimise unpredicted correct answers than when marking on paper. Also, questions where students must simply 'choose' the correct answer ('multiple choice' or 'multiple response') can give weaker students an in-built advantage, especially at higher levels. These were useful discoveries to inform further creation of questions.

**Students' responses and feedback**

Students were consulted through anonymous questionnaires to evaluate their experience and reactions, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Results were broadly in line with findings from similar projects (Christie, 2001; Wiebe & Kabata, 2010). What was especially valuable to us was the qualitative dimension of the students' open-ended comments, where they freely expressed their opinions. Here is a representative selection of positive and negative student responses to the question 'What are the advantages and disadvantages of online testing?':

Advantages

'Neater', 'Quicker', 'Straightforward', 'Clearer'
'Quick, simple and no risk of handwriting being misread'
'Novelty value' 'Test is fairly short & we can practise at home'
'Fewer nerves' 'It felt more relaxing'
'Practice online is useful'

'You can easily check how much time you have left'
'I can change/edit my answers more easily than on paper if I'd made a mistake'
'I liked the drop-down questions and generally just doing it via computer'
'Multiple choice style questions are more user-friendly'
'Easier – less writing – waste less time'
'Answers are clearer & I have a better idea of how much time I need'

Disadvantages

'I find it easier and better to organise my thoughts on paper'
'I don't trust the computer to mark correctly'
'Possibility that the system cannot recognise more than one possible correct answer'
'Feedback is not as good as on paper'
'Difficult dealing with accented characters' 'Typing errors more likely'
'Technical problems are a source of anxiety and stress – what if my PC shuts down in the middle of my exam?!' 'What if I click on something and lose the test!'
'Multiple choice is easier – you can guess the right answer'
'Having to trek across the university to some unknown building which wastes time'

**Lessons learned and recommendations**

This project has been an opportunity to use e-assessment to rethink, improve, and vary our assessment practices. It put established assessment routines and procedures to the test and allowed tutors to reconnect with the student experience by addressing some fundamental issues in assessment, such as test reliability (especially with respect to the need for careful calibration of the weighting of questions to avoid unrepresentative results).
Embracing change through blended learning highlighted the need for a continuing focus on the pedagogical value of assessment (what you want to test, why and how) (Fullan, 1998: 253-68). It also underlined the importance of drawing up a carefully planned project cycle, following the ADDIE model (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation) as well as that of strategically phased online learning activities, following a system such as Salmon's five-stage model (Salmon, 2002). Among other things, this shift entailed: careful planning of staffing and workloads; increased logistical and administrative needs and resource requirements; new project evaluation procedures; the implementation of strict quality assurance mechanisms in order to test the effectiveness of assessments; making sure students understood practical issues (good communication, clear instructions and procedures); the provision of adequate opportunities for students to familiarise themselves with the new system and gain confidence in using it; the drawing-up of effective contingency plans for summative tests (paper back-up copies); deciding how feedback to students would be offered; etc.

Our project has showed that, eventually, students become more familiar and more accepting of new systems. This does, however, take time and systems need to be embedded and integrated within the curriculum to be appreciated and exploited to their fullest extent.

**Bibliography**

Beatty, K. 2003. *Teaching and Researching Computer-assisted Language Learning*. London: Longman.

Boscolo, C., Davies, A. & Smith, K. 2008. Enhancing the student experience through technology. *Tuttitalia,* 36:4-11.

Christie, K. N. 2001. Web-based multimedia in business Italian: A longitudinal evaluation of learner experiences and attitudes. *Italica*, 78(4):499-525.

DET. 2003. *Blended Learning*. NSW Department of Education and Training.

Fratter, I. 2004. *Tecnologie per l'insegnamento delle lingue*. Roma: Carocci.

Fullan, M. 1998. Linking change and assessment. In: P. Rea-Dickins and K. P. Germaine, eds. *Managing Evaluation and Innovation in Language Teaching*. London: Longman, pp. 253-68.

Gaspari, F. & Polisca, E. 2009. How do we teach Italian culture? The e-learning approach of CAMILLE. *Tuttitalia*, 37:3-10.

Gläsmann, S. 2004. *Communicating online*. London: CILT.

Heinze, A. & Procter, C. 2004. Reflections On The Use Of Blended Learning [online] [accessed 20 August 2011]. Available at:
<www.ece.salford.ac.uk/proceedings/papers/ah_04.rtf.>

JISC. 2007. *Effective Practice with e-Assessment*. London: HEFCE.

JISC. 2009. *Managing Curriculum Change – Transforming curriculum design and delivery through technology*. London: HEFCE.

JISC. 2010. *Effective Assessment in a Digital Age – A guide to technology-enhanced assessment and feedback*. London: HEFCE.

JISC project team. 2009. *Review of Advanced e-Assessment Techniques (RAeAT) Final Report*. [online] [accessed 20 August 2011]. Available at:
<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/projects/raeatfinalreportpdf.pdf.>

Heinze, A. & Procter, C. 2004. Reflections On The Use Of Blended Learning. [online] [accessed 20 August 2011]. Available at:
<www.ece.salford.ac.uk/proceedings/papers/ah_04.rtf.>

Mayes T. & de Freita, S. 2010. *Review of e-learning theories, frameworks and models – JISC e-Learning Models Desk Study – Stage 2*. [online] [accessed 20 August 2011]. Available at:
<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/Stage%202%20Learning%20Models%20(Version%201).pdf>

Neumann, D. L., Neumann, M. M. & Hood, M. 2011. Evaluating computer-based simulations, multimedia and animations that help integrate blended learning with lectures in first-year statistics. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 27(2):274-289.

Polisca, E. 2006. Facilitating the learning process: an evaluation of the use of a virtual learning environment (VLE)-enhanced independent language-learning programme (ILLP). *CALICO Journal*, 23:499-516.

Richards, C. 2005. The design of effective ICT-supported learning activities: exemplary models, changing requirements, and new possibilities. *Language Learning & Technology*, 9(1):60-79.

Ridgeway, J., McCusker, S. & Pead, D. 2004. *Literature Review of E-assessment*. Bristol: Futurelab.

Salmon, G. 2002. *E-tivities: the key to active online learning*. London: Routledge.

Wiebe, G. & Kabata, K. 2010. Students' and instructors' attitudes towards the use of CALL in foreign language teaching and learning. *CALL*, 23(3):221-234

Wikipedia. 2010. [online] [accessed 20 August 2010]. Available at:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blended_learning>