Tema

ASSESSING MODERN LANGUAGES IN SWEDISH UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOLS

L'article présente les modalités d'évaluation du nouveau plan d'étude pour les langues étrangères en Suède. Partant d'une présentation générale des nouveaux plans d'étude pour les langues modernes, le propos se concentre ensuite sur le cas particulier de l'italien L2 pour débutants au secondaire II: le lecteur est invité à suivre les étudiants du lycée de Kärrtorp, à la périphérie de Stockholm, dans leur première approche de l'italien L2 jusqu'à leur premier examen, neuf mois plus tard, lorsque l'évaluation des connaissances acquises a été faite selon le nouveau plan d'études.

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The purpose of this report is to provide an example of how Italian for beginners at a Swedish upper secondary school (students aged 16-19) was assessed in light of the new Swedish foreign language syllabus. After an introduction of the new syllabi for modern languages, the reader is invited to follow my learners of Italian at Kärrtorps gymnasium outside Stockholm from their first encounters with the new language at the start of the course in August to the final examination period nine months later, when the knowledge requirements from the syllabus were assessed and summarized for the course grade.

The new national curriculum

In 2011 a new National Curriculum was introduced in Sweden with new syllabi for the school subjects and yet another new grading system, the third in just 18 years. The new concise syllabi consist of three parts:

- the aim of the subject;
- the core content; and
- the knowledge requirements (a new term which in most English-speaking contexts are referred to as 'standards').

Similar to the previous curriculum, a communicative approach to language teaching is prescribed in the aim for modern languages, giving learners the opportunity to "develop all-round communicative skills". Furthermore, in line with communicative methodologies, the suggestion is that foreign language should be taught in the foreign language to the greatest extent possible, which in many cases is asking much of teachers. The following three components of communicative competence are emphasized in the aim of the subject:

1. *Linguistic competence* in reception and production (i.e. understanding target language (TL) speech/text and speaking/writing it) which is relatively unproblematic from an assessment point of view as it is specified in the knowledge requirements.
2. *Strategic competence* is given a more prominent role in the new syllabi. However, **assessing it is fraught with problems as strategies are difficult to define and may constitute non-observable data**: avoidance is a possible and presumably common strategy, in-

deed difficult to assess! It is explicitly mentioned in the knowledge requirements but not sufficiently specified.

3. *Sociolinguistic competence* involving the ability to adapt language to different purposes, recipients and situations. This competence is only implicitly subsumed in the knowledge requirements for linguistic competence.

In addition, there is a TL cultural part where learners are to comment on phenomena from TL contexts and make comparisons with their own experiences and knowledge. This component is included in the knowledge requirements but insufficiently specified.

Another new feature is found in the core content of the syllabus, detailing what factual content the teaching in the course should cover, e.g. that signs and advertisements are relevant objects of study for promoting receptive skills and that politeness and fixed expressions should be integrated in production-oriented lesson activities.

Ongoing Assessment

There is something special about teaching a foreign language to complete beginners – you really have the opportunity to isolate and gauge your own effectiveness as a language teacher given the fact that your learners know nothing at the outset, at least in theory. My being an Italian teacher at upper secondary school in Sweden alters this picture in an important way as I know that Italian is their third foreign language learned in school, having started formal instruction of English around the age of nine (this being compulsory), and then choosing a second foreign language (Spanish, French and German) at the age of 12. My learners thus came to the classroom with different experiences of and attitudes towards formal language learning, as well as different proficiency levels in the languages they had learned.

Right from the first lesson I taught, I made an effort to convey the idea that their knowledge of other languages was resourceful for them when learning Italian, e.g. by introducing the concept of cognatedness, i.e. that the same or similar word form in two languages often have related meanings – as in the Italian word *dialogo* and *dialog* in Swedish – and I encouraged educated guessing as a powerful metalinguistic strategy. I also focused on fostering native-like pronunciation by highlighting consonant quality in Italian, with e.g. the 'thick' sound of the initial sound in the Italian word *cinema*. The third feature I prioritized from day one was routines with massive comprehensible exposure to and pushed output of Italian. I emphasized how much them joining in these routines, and accepting the language showers they were exposed to, improved the chances of their scoring high on the final examinations. The three central components of the routines were:

1. *roll call*: using attendance checking as a learning opportunity. The first time they responded *Sì (yes)* themselves or classmates said *No, è assente (No, he/she is absent)*, using words that were written on the whiteboard. This practice grew in complexity so that eventually learners provided elaborate answers such as *Io preferisco l'estate (I prefer summer)*. The lesson plan was also written on the whiteboard and I went through it, in Italian, every lesson. Though time-consuming this roll call routine proved immensely educational, particularly its repetitive nature.
2. *text pre-activities*: the introduction of a new text included setting learners up for success by various techniques to give them a pre-understanding of it, e.g. my choosing five core sentences from the text which they analysed in pairs and then guessed what it would be about it (in their L1).
3. *weekly written tests*: learners were informed of the final examination and how it was to summatively assess their communicative competence in Italian. They were also told that weekly (marked but not recorded) tests would be administered to make sure that they were "on track" learning-wise, a consistent poor result of which would generate a written notice.

