

Testing Academic Language Proficiency

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By

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2017

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): 1-5275-0294-5

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-0294-9

The author would like to thank Lois Clegg (University of Parma) for the accurate revision and partial translation of the volume.

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INTRODUCTION

This book presents a decade-long research project conducted at the University of Parma (Italy) in the field of acquisition, teaching and testing of language for academic purposes.

In the last twenty years approximately, Italy has seen a huge increase in the number of international students attending Italian schools, mainly the state system, and Italian universities. Official statistics show that in schools, the percentage of international students, almost all of them first generation, has risen from 2.7% in 2002 to 9.2% today¹. Moreover, international students in upper secondary schools (students aged between 14 and 19), the target of this research program, have increased from 1.3% to 7.0%.

Meanwhile, second generation have overtaken first generation immigrant students to reach an overall 52%, but the percentage remains relatively low at 18.7% in upper secondary schools. Although in recent years there has been heated debate and a reform bill may sooner or later be approved so that citizenship can be awarded on the basis of ‘*ius soli*’ and ‘*ius culturae*’, Italy today still has a system based on ‘*ius sanguinis*’, which explains why the majority of second generation students are listed together with foreign students.

This historical context has allowed a group of researchers from *Laboratorio di Glottodidattica* of the University of Parma to tackle some research questions related to the acquisition, teaching and testing of Italian as an academic language.

First of all, the researchers investigated the state of the art in the field from an international perspective, concentrating primarily on English-speaking countries. English has the status of an international language, and a wealth of publications and practical experience in the field of testing academic language competencies are available.

Research next focused on the particular status of Italian as a foreign language. Italian is one of the most frequently studied languages in the world, but mainly for general communication rather than academic

¹ Data refer to the school year 2014-15. Source: Ministero dell’Istruzione, dell’Università e della Ricerca, 2015, *Gli alunni stranieri nel sistema scolastico italiano A.S. 2014-15*, MIUR - Ufficio di Statistica.

purposes. In fact, several international certificates are available for Italian as a foreign language, but there are none for Italian as a language learnt for study purposes. This led the Parma researchers to opt to create a program aimed to teach and assess language competence for academic purposes. The *Italstudio* test was developed with the dual aim of certifying students' levels of competence and of guiding the school system to a new methodological approach to quality assurance of language acquisition processes beyond the elementary levels, i.e. up to levels of academic language autonomy. Under the *Italstudio* scheme, the Parma researchers also created, implemented and evaluated training proposals for language and subject teachers who were then involved in teaching language courses for academic purposes.

A further research question was how to develop a coherent set of descriptors and syllabi which could work as the basis for the *Italstudio* test and the courses held to develop academic language skills for test takers.

Between 2010 and 2016, the *Italstudio* test was implemented in the geographical context of the Parma and Reggio Emilia areas in the region of Emilia-Romagna, where the percentage of international students in upper secondary schools is significantly above average. Percentages are 7.0% on a national scale, and 15.5% on a regional scale, but they reach 16.7% in Parma and 16.3% in Reggio Emilia.

The model of language test which was developed later served as a practical basis to expand two more research lines: one related to the acquisition of academic language competences by international students at university level and the other concerning the assessment of communication skills in Italian as an L1 for university students. This second line of research is ongoing and is not reported in this book.

The first three chapters of this book cover the issues presented above.

In the two final chapters, the book reports and discusses data regarding over 2500 students in order to provide evidence of the validity and the reliability of the *Italstudio* test assessed with statistical methods. After an initial analysis of these features, which are presented in detail in *Studiare in italiano* (Mezzadri 2011), Chapter 4 compares several versions of *Italstudio* from 2011 to 2015 and the related scores.

The final chapter shows the results of an analysis on the effect of language distance on language learning.

To conclude, the research and teaching experience described in this book is intended as an example to promote a coherent support system for students involved in formal education in a foreign country, with a focus on developing and testing language competencies for academic purposes. In

particular, the goal is to illustrate a possible way to approach such issues when related to a language other than English.

CHAPTER ONE

LANGUAGE FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES (LAP)

1.1 International overview

The *Laboratorio di Glottodidattica* of Parma University has worked for several years in research and applying research to schools and universities in Italy. Numerous academic contributions have been published, including the monographs by Mezzadri (2008, 2011 and 2016) and articles and papers listed in the bibliography at the end of this book. Much of the work is inspired by research carried out overseas, especially in English-speaking countries. It is useful to outline the origins and development of the concept of Language for Academic Purposes (LAP) in order to have an idea of the advantages of a comparative approach.

The field of LAP as specialised language training or informal acquisition at school and university has emerged over decades. Researchers in the field have access to international studies, but today even non-specialists in schools and universities are usually aware of certifications such as TOEFL and IELTS, which constitute attempts to communicate proficiency levels in English in a transparent manner. Such schemes are the outcome of years of experience involving large numbers of students around the world aiming to study at university in English speaking countries.

