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Questa è la Versione finale referata (Post print/Accepted manuscript) della seguente pubblicazione:

Original Citation:

Assessment and Certification of Foreign Language Learning through Rubrics: A Methodological Perspective / davide capperucci. - ELETTRONICO. - (2018), pp. 294-307.

Availability:

This version is available at: 2158/1120743 since: 2018-03-25T12:09:45Z

Publisher:

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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New Trends in Foreign Language Teaching

New Trends in Foreign Language Teaching:

*Methods, Evaluation
and Innovation*

Edited by

António Lopes and Raúl Ruiz Cecilia

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2018

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-0597-9

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0597-1

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ASSESSMENT AND CERTIFICATION
OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING
THROUGH RUBRICS:
A METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

DAVIDE CAPPERUCCI

1. Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in Primary and Secondary School is an important aspect which, in recent decades, has involved many EU countries¹. Parallel to the development of European and national policies on foreign language learning and teaching, the pedagogical reflection on these themes has devoted increasing attention to Curriculum issues, as well as how to assess and certify foreign language learning effectively². This requires upstream a specific expertise in teachers in the area of assessment, which must be treated carefully and with methodological rigour.

This paper focuses specifically on EFL–teacher development in Assessment and Certification competencies, which is considered as an essential aspect of teacher’s professionalism³.

After outlining a theoretical framework for Authentic Assessment, according to the international literature⁴, the present paper addresses a

¹ Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Kenneth M. Zeichner, eds., *Studying teacher education: The report of the AERA panel on research and teacher education* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2010).

² Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers, *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³ Michael Grenfell, Michael Kelly and Diana Jones, *The European Language Teacher: Recent Trends and Future Developments in Teacher Education* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003); Adrienne L. Herrell and Michael L. Jordan, *50 strategies for teaching English language learners* (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2015).

methodological certification of achievement model, with particular reference to how this matter is dealt with in the Italian School System, although most of the reflections and methodological proposals that are here presented may be valid for any school system.

2. From competence development to assessment

One common characteristic to the latest education system reforms in the majority of European countries is the attempt to redefine the purpose of education in the perspective of competence. The initial input that led to the passage from "fundamental knowledge" to the development of disciplinary and citizenship key competences was introduced, firstly, with the Lisbon Strategy of 2000 and more recently with the Europe 2020 strategy⁵. Both of these measures recognize the centrality of the "competence construct" as an element of innovation in education which can combat school dropout, and develop higher levels of competitiveness, employability and social inclusion within the member countries. This 'turn' from knowledge to competences marks a very delicate transition for the school system, since it sets new purposes for Education moving from the knowledge that all must firmly possess to the capacity to apply knowledge and skills acquired to solve problems in known and unknown situations. Competences were a sort "tsunami 'skills'", at least for Italy, given the 'disruptive' way they entered the school system, without adequate teacher preparation to deal with such a radical change.

From the instructional design point of view, competences require the rewriting of established practices which have focused on content transmission. In terms of the learning assessment, the change appears even greater, putting new questions about the methodologies and tools to be used in the assessment of results and the certification of achievement.

The attention that competences have today has developed over time as to offer a more complete definition of what was initially provided by Behaviourist theories. In the case of Behaviourism, competence is associated with the concept of performance. Based on the paradigm of technical rationality, competence is simplified into a series of performances empirically observable and measurable, whose sum demonstrates the mastery level achieved by the subject. Subsequently, thanks to the

⁴ Margaret E. Gredler, *Classroom Assessment and Learning* (Reading, MA: Longman, 1999).

⁵ Fernando Hervás Soriano and Fulvio Mulatero, "Knowledge policy in the EU: From the Lisbon strategy to Europe 2020," *Journal of the Knowledge Economy* 1, no. 4 (2010), 289–302.

contribution of Cognitivist and Constructivist learning theories, reflection about competences has shifted towards less reductionist approaches which considered the totality of the person and the intersection of multiple planes such as the cognitive, socio-emotional, and relational domains⁶.

Even Perrenoud⁷ claims that competence is something more than just a pattern of action, something which cannot be reduced to the simple repetition of previously acquired patterns, indeed it orchestrates a set of different components. A pattern consists in the underlying action or the single operation, while a competence implements schemes of perception, thinking, evaluation and action, which underlie inferences, anticipations, transpositions, generalizations, the estimation of the probability, the start of a diagnostic search from a set of clues, the search for information of a different nature, the construction of a decision etc.