Grading

I now turn to the central topic of this report: how I assessed my learners of Italian

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and the grading system. The knowledge requirements reflect the competences in the aim of the subject and are specified for three grade levels (Figure 1 and Figure 2): E (the lowest passing grade), C, and A (the highest passing grade). For the unspecified grade D, all knowledge requirements for grade E should be met plus more than half of the ones for grade C. The same procedure applies to the grade B, involving the requirements for C and A.

Figure 1: The Swedish grading system (as of 2011)

For a grade of:	The student has:
A	achieved all the defined knowledge requirements
B	achieved all the knowledge requirements for Grade C and the bulk of the requirements for Grade A.
C	achieved all the knowledge requirements for Grade C
D	achieved all the knowledge requirements for Grade E and the bulk of the requirements for Grade C.
E	achieved all the knowledge requirements for Grade E
F	failed to achieve any or all of the knowledge requirements for Grade E

Continuous assessment is not part of the Swedish grading system as what the student knows at the end of the course is what matters. However, should teachers have reason to believe that a student risks getting a failing grade (F), he/she is entitled to receive a written notice during the parent/teacher meeting, specifying on what grounds the warning is issued, what needs to be done and the role each party is expected to play for a passing grade to be reached.

Final examinations

The final examinations of my Italian course took place in May and required a great deal of planning, practical arrangements and innovation. The examinations were divided into three parts (see the complete test on www.babylonia.ch > No 2/2016 > Article Snoder):

- (1) a written test assessing listening, reading, and writing;
- (2) an oral test in which learners were put in pairs and interacted for around 15 minutes; and
- (3) the cultural part for which learners had prepared two topics related to Italian civilization, a test they took directly after the oral test.

In April learners were given detailed information as to the contents of these assessments (vocabulary lists, grammar, etc.) and also, importantly, the opportunity to take mock exams, i.e. taking the tests in the exact same form, but with other contents, to practice the procedure.

The written test

The written test consisted of three parts that were assessed qualitatively with explicit reference to the knowledge requirements for levels E, C, and A. Let us look at examples of all three parts for the E level. The listening instructions tell learners that they are to hear a dialogue in Italian, once, and then answer questions in Swedish (after having read them through). **The choice of language was deemed important to me as they were to be assessed on how well they understood Italian and not how well they expressed themselves in Italian, referred to as the validity of the assessment, or that the measurement measures what it is intended to measure (the choice of language for the listening comprehension is not specified in the syllabus).** As can be seen in the test itself, the knowledge requirements are found in the box at the bottom of the page (Figure 2) and specify qualities for each level of performance, e.g. that at the E level the "Learner shows his/her understanding by [...] acting upon messages with an **acceptable result**". Here quantitative measures were judged necessary as a distinction between "acceptable" ("godtagbart"), "satisfactory" ("tillfredsställande") and "good" ("gott") results needed to be quantified. Acceptable was thus, admittedly somewhat arbitrarily, defined as a score of three out of seven points, satisfactory four to five points and good six to seven points and how to interpret these adjectives is decided by individual or teams of teachers.

Figure 2: Definitions of result levels (in Swedish)

Kunskapskrav för hörförståelse från Gy11:
E: Eleven visar sin förståelse genom att […] med **godtagbart** resultat agera utifrån budskap […] i innehållet – eleven fick tre rätt av sju på ovanstående hörförståelseuppgift _____

C: Eleven visar sin förståelse genom att […] med **tillfredsställande** resultat agera utifrån budskap […] i innehållet – eleven fick fyra-fem rätt av sju på ovanstående hörförståelseuppgift _____

A: Eleven visar sin förståelse genom att […] med **gott** resultat agera utifrån budskap […] i innehållet – eleven fick sex-sju rätt av sju på ovanstående hörförståelseuppgift _____