There are of course clear differences in context and in the extent of demand for Italian language training for academic purposes compared to the demand for ‘English for Academic Purposes’ (EAP). A comparison between the two fields is however helpful and can yield indications useful for each field. The case of Italian, moreover, may have implications for other languages which are ‘secondary in importance’ compared to English. We believe that our findings enrich comparison between fields of research and strengthen the role of research in other languages. This can help avoid the risk of paying too much attention to the model embodied by EAP, whose predominance is both indisputable and unique.

We now provide a brief historical outline of LAP as the basis for new analysis of the topic.

1.2 Language for Academic Purposes in the English-speaking world

Jordan (2002:73) notes that after an “ad hoc and part-time” approach to supplying language assistance to overseas students from the 1960s, the first evidence of development in the field was the appearance in 1974 of the definition ‘English for Academic Purposes’ and the acronym EAP. The term was adopted by the British Council and its use spread rapidly. But Jordan also notes that although the term was agreed on without problems, in the field itself “there have been many changes, not least in materials, methods, technology, expectations and finance” (73).

Changes in how academic writing is produced are ongoing and reveal the difficulties inherent in the field. The original approach focused on register and lexis, with attention later shifting to the purpose of writing, the capacity to communicate, stylistic appropriacy and conventions in quotation and plagiarism etc. Essentially, the focus shifted to academic culture and conventions followed by different academic fields.

This scenario is clearly relevant to the university environment, but the shift is also relevant to school, particularly if it is interpreted as affecting objectives for stages in overall education. It is in fact often difficult to define boundaries between learning a language for academic purposes and learning for general communicative purposes. But there are opportunities for great innovations in teaching in considering language learning for academic purposes. This volume in fact focuses on the differences between language for general academic purposes and language for specific academic purposes. In English these fields are English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). The terms adopted by the Parma University scheme are used here, where *ItalstudioG* is General Academic Italian and *ItalstudioS* is Specific Academic Italian. It is important to note that differentiation between types of academic language is of interest in language education of L1 as well L2 pupils and students. Referring to the key work of the mid-1980s by Williams, Swales and Kirkman, the enlightening *Common ground: Shared interests in ESP and Communication Studies*, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998:24) in fact emphasise that “there is a clear overlap with related work in teaching study skills to native speakers.”

The coincidence of the two types of learning also occurs in cases where English is used as a ‘medium of instruction’ in Foreign Language

contexts. There are for example degree courses taught and delivered entirely in English at Parma University, as there are at other universities across Italy. Moreover, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is the norm for at least one subject in the final year of upper-secondary schools in Italy. In our work with upper-secondary school pupils, this has led to projects which, consistently with our ideas, see Mezzadri (2010 and 2013b), include joint academic language learning and testing. This includes common entry tests for both foreign and Italian L1 first-year pupils. A similar project is the testing of preliminary competences of university students which is part of an ongoing inter-university research project, see Mezzadri, Sisti, Torsani, Carloni (in press).

1.3 A wider view

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998:34) put forward a useful basic definition of EAP: “English for Academic Purposes (EAP) refers to any English teaching that relates to a study purpose”. Other researchers consider EAP as a branch of English teaching which helps students study and research in English, see Jordan (1997) or Flowerdew and Peacock (2001).

There are however more detailed definitions. Hyland and Hamp–Lyons (2002:2) include sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic as well as linguistic aspects:

English for Academic Purposes refers to language research and instruction that focuses on the specific communicative needs and practices of particular groups in academic contexts. It means grounding instruction in an understanding of the cognitive, social and linguistic demands of specific academic disciplines. This takes practitioners beyond preparing learners for study in English to developing new kinds of literacy: equipping students with the communicative skills to participate in particular academic and cultural contexts.

Hamp–Lyons (2011:89) also supplies further characteristics:

EAP is an eclectic and pragmatic discipline: a wide range of linguistic, applied linguistic and educational topics can be considered from the perspective of English for academic purposes, or drawn in methodologically to inform EAP. These include classroom language, teaching methodology, teacher education, assessment of language, needs analysis, materials development and evaluation, discourse analysis, acquisition studies in EAP contexts, research writing and speaking at all academic levels, the sociopolitics of English in academic uses and language planning – and this list is sure to be incomplete.

Although, as she notes, the list is almost certainly incomplete, Hamp-Lyons (2011:89) provides nevertheless the opportunity to enrich the first epistemological reflection on language for purposes of study.

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998:20) identify different areas of EAP which include analysis of register, rhetoric and discourse analysis of study ability and educational needs. Their books offer an exhaustive review of the literature on all these aspects.