To evaluate such a rich and multifaceted form of learning we should also rethink the assessment methods and tools (e.g., the traditional ones), designed to assess knowledge. Indeed, not always do they seem to be reliable and adequate to detect situated behaviours that go beyond the memory of notional information. Hence, the need to develop new theoretical and epistemological models of assessment, based on the evidence of empirical research, can also contribute to the development of new interpretive criteria and tools to be used in teaching.

3. Theoretical framework: authentic assessment and certification of achievement

The theoretical model that inspired this research is authentic assessment, which, as written by McClelland⁸, Glaser and Resnick⁹, aims to develop multidimensional methods of assessment which are able to overcome the rigidity that, sometimes, is attributed to assessment through testing. In this case, the task of assessment is not so much to measure learning, but to provide information on the processes that generate learning and how the

⁶ Michele Pellerey, *Le competenze. Il ruolo delle competenze nei processi educativi scolastici e formativi* (Napoli: Tecnodid, 2010).

⁷ Philippe Perrenoud, *Dix nouvelles compétences pour enseigner* (Paris: ESF éditeur, 1999); Philippe Perrenoud, *Développer la pratique réflexive dans le métier d'enseignant: professionnalisation et raison pédagogique* (Paris: ESF éditeur, 2010).

⁸ David C. McClelland, "The knowledge testing-educational complex strikes back," *American Psychologist* 49, no. 1 (1994), 66–69.

⁹ Robert Glaser and Lauren B. Resnick, eds. *Knowing, learning and instruction: Essays in honor of Robert Glaser* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1989).

knowledge acquired is put into practice through effective behaviours transferable both inside and outside the school. Authentic assessment focuses on how the student builds up personal learning by actively operating in different situations, rather than on limiting assessment to the standardisation of results. In this sense, it can promote, even in the school context, a new way of thinking about assessment by referring to direct forms of performance assessment: authentic assessment does not assume any predictive or projective function, but evaluates the action produced directly in the field for what it is, therefore, learning is seen as a product of contextualised knowledge, transferable in similar situations of use (*near transfer*)¹⁰. In this sense, authentic assessment is perceived as a form of assessment *for* learning¹¹.

According to this theoretical perspective¹², authentic assessment: 1. is based on real tasks and not on evidence which has a predictive value; 2. requires judgment and innovation, as it leads to the solution of problems that may have more than one right answer or multiple solutions; 3. asks the student to participate in the construction of knowledge, identifying, recognizing and processing the main structures of the school-subjects; 4. requires the effective use of a *repertoire* of knowledge and functional skills to deal with complex tasks; not just to show the amount and extent of knowledge, skills and competences acquired, but to highlight the plasticity, integration, connectivity of different kinds of knowledge among them and the surrounding reality; 5. gives the opportunity to select, repeat, test patterns of action, check resources, get feedback and improve performance by increasing levels of *mastery* (performance-feedback-revision-performance).

Hart¹³ adds that the performance provided by the subject is authentic when it is connected to challenging tasks, applied to real contexts of action in which the pupil can interact. The "authentic tasks" stimulate the child's internal (cognitive and non-cognitive) skill development as well as validate the knowledge acquired at school or elsewhere. To solve a task in real settings pupils do not need all the knowledge related to the problem to

¹⁰ Blaine R. Worthen, Walter R. Borg and Karl White, *Measurement and evaluation in the schools* (Reading, MA: Longman Publishing Group, 1993).

¹¹ Clinton I. Chase, *Contemporary Assessment for Educators* (Reading, MA: Longman, 1999).

¹² Richard J. Stiggins, *Student-centred classroom assessment* (New York: Macmillan, 1994); Grant P. Wiggins, *Assessing student performance: Exploring the purpose and limits of testing* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1993).

¹³ Diane Hart, *Authentic assessment. A Handbook for Educators* (Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley, 1994).

be addressed, since much of that knowledge is acquired through the manipulation of the problem-situation, the use of available tools and the explorations made by the student. All this highlights the subject's ability to activate investigative processes in which (s)he is required to structure problem-solving and build itineraries (thanks to the teacher's guidance), through which to verify (or not) knowledge and know-how effectiveness.