For the reading and writing parts, the E, C, and A levels were put in separate sections so that learners were allowed to 'target' their grade level, e.g. only taking the E level reading part if they so desired. To be awarded a grade C learners need to pass both the E and C level, and for an A learners need to pass all three levels. In the reading part, the knowledge requirement for each level was stated first and then a short text followed with questions, again, to be answered in Swedish. The threshold for pass for the E level was set at 60% correct answers, meaning that students either passed or failed that task. The knowledge requirements are specified for reading and e.g. for grade E the student "understands common words and simple phrases in short, simple texts about everyday activities and familiar topics", followed by the same subcriteria as for the reading part. For the writing part learners were asked to write a short coherent text in Italian (introducing a fictitious female friend) and were provided with necessary information in Swedish. The knowledge requirements for writing specify that the learner is "capable of expressing him-/herself comprehensibly with single words and phrases". The threshold for pass was set at 50% comprehensible answers, which in this case did not require complete grammatical accuracy, but instead comprehensibility was the key. So, if a learner wrote the female personal pronoun *Lei* (for *She*) and included all the necessary content words, but failed to make subject-adjective agreements, it stilled counted as a correct answer from a comprehensibility point of view (for those who don't speak Italian: without *Lei* and agreements it could have referred to a man, which is not acceptable in this situation).

The oral exam

In the oral test learners performed in self-selected pairs and were scheduled a 20-minute appointment. They were provided with test materials which included two grids (different for person A and B) with contexts and prompts in the L1 on content matter from the course and instructed how to perform the intended procedure. Then they interacted for 10-15 minutes, sitting at desks facing each other and with myself as a non-participant assessor with forms to fill out in which I put comments and ticks in relevant boxes according to the knowledge requirements (I also audio-recorded the dialogues). Strategic competence is, as mentioned above, emphasized in the syllabi but I did not register a single (observable) instance of strategy use during all these interactions, apart from one instance of looking up words on a mobile phone. To remedy this situation I asked them to individually write down examples of possible strategies. The specifications in the knowledge requirements regarding strategies are limited (no examples are given) and the few details that are provided require interpretation. For grade E it says "some strategies", for C "some different strategies" and for A "several different strategies". I adopted a pragmatic approach to it and two similar strategies sufficed for an E, two distinctively different strategies were enough for a C and more than two distinctively different strategies met the A grade criterion.

The cultural part

For the third part the knowledge requirements are unspecific and confusing as they do not state which language to use and the exact same wording is used for both the E and C grades while for the A level only the word "very" is left out: "Students comment in **very** simple forms on some phenomena in different contexts and areas where the language is used, and make simple comparisons with their own experiences and knowledge" (for grades E and C; emphasis in original). My learners had prepared

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to discuss two aspects of Italian culture and civilization that I had suggested – e.g. football and food – and relate them to their own experiences and knowledge, in writing. The pragmatic yet unsatisfactory approach to go about assessing these short coherent texts written in Swedish was to simply categorize them as pass or non-pass performances (i.e. similar to a course requirement).

It took me four weeks in May to gather enough data to grade all my learners. Let us now look at examples of two learners, referred to as *Daniella* and *Bianca* (fictitious names). *Daniella* received an E at the oral test, she passed the culture test and received three C's on the listening-reading-writing tests. Her final course grade was a D. Her classmate *Bianca* received an A on the oral test, a pass on the culture test, A on the listening and writing tests and a C for the writing test. Her final course grade was a B.

This was the first batch of students I graded with the new curriculum. Fortunately, I was not fresh out of university, but had taught modern languages for ten years, and also worked three years as a teacher educator at the university. I was therefore fully aware of the importance of keeping everything "by the book", i.e. sticking very close to the curricular documents (to the extent that it was feasible), which is the hallmark of a professional and competent teacher. I tried to cooperate with my colleagues (teachers of other foreign languages such as French and Spanish), but being the only Italian teacher at the school I was largely left to my own devices.

If I were to teach the same course again I would definitely keep the routines, but I think I would show the students, at a rather early stage, an example of the final examinations to boost motivation and explain the grading system. Of the three competences, I found that linguistic competence was the easiest one to score, whereas scoring strategic competence was more challenging. For lack of a better test instrument, I resorted to assigning students to simply enumerate strategies, but I do not know how else to go about it. Sociolinguistic competence was even more problematic as it is not explicitly specified in the knowledge requirements. However, it was embedded, though implicitly, in the writing part where students needed to show awareness of politeness markers and also use other textual devices to adapt it to the particular genre. The cultural part was clearly the most problematic aspect, for reasons already specified.

Conclusion

As a result of these flaws and inconsistencies I do not endorse the Swedish National Curriculum 2011 and its new syllabus for modern languages and the grading system. The knowledge requirements need to be revised so that the aims may be validly assessed. Furthermore, more in-service training is needed, run by assessment experts who can explain the rationales behind the syllabus and provide concrete examples of learning activities and assessment tasks. Moreover, school management should also impose collegial cooperation for same subject teachers in syllabus design and not naïvely believe that it will occur on a voluntary basis.