This list is updated in a more recent book by Harwood and Petrić (2011:244–249), who emphasise the importance of EGAP and ESAP, collaboration between language teachers and subject specialists, needs and rights analysis, see Benesch (2001), gender analysis, the use of language corpora in EAP, intra- and interdisciplinary differences. They look forward to future developments in areas such as teacher training, assessment of EGAP teaching and learning, the relationship between language acquisition and EAP, better understanding of EAP environments, academic literacy and EAP learning materials.

1.4 Defining language for study purposes

It is essential at this point to discuss the existence of language for study purposes. Some researchers believe that the distinction between general purpose language and language for study purposes is artificial. Vedovelli (2010:115) for example writes that the distinction is

contrived or artificial, especially when it is based on the CEFR. The distinction is linked to an idea of levels A1 and A2 being those where the foreign student can communicate and levels B1 e B2 making possible contact with the language of study in the academic field. (Trans.)

There is truth in Vedovelli's observation. The project presented in this book in fact confirms that depriving A1 and A2 students of language for study purposes is inconsistent with the university or school requirement for students to be equipped for tasks which are demanding in terms of language, culture and subject and cognitively.

Vedovelli (2010:115) also cites the Italian tradition in language education of scholars such as Tullio De Mauro, praised as a 'fount of intellectual and civic inspiration', and the GISCEL research group (Gruppo di Intervento e Studio nel Campo dell'Educazione Linguistica) of the *Società di Linguistica Italiana*. It is in other words important to situate this research in a context of social commitment. This commitment was part of established practice in the 1970s and 1980s and over the last twenty years has started to yield fruit in terms of teaching which in part reflects the work of

important Italian thinkers such as Gramsci and Don Milani. See Vedovelli (2010:114).

The tradition is based on the need to enable everyone to have access to language and communication in order to be able to exploit opportunity. The aim is to overcome differences between individuals resulting from social inequality by opening up quality language education. In addition, in a Europe which today is undergoing fundamental change and a world seeing large-scale migration on an unprecedented scale, language education is far from being the only issue. There are more general cultural elements which require schools and universities to face up to new needs, and needs which can no longer be ignored, such as the development of skills of comprehension and clarification of implicit cultural input. This is the topic of a section below.

In Italy, there has been the attempt to use teaching techniques which impact on day-to-day life in the classroom. One of these is using textual simplification techniques in order to adapt texts with subject content to the language level of learners. It was popularized by methodology specialists, linguists, see Piemontese (1996), teacher trainers and many publishers. It had a clearly positive effect on learners, who were thus able to better understand, and on teachers who became more aware of language and textual problems, and were enabled to exploit texts as regards both language and content. But there are problems with under-estimating aspects of textual competence. It is an issue currently debated by researchers and teacher trainers in CLIL for schools and universities. Very briefly, their task is to convince teachers that in order to teach new content through a vehicular language, even L1 in some cases, they need to have, on top of knowledge of the language and the subject, training in language teaching methodology and applying it in the classroom.

We believe that this is particularly important at university, and especially in view of the arrival at university of students whose mother tongue is not the mainstream language. This is a desirable and inevitable outcome of higher education which continues schooling.

The validity of the above framework as a general fit is clear, and it comes into particular focus in cooperation schemes with overseas universities from low income countries, and the need to support these students in taking part in school and university communities. This is a multifaceted and sensitive issue, and the last chapter of this book presents figures and discussion on the extreme difficulties faced by students originating from outside the mainstream culture in academic institutions, which in our case is Italian.

So a key component of this research is the difference between language for general purpose communication and LAP, which is determined by the typical textual features of the academic context and the particular communicative context of university. The research also focuses on how academic language can be linked to the CEFR and how aspects of certain syllabuses need to be adapted for the language of academic purposes. A new sub-syllabus in grammar might be developed, for example, or there might be a specific syllabus developing study skills following CEFR levels.

Later chapters focus on syllabus development, but we now concentrate on varieties of academic language, variations between subject areas and the process of acculturation underpinning academic communities and university life.

1.4.1 Varieties of language

Even in the light of the remarks above, it is clear that there are different types of language among different academic communities. In the field of language teaching, there are various ways of defining these varieties and, more generally, various types of professional and vocational language. The terminology and explanation provided by Paolo Balboni (2000:12-13) is of interest. Balboni uses the term *micro-language* and uses: “*scientific-professional micro-language* to refer to language of ‘*academic fields*’ (research, university) and ‘*professional or vocation micro-language*’ to refer to the language of vocational sectors (ranging from blue-collar work to engineering, nurse to doctor, high school student to literary critic) used with *the aim of communicating in the least ambiguous manner possible and to be recognised as belonging to the academic or professional field*’.” (Trans.)

More frequently the concept of ‘language for specific purposes’ is used, see for example Gálová (2007), and is also used here for convenience and clarity. But both concepts in a way tend to separate language for general purposes from micro-language or language for specific purposes, and this division could conceal a traditional methodological approach which sees micro-language as nothing but a series of text types, tasks and exposure to and memorisation of specialist terms.