Authentic assessment aims to provide feedback on products and processes of learning. In this way it allows information related to the capacity of critical thinking, problem-solving, metacognition, working efficiency and reasoning to be collected¹⁴. To do this, "authentic tasks" or "real tasks" are used. An authentic task requires the use of internal capabilities and knowledge, skills and competences that students have learned at school or in other non-formal/informal educational contexts. Authentic assessment is, therefore, founded on the belief that academic achievement is reached by the accumulation of knowledge, rather, it is based on the ability to generalize, to model, to identify relationships, and to transfer acquired knowledge in real contexts. Thus, assessment and certification of achievement are closely related to highlighting how students' knowledge has generated competences that can be used effectively in multiple contexts and learning situations¹⁵.

In an article published in the *Educational Leadership* Journal, Newmann and Wehlage¹⁶ underline the importance of authentic tasks used both for teaching and for assessment. These tasks must be used in a coherent and effective manner and should be understood as both learning activities and tools which can guarantee the competences acquired by the pupil. Hence, they claim that a task is authentic and increases pupils' learning if it meets three conditions: 1. allows the construction of new meanings and the expansion of knowledge; 2. uses a heuristic approach which aims to implement pupil's learning; 3. points to the development of intellectual and operational products that have value and meaning beyond academic success.

¹⁴ Robert E. Blum and Arter Judith A., eds., *A handbook for student performance assessment in an era of restructuring* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1996).

¹⁵ Linda Darling-Hammond, "Performance assessment and educational equity," *Harvard Educational Review* 64, no. 1 (1994), 5–31.

¹⁶ Fred M. Newmann and Gary G. Wehlage, "Five standards of authentic instruction," *Educational leadership* 50, no. 7 (1993), 8–12.

Hipps¹⁷, Reckase¹⁸, Sackett, Borneman and Connelly¹⁹ address the question of the significance of authentic assessment by linking the latter also to psychometric issues. On this front, the underlying assumptions of Classical Assessment Theory are based on the criteria of validity, reliability and objectivity of the evaluation. The above-mentioned authors argue that, in the case of authentic assessment, these criteria are difficult to apply and it is, therefore, necessary to rethink them, replacing them with others, such as the significance of the accrued learning, context and effectiveness of behaviour, transferability, adaptability, “*transformativity*”, competence mastery of the degree of skills, and cognitive complexity.

In accordance with the epistemological and methodological issues mentioned above, the research question of this study, therefore, is how to develop methodological models that can support English teachers in the certification of achievement acquired by learners, so that they can be recognised in subsequent grades of schooling and in the world of professions.

4. Research context, design and methodology: the ARCA Model

Recently, the Italian Ministry of Education has developed a national experimental document of certification of achievement which is to be gradually extended to all primary and lower secondary schools²⁰. The ministerial act states that the certificate of achievement is to be issued by the school at the end of the fifth grade of primary school and at the end of the third grade of lower secondary school. It is delivered to the student’s family as well as to the subsequent chosen level of schooling or vocational training centre. In this way, the act wants to underline the ongoing process and the single-nature of the first cycle of education, and assign to the certification of achievement the function to (1) promote continuity between different levels of schooling and the vertical nature of the

¹⁷ Jerome A. Hipps, “Trustworthiness and Authenticity: Alternate Ways to Judge Authentic Assessments,” Paper presented at the *Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*, Atlanta, GA, April 12-16, 1993.

¹⁸ Mark D. Reckase, “Statistical Test Specifications for Performance Assessments: Is This an Oxymoron?,” Paper presented at the *Annual Meeting of the National Council on Measurement in Education*, Chicago, IL, March 25-27, 1997.

¹⁹ Paul R. Sackett, Matthew J. Borneman and Brian S. Connelly, “High stakes testing in education and employment: Evaluating common criticisms regarding validity and fairness,” *American Psychologist* 63, no. 4 (2008), 215–227.

²⁰ See Act no. 3, February, 13, 2015.

curriculum, and (2) support students' efforts towards the attainment of school or vocational qualifications.

The achievement to be certified are those described in the student profile of the national core curriculum²¹. The *student profile (SP)* describes, in a basic manner general competences related to all subjects taught as well as those linked to citizenship education. These are competences that a pupil should possess at the end of the first cycle of education, which in the Italian school system ends with the lower secondary school (at age 14). The Ministry of Education Act no. 3/2015 related to the certification of achievement provides an overview of the student profile competences at the end of primary school, thus highlighting the extent to which those competences have to be developed in an eight-year period of education (*Table 1*).