In this book, although ‘micro-language’ and ‘language for specific purposes’ can be useful and appropriate terms, we use instead the concept of ‘language for study purposes’. This concept encapsulates the intention to hold together the various pieces of the mosaic, the different micro-languages and general-purpose language. Here again the vast body of

work on English for study purposes done in the 1970s is a useful basis for more detailed study.

One of the two main perspectives, see Bloor and Bloor (1986), is the 'common core hypothesis' that many aspects of language can be found in all or most languages for specific purposes. The nucleus is made up of words and structures used in all communicative situations. Frequency analysis of terms and structures clearly reveals the widespread use of these elements. Hyland (2002:389) notes that many textbooks on teaching English for specific purposes are "obviously based on this idea". But it is a view which has given rise to somewhat debatable methodological choices, consolidating a language teaching tradition with a paradigm based on sequential exposure to first general language and then language/s for specific purposes, see Coxhead and Nation (2001).

The second perspective does not take account of common core and says that all varieties are learnt in context, and that language exists only as a variety (Basturkmen 2006:17). Basturkmen (2006:15) notes that the idea of language variety refers to registers of language in different contexts; vocational and academic as well as general purpose. This view entails that language is always learnt in the context of communication in contexts and situations which determine the characteristics of what is learnt and which encourage use. As emphasised above, the centrality of context entails shifting focus towards the learner as an individual rather than fixation on contexts and situations of communicative use.

Looking more closely from this angle at the context of the university, there has been heated debate in the English-speaking world. Hamp-Lyons (2011:95) notes that a university student, especially in the first years of a degree course, may find the path even more complex if focussed on differences in genre and communicative behaviours of different subject areas and scientific communities. The prevailing opinion today is that it is more useful in the first year of university for the student to focus on a core set of essential skills, and focus on more specific features of their own subjects in subsequent years, see Johns (1995); Lea and Street (1999); Ivanić (1998); Hyland (2002).

Italian learnt at school and university as a second language is an interesting context in that it differs from cases where English is the target language and also the mainstream language for study purposes. There are many aspects in common with other countries where the language for study purposes is an L2 which is not English.

At this point, it is necessary to examine the extent of the phenomenon of Italian for academic purposes in Italy. The situation described here prevails in schools and educational institutes all over the country and it pre-

sents a heterogeneous range of users in terms of language ability and subject areas studied at university, and at multidisciplinary level in schools. These students are mainly following language courses where classes are formed on the basis of level of Italian language ability rather than L1 or background.

In this context, it is therefore important to define the type of course or syllabus. This will usually be based on a common core and common features present in language for study purposes. The course however would be incomplete if it did not provide guidance for students towards membership of an academic community possessing sound learning strategies and language skills.

1.4.2 The process of academic acculturation

A further observation by Basturkmen (2006:85) is helpful in this context. On the basis of work by Schumann (1986), Basturkmen suggests there is a close connection between acculturation into the target community and success in L2 learning. In our case, the target community is the academic subject community at university and the L2 is language for study purposes.

Schumann examined facts impacting on acculturation and success in language learning, and two of these factors appear to be particularly relevant for foreign students in Italy. The first is social, the desire to assimilate and integrate into the target language and social community. For students of Italian at universities and schools, there are many opportunities for experiences outside the language lessons for foreigners, and subject courses are based on inclusion in lessons, seminars, and group work etc.

The second factor is psychological and is the culture and linguistic shock which may lead to the foreign student rejecting the target context. Improving understanding of how society and educational systems work in their new country is an important driver of better language acquisition. As a consequence, support systems for teaching are very important; different forms of tutoring, language tandem schemes where a couple of students teach one another their respective languages, flexibility in preparing and administering testing, introducing training in life skills for dealing with academic staff and other students are all useful ways of supplementing language teaching in the strict sense.

1.4.3 EAP approaches

To conclude our brief examination of the world of English Language Teaching (ELT), we now look at the results of a survey presented by Jordan (2002:77) on a sample of EAP teachers, which shows the evolution of EAP teaching. Teaching in the language of study is held to be very positive in that it raises student self-esteem and helps them to adopt to new academic contexts. As noted in the previous section, current practice tends to give a great deal of qualitative importance to integration of subsidiary learning pathways and tends to raise awareness of for example similarities between academic environments and systems and conventions of linguistic and other types. Students need to learn, for example, how to cite or use quotations, how to behave with professors and with staff in general, and they need to acquire the appropriate learning strategies (73).

This has led to many different approaches to teaching EAP, where EAP is different from general purpose language. Six of these approaches are listed by Watson Todd (2003:151–152):

1. Focus on inductive learning;
2. Using process syllabuses;
3. Promoting learner autonomy;
4. Using authentic materials and tasks;
5. Integrating technology in teaching;
6. Using team teaching.

These six approaches can be used at the same time, and together provide a basis for a course in language for study purposes.

1.5 What EAP is exactly

The precise nature of EAP however has long been a focus of debate. For some researchers (Beard and Hartley 1984, Robinson 1980 and 1991) EAP is the same as study skills. Other researchers, as surveyed by Jordan in an overview of 1989, however, find that although study skills are central to any EAP course, EAP is rather (Jordan 1997:5): “a general academic English register, incorporating a formal, academic style, with proficiency in the language use”. Consideration of the relative weight of various components of EAP leads to Blue’s (1988) definition of the specific field of English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) and a generic or general field of English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP).

1.5.1 The implications of the distinction between EGAP/ESAP

Hyland (2006:9) finds that teachers using an EGAP approach aim to isolate skills, language structures and learning activities which they believe to be common to all subjects or disciplines. These are accompanied by other components more specific to subjects, linked to the language practice of subjects as well as the characteristics of, for example, text types and registers. Although there are many significant differences, there are also parallels between the relationship between EGAP and ESAP in the learning and teaching of Italian for study purposes.

One of the parallels is the awareness of the importance of the relationship between study skills and general or specific language for study purposes. We believe this is the key to defining our field of action of Italian as an L2 for academic purposes.

This approach makes it possible to examine the possible implications in contexts where language abilities are developed in the language of study and underpins differences between education systems. It is discussed in the following sections.

1.5.2 Advantages and disadvantages of general study purpose and specific study purpose language

Hyland (2006:10-12) writes that the EAP teacher is not a specialist in content and can mislead students when teaching more advanced aspects of the subject, and uses this observation to support EAP being for general rather than specific purposes. A further factor is the language competence level required to support ESAP as well as the numerous transversal skills required in many, if not all, subjects. This point is made by many researchers, such as Hutchinson and Waters (1987), Spack (1988), and Zamel (1993).

From another point of view, however, it can be dangerous to delegate teaching of language for study purposes to subject teachers, who may not have the competence or qualifications to teach through the medium of a foreign language.

A further reason for the need for a specific approach is the relatively low range of skills which are sometimes held to comprise the common core. Because there are few of these skills, EAP courses can become short remedial courses held by people who do not necessarily have professional competence or qualifications (Hyland 2006:12).

The above remarks concern mainly organisational aspects of how teaching is organised, but a more fruitful perspective is to look at the

greater number of differences than similarities between specific language varieties (Johns 1988). There are in fact more differences when the different target audiences, the characteristics of variety in terms of text types, lexis semantics and contexts of use are taken into account. Hyland (2002:389), who also supports an ESAP perspective, suggests considering these differences. He writes, “The discourses of the academy do not form an undifferentiated, unitary mass but a variety of subject-specific literacies. Disciplines have different views of knowledge, different research practices, and different ways of seeing the world, and as a result, investigating the practices of those disciplines will inevitably take us to greater specificity.”

The text types which students are asked to produce confirm this point. There are considerable differences in terms of subject specificity and level of study. For humanities and social sciences there will be analysis and summary, and in technical and scientific contexts there will be writing descriptions of objects, graphs and tables, defining procedures, or writing laboratory reports, see Hyland (2002:390).

It is not difficult to identify elements of a common core of general study purpose language in terms of grammar, study skills, learning strategies, text types, or in lexical word formation as in derivation and modification etc. But beneath this superficial level, there lie implicit cultural norms, objectivity, emotional neutrality, management of social relations in the academic community and how to present view of the world of a community, and when these are taken into account it becomes more difficult for a teaching syllabus to cover the various needs of different academic communities, see Johns (1997:58-64).

To conclude, it is also useful to take into account a slightly less controversial area described in the 1980s by Spack (1988). Searching for a balance between the opposing factions of EGAP and ESAP in the world of ELT, Spack emphasises that in teaching writing for academic purposes, teachers should teach language for general study purposes and leave to subject teachers more specific subject writing types which are more closely affected by subject specificities. Citing research reported by Maimon et al. (1981), Spack also notes that it is rare for the language teacher to be able to learn another subject, given that each subject requires the capacity to observe content from a different point of view, a different way of thinking and a different assessment system.

Shifting attention to the student, Spack promotes an approach immersing the student in content through exposure to reading and listening texts, at seminars and conferences, doing and sharing as well as reading and listening, or through the observation of ways in which academic texts are constructed. To do this, students need to learn how to use strategies and

skills which can be acquired through a course in language for study purposes held by suitably qualified teachers. The concept of suitably qualified lies outside the scope of this book, but it is worth emphasising that it entails teacher training over and above the normal teacher training for an L2 teacher.

Skills and strategies the student needs include things such as research skills, use of sources of information, planning and organisation, analysis and summarisation after negotiating and explaining concepts, producing coherent texts of a required type, revising and editing their own writing etc.