Type of school	<i>Student profile competence indicators</i>
Primary School	The pupil is able to express him/herself in English at an elementary level and to communicate in an essential way in simple everyday situations.
Lower Secondary School	Meeting people of different nationalities, the pupil is able to express him/herself in English at an elementary level and to communicate in an essential way in simple everyday situations, using a second European language. He/She uses English to work with Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

Table 16-1: Student profile competence indicators related to EFL teaching.

Each competence indicator in the student profile must be certified using a scale articulated in 4 levels of mastery (*A-Excellent; B-Intermediate; C-Elementary; D-Pre-Elementary*). For each of these levels, there is a general description of the expected performances.

²¹ MIUR, "Indicazioni Nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo," *Annali dell'Istruzione* (Rome, IT: Le Monnier, 2012).

The *student profile* indicators are very broad. They are general references that cover quite a broad range of knowledge. The indicators referring to the English for example succinctly sum up all the different competences that a pupil should possess at the end of Primary and Lower Secondary Schools. The global assessment of these competences demands close attention to the performance that pupils are able to implement in the various sub-competences (or skills) which constitute broader language competences in English. Therefore, it is very important to design the teaching process keeping in mind the specific competence of the English language competences to be developed. In line with the structure of the *National Guidelines*²², the EFL competences to be pursued are represented by the *Outcomes for Competence Development (OCD)*.

The *Outcomes for Competence Development*, which are prescriptive and common to all private and state schools within the Italian education system, are provided for the end of the fifth grade of primary school and the third grade of lower secondary school. These OCD constitute constant references for teachers, in so far as they indicate cultural and educational paths to be followed and help to give direction to the instructional action undertaken to enable pupils' integral development. In the first cycle of schooling (Primary and Lower Secondary Schools), the *Outcomes* represent criteria for assessing the expected competences and schools must work to ensure that every pupil can achieve them, to guarantee the unity of the national system and the quality of service. They correspond to the A1 level of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)* (Table 2).

The pupil comprehends oral and written messages related to familiar areas.
The pupil describes orally and in written form aspects of life, the context where he lives, matters related to immediate needs.
The pupil plays an active role in group games, communicates in an understandable way, even using pre-structured phrases and sentences, in simple and routine information exchanges.
The pupil performs tasks following the instructions given by the teacher in a foreign language, makes requests and asks for explanations.
The pupil identifies some cultural elements and understands relationships between linguistic forms and foreign language uses.

Table 16-2: Outcomes for competence development at the end of primary school.

²² *Ibid.*

The most critical aspect that schools face in applying the national certification document is in clarifying the extent to which the competences promoted by all curriculum subjects (*OCD*) contribute to the achievement of the student competence profile (*SP*). The ARCA Model was created to respond to this need as identified by schools.

From the methodological point of view, an action-research project was started and was carried out by researchers and EFL teachers. The ARCA Model was designed and tested by the University of Florence together with a sample of 25 Tuscan schools involved in the pilot project funded by the Regional School Office. In this pilot project, 25 teachers were involved as group-coordinators, as well as 275 EFL teachers. A total of 26 action-research groups were set up with the aim of building appropriate assessment rubrics for all the EFL competences of the national core curriculum.

The action-research work was articulated in four stages: 1. joint-work between university researchers and 25 group-coordinators to design a methodological model capable of supporting EFL teachers' activities aimed at the certification of achievement; 2. meetings with teachers to familiarize them with the model developed; 3. revision of the final preliminary version of the model taking teachers' recommendations into consideration; 4. experimentation of the final model through the construction of rubrics.

Assessment rubrics were used as instruments to accompany teachers towards the certification of achievement, since thanks to these it is possible to describe appropriate mastery levels to be certified. As indicated by several authors²³, rather than attribute a score or a final mark, the function of the rubrics is to describe through specific indicators and descriptors of competence what students are able to do in performance tasks. Goodrich²⁴ defines rubrics as a measuring tool that lists the criteria to analyse the work in its most significant aspects, it expresses clearly the quality levels for each criterion considered useful, starting from the

²³ Charlotte Danielson and Pia Hansen, *A collection of performance tasks and rubrics* (Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education, 1999); Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins, *Understanding by design. Professional development workbook* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2004).