Although this list is far from comprehensive it involves a heavy cognitive load, and shows that the teacher of language for study purposes needs to do more than treat study skills as secondary. The teacher needs to be open to close contact with subject content as well as metacognitive teaching. This is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

1.5.3 The *Italstudio* option

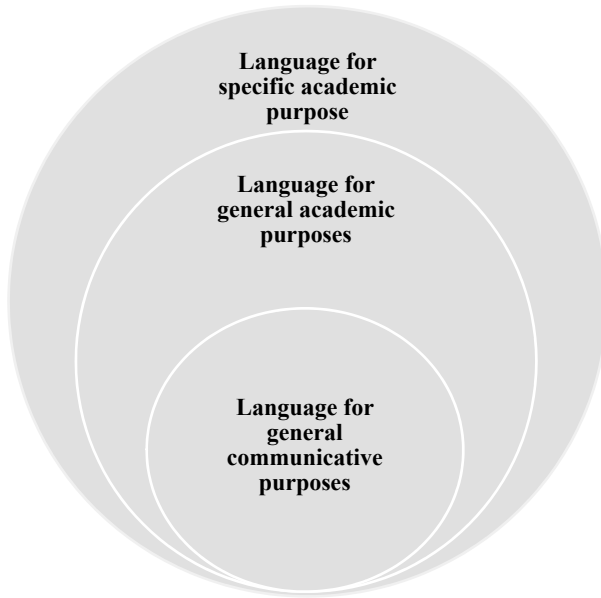
Harwood and Petrić (2011) supply a summary of points in favour of or against EGAP which is useful to explain several aspects of *Italstudio* and complete this introduction. They note that (246) “EGAP may appeal where student populations and fields of study are diverse, and where EAP teachers have little time or resources to design subject-specific programmes, since the challenges of researching, designing, and implementing as many appropriate programmes as are needed can be formidable”. They also invite readers to refer to Basturkmen (2003); Belcher (2006); and Hyland (2006) for further discussion.

EGAP also has advantages in economic terms because a single course meets the needs of students from all fields of study. It makes it possible to offer language for study purposes in contexts where collaboration between language and subject teachers is infrequent and not close, and where the language teacher is unable to meet the specific requirements posed by many subjects.

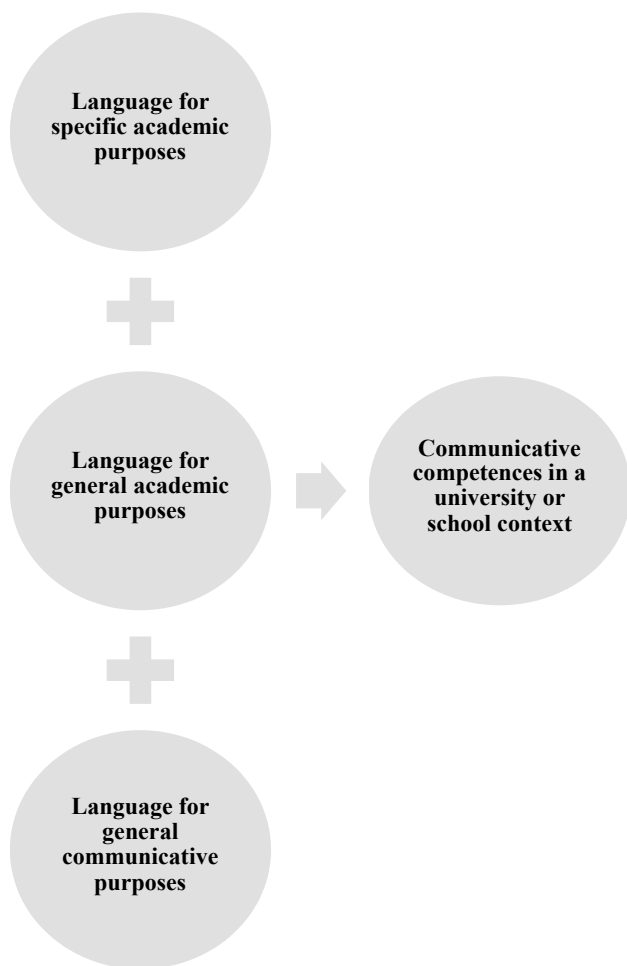
The decision to offer a general study language course may appear to be the easiest option, but it was in fact taken on the basis of variety of language used for study, as well as an analysis of students needs and academic context.

The diagrams below are a graphical representation of EGAP models described in Section 1.4.1. The three circles show the first phase of learning of language for general communicative purposes, followed by lan-

guage for general academic purposes and lastly language for specific academic purposes.



The diagram below shows more clearly the relationship between the three types of language as it is conceived by the author and the group of researchers working at the *Italstudio* programme.



In the last diagram, the sequence of one type of language following another is replaced by an interpretation where one aspect can still be followed by another, but each aspect continues to be developed so that language for communicative purposes can still grow at times when the learner is most closely involved in general or specific and academic language. This is unlike the traditional syllabus of micro-language teaching in Italy, which usually interrupts this development.

In the same way, it is still possible to set the order so that general academic language is learnt before specific academic language. In other

words, any sort of alteration in learning sequence can be made on the basis of contingency factors such as absence of language teachers having a sufficient level of knowledge of a subject, lack of resources or lack of agreement between language and subject teachers. The approach however emphasises that both academic and general purpose language can be developed at the same time. This means that in Italy a foreign student is not taken out of subject lessons for exclusively language training. Rather, it is envisaged that skills development will take place through continuous overlap between the three levels. The teacher's main task is thus to make comprehensible and meaningful pathways through the three levels, in the belief that all three comprise together language and communicative competence necessary for academic success at school and university.

It is thus necessary to balance the three syllabuses and tailor them to student needs at what may be almost individual level, so the teacher needs to be aware of what teaching and learning skills in academic language entails. It is true that the three levels are present at the same time, but general academic language provides the link. For example, the three levels are linked by the focus on developing discourse competence on the basis of comprehension and production of texts, on which our view of academic language is based. The approach thus goes beyond study skills.

The *Italstudio* test described in Chapter 3 is the outcome of the approach based on discourse competence, see COE (2002:150-154), and the text, and in which the language skills envisaged in the CEFR (vocabulary, grammar, semantics, phonology, spelling, orthoepic competence) and study skills underpin learning how to manage discourse in an academic context.

1.5.4 *ItalstudioG* content

As noted above, the *Italstudio* programme aims primarily to respond to different levels of requirement for language learning in language for study purposes for foreign students (but also in L1) at school and university. It is an extremely broad scheme and covers a host of aspects: L2 teacher training, particularly in teaching language for study purposes; skills training for subject teachers using a foreign language as a medium of instruction; training for administrative and management staff all along the chain; relationships with families, students and stakeholders outside the school or university; the creation of professional environments where teachers can manage acquisition of language for study purposes as well as subject content and which encourage integration of foreign students into groups formed on the basis of acquisition times necessary for L2 for study pur-

poses, initial testing of competence in language for study purposes, creation of classes and delivery of academic language courses; preparation for final testing; test administration, communication of test results for integrated assessment of language level and content in order to use efficaciously the assessment methods used by the school.

The syllabuses laid down by the *Italstudio* test and skills descriptors shown in Chapter 3 are guidelines both for the test itself and for Italian language learning at university. This section provides some examples in the school and university contexts.

The context is language teaching for general academic purposes with some shorter focuses on micro-languages: teaching syllabuses aim at transversal skills in all or almost all subjects, as well as focusing on specific academic language.

It is possible to identify different levels of intervention in academic language from A2 level, going up to B1 and B2, so that there is a gradual increase in specific elements in academic language.

Although with the provisos discussed in the previous section regarding the final aims of learning and study skills in terms of text, these are in fact extremely important in *Italstudio*. They are techniques and skills in common to all types of academic work across different subjects. For example, regardless of field of study, at university listening skills are required to listen to lectures, as well as note-taking techniques and skills in decoding para-textual elements. Listening in fact is probably the still most transversal skill in Italian universities today, where most subjects are taught through lectures to large groups of students. Another receptive skill of comprehension is in decoding written texts; reading techniques are common to all subject areas, although they will depend on the type of subject and the teaching style of the professor or teacher. In some cases, according to the type of text and the phase of the course, activities will be based on global understanding. In other cases, intensive reading is used for imparting specific information, and in others, texts are read in order to be summarised as a study activity in itself.

Among productive skills, writing essays and reports, writing notes, summaries or making concept maps, as well as giving a presentation or giving answers in an oral exam are all skills used across the board in different academic fields (Blue 1993, Dudley-Evans e St John 1998).

The most subject specific part of *Italstudio* is called *ItalstudioS* and here skills and techniques acquired transversally are applied to different subject areas, hence text types, contexts, language and communicative styles typical of each academic field.

The syllabus is often difficult to apply in the context of university language courses. At Parma University, the Italian for Academic Purposes courses reach B2 level as described in Chapter 3. But in view of their heavy subject timetables, students, especially overseas students, do not usually have enough time to perfect language skills in a formal course above this level. Rather the individual student, having been equipped for specific language through the transversal project *ItalstudioG* learns how to manage specific academic language study autonomously, or with the support of subject staff.

So in practice, the level of general academic language is the key and is strengthened by direct language teaching. But the student does not experience delay in meeting specific language, which is encountered in the academic or scientific community.

As briefly mentioned above, progress towards these aims can only be made with the use of teacher training. Mainly L2 teachers need to be trained, but so do subject teachers, who at both school and university need to have professional skills to teach their subject through the medium of an L2. Greater awareness by teachers of the mechanisms of communication and teaching through the medium of an L2 is an essential condition for teaching which can consistently and convincingly meet the requirements of today's plurilingual and pluricultural society.