²⁴ Heidi Goodrich, "Understanding rubrics," *Educational Leadership* 54 no. 4 (1996), 14–17.

minimum accepted levels. In our case we, used “analytic rubrics”²⁵. The following steps were considered for their construction:

Phase 1. Selection of a competence belonging to one of the curriculum subjects for the first cycle (referred to the primary school or secondary school level);

Phase 2. Description of the competence selected in components or sub-competences or indicators (necessary for complex competences, referred to as "molecular", as opposed to 'atomic' competences which constitute those with a single competence);

Phase 3. Construction of an assessment rubric for each of the components or sub-competences or indicators related to the selected competence (the mastery descriptors related to each component are necessary because a pupil can develop said components or sub-competences or indicators based on different degrees of proficiency);

Phase 4. Matching of each mastery descriptor to the corresponding certification level. In this case, we applied the 4 levels of certification provided by the national document (*A-Excellent*; *B-Intermediate*; *C-Elementary*; *D-Pre-Elementary*).

Here is an example of an EFL assessment rubric designed using the ARCA Model.

EFL competence		
The pupil describes orally and in written form aspects of life, the context where he lives, matters related to immediate needs.		
Competence levels	Mastery descriptors	Certification Levels
<i>Level 1</i>	With the help of teachers, he/she uses and writes single words or very short pre-structured phrases and sentences concerning himself and his family. With the help of images and flashcards, he describes where he lives, his school and the people with whom (s)he is more familiar.	D – Pre-Elementary With the help of teachers, the pupil is able to solve simple tasks in familiar situations.

²⁵ Deborah Allen and Kimberly Tanner, “Rubrics: tools for making learning goals and evaluation criteria explicit for both teachers and learners,” *CBE-Life Sciences Education* 5, no. 3 (2006), 197–203.

<i>Level 2</i>	(S)He uses and writes simple phrases and sentences concerning one's self, family, other people and home. (S)He integrates different sources of information to describe everyday actions and situations. (S)He is able to imagine, write and talk about things not yet experienced, using sentences with a simple syntactic and lexical structure (subject, verb, object).	<i>C – Elementary</i> The pupil is able to solve simple problems in new situations. (S)He demonstrates that (s)he has acquired fundamental knowledge and skills. (S)He is able to apply basic rules and procedures.
<i>Level 3</i>	(S)He can use and write a series of phrases and sentences to describe one's self, family, other people and the context where (s)he lives. (S)He integrates different sources of information and media used at home or at school. (S)He is able to imagine, write and talk about things not yet experienced, using sentences with a simple syntactic and lexical structure. When (s)he talks about familiar things (s)he is aware of what (s)he says.	<i>B – Intermediate</i> The pupil is able to solve tasks and problems in new situations. (S)He is aware of the decisions to be taken. (S)He is able to use knowledge and skills.
<i>Level 4</i>	(S)He can use and write a series of phrases and sentences to describe one's self, family, other people and the context where (s)he lives. (S)He integrates different sources of information and media used	<i>A – Advanced</i> The pupil is able to solve complex tasks and problems. (S)He demonstrates an appropriated use of knowledge and skills. (S)He exposes and justifies

	at home or at school. (S)He is able to imagine, write and talk about things not yet experienced, using sentences with a simple syntactic and lexical structure. When (s)he talks about familiar things (s)he is aware of what (s)he says, (s)he is able to communicate immediate needs and what (s)he likes or dislikes.	his opinions and is responsible and aware when making decisions.
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Table 16-3. Example of an assessment rubric according to the ARCA model

5. Results

The most significant result of the present action-research is the ARCA Model aimed at the certification of school achievement. The strength of this research experience may be read both in terms of process and product. As regards the research process, it has emphasised the importance of the participatory approach adopted thanks to the direct involvement of EFL teachers. With reference to the product, it has led to the construction of specific descriptors, articulated on 4 levels of mastery, which are able to describe the quality of students' performances in EFL. In coherence with the research methodology adopted in the design phase, rubrics were used because of the suitability of these instruments to describe different levels of mastery.

The action-research has led to the identification of some guidelines for the certification of EFL achievement. Specific procedural criteria have been defined to support teachers' work: 1. linking the EFL competence indicators of the student profile and the EFL competences developed by the national curriculum; 2. articulation of the selected EFL competences in specific components (or sub-competences, or indicators); 3. description of the EFL competences (or their components) throughout the 4 mastery levels thanks to the construction of rubrics; 4. matching each mastery level descriptor to the corresponding certification level (stated by the Ministry). This methodology has led to the description of all the EFL competences provided by the national core curriculum and has promoted, among the

teachers in the sample, a more conscious and transparent use of the certification of achievement.

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