CHAPTER TWO

TESTING LANGUAGE FOR STUDY PURPOSES

2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the place of the *Italstudio* scheme with regard to the international framework of language testing, and testing of LAP. It also examines test construct, and analyses validity criteria, showing practical aspects of the test.

2.2 A definition

The following definition of a specific purpose language test given by Douglas (2000:90) is a useful place to start:

a specific purpose language test is one in which test content and methods are derived from an analysis of a specific purpose target language use situation, so that test tasks allow for an interaction between the test taker's language ability and specific purpose content knowledge, on the one hand, and the test tasks on the other.

This type of test allows us to infer the candidate's capacity to use language, in this case, in the context of school or university.

Literature in this field appears to suggest that it is almost impossible to distinguish between the nature of testing LAP and testing language for general purposes, see Weir (1990) and Douglas (2000). Testing for specific purposes, in this case school and academic, is already in itself assessment of communicative competence, but a slight difference with general purpose test is the importance of context of language use, and cultural and subject knowledge of test takers.

2.3 Type of test

The *Italstudio* test is 'criterion-referenced' and not 'norm-referenced' according to the difference defined by Douglas (2000:15). In other words,

the test is not based on revealing differences between test-takers or ranking them in order of competence. Of course it implies differences between individual candidates through scores, which are given overall as well as for each section of the test, but what *Italstudio* sets out to measure is the relation between test performance and levels, which are based on interpretations of the CEFR as described in Chapter 3. The main aim of the test is to assess capacity to communicate in defined situations typical of the school and university context.

It is widely acknowledged that language use takes place in specific contexts and needs to be interpreted and evaluated in relation to the context. It is thus clear, see Bachman (1990), that there is a potentially infinite number of utterances in communicative exchange, so that, as noted by Douglas (2000:13), it is not possible to predict future communicative performance on the basis of a single test. We however believe that a testing procedure like *Italstudio* is valid partly on the basis of the similarity between real life and test tasks, characteristics of the context and situations of communicative exchange simulated in the test. *Italstudio* testing is therefore required to meet this type of criteria.

Chapter 4 focuses on the validity of the *Italstudio* test.

Through analysis of characteristics of language in context, it is possible to make inferences about the language skills of the candidate in the school or university environment. Douglas (2000:14) states that interaction between skills and characteristics of the task gives the task authenticity which he interprets as the level of candidate involvement in characteristic tasks of the specific situation of language use. In more detail, Douglas (17) emphasises the difference between authenticity of situation and authenticity of interaction. Situational authenticity is clearly a matter of the similarity between the test situation and tasks, while interactional authenticity is a matter of the individual dimension, between the speaker and the discourse, in the context of the text, the interaction between the candidate and the test tasks.

An additional strength of the test is that, as recommended in the CEFR, it assesses heuristic strategies, as tools to supply indications on the capacity of test takers to solve problems deriving from the newness of the situation and communication involved. It is also necessary to take account of the wider issue of the relationship between cultural and subject knowledge and language performance.

2.4. Communicative language competences and cultural-subject knowledge

There is much wide-ranging debate about the relationship between subject and micro-linguistic competence on one hand, and competence in general academic language on the other. Looking back to Chapter 1, a certain amount of difficulty is noted by Hamp-Lyon (2011:94), when academic language meets micro-language of the different subjects. It is worth noting that subject specialisation is of course greater and is found to a wider extent at university than at school. It is therefore necessary to identify the basic differences between academic language and micro-languages taking account of the philosophy of education. Following Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), Hamp-Lyons (2011:94) proposes shifting focus away from language, text and activities, which are the typical context of micro-language learning, and onto the individual, placed at the centre of teaching language for study purposes.

This is a return to what in Italy has for decades been called the humanist-affective approach, here becoming more specialised into the process of knowledge acquisition by the individual, in other words creating the conditions in which an individual learner can gradually master a subject through a foreign language. It is not enough to create micro-linguistic conditions, because the communicative needs of academic language are strongly determined by the customs of particular groups. For Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002:2), it entails “grounding instruction in an understanding of the cognitive, social and linguistic demands of specific academic disciplines”.

This approach does not mean that the fundamental observations of the last two decades should be abandoned. A great deal of work regarding English has been done by Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995), Bloor (1998), Woodward-Kron (2008) as well as work on corpora such as that by Thompson starting from Thompson (2001) and including Carter and McCarthy (2006). International research which also concerns Italy includes Granger, Gilquin and Meunier (2013). This research needs to underpin the creation of conditions for an individual to learn and understand, and thus manage communication in highly characterised academic contexts. The present research on assessing academic language skill goes in this direction.

In the early 1990s, there was an improvement in the quality of language testing which became a discipline in itself in the wider field of applied linguistics. See Alderson (1991); Bachman (1990); Skehan (1988, 1989 and 1991). Communicative testing itself in fact underwent a sea