COMPETENCY-BASED ASSESSMENT IN TEACHING ITALIAN AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: TRAINING CPIA IMMIGRANT STUDENTS FOR DIPLOMA ATTAINMENT

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1. INTRODUCTION

The following article aims to discuss and provide insights on the topic of Competency-Based Assessment (hereafter referred to as CBA) within the educational pathways offered by the *Centro Provinciale per l'Istruzione degli Adulti* (CPIA). The CPIA, as a territorial service network, represents one of the primary bodies for the reception of both Italian and immigrant populations, and for promoting lifelong learning at the local level in Italy[2]. In addition to providing specific literacy and Italian language learning programs addressed to achieve a proficiency level of at least A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), CPIAs offer personalized First-Level education pathways, which are divided into two periods:

i) a First Educational Period of 400 hours, with the option to extend this time to a maximum of 200 hours without a primary school certification. This educational program is structured to obtain the Lower Secondary School Diploma, formerly known as the License of the Third Year of Middle School[3];

ii) a Second Educational Period aimed at achieving certification that verifies the acquisition of fundamental competencies related to mandatory education[4].

By regulations, the assessment for achieving the Diploma is carried out through an individual educational agreement, commonly referred to as the *Patto Formativo Individuale* (PFI). This is a personalized study program (*Percorso di studi personalizzato*, henceforth PSP), which characterizes the entire educational offering of CPIAs. The PSP is proposed to the student based on functional and disciplinary observations and assessments, to valorize the adult's cultural and professional heritage while promoting a biographical re-evaluation of the learning path within the perspective of lifelong learning (cf. D.P.R. 263/2012).

The PSP is designed to meet the diverse needs of CPIA users, who encompass a wide range of student-workers aged sixteen to adulthood. The latter group comes from various work and educational backgrounds, each with its level and type of training (Angeloni,

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[2] At CPIAs, enrollment is open to adults, *both* Italian and foreign, who have reached the age of sixteen (in specific circumstances, even fifteen-year-olds) and who have not met the mandatory school requirements or do not possess the concluding educational qualification of the first cycle. Cf. Decree of the President of the Republic (D.P.R.) 263/2012 for further information.

[3] Contingent upon the successful completion of at least 70% of the individual educational agreement (D.P.R. 263/2012, Article 6), the final Diploma examination comprises three written assessments: Italian, Mathematics, and a foreign language specified in the personalized study program. Additionally, an interdisciplinary interview is conducted.

[4] Cf. Ministerial Decree (hereinafter referred to as D.M.) of August 22, 2007, No. 139 and D.P.R. of March 15, 2010, No. 87, 88.

2022: 76). This broad age variety among students reflects an equally significant diversification in linguistic and cultural backgrounds: classes often consist of students with distant L1 backgrounds, and their learning backgrounds may differ considerably at the primary school level, or even be non-existent. Due to these differences, the approach to young adult education in CPIAs is often based on memorization and repetition. Furthermore, many students who subscribe to the PFI when they find employment tend to postpone the completion of their educational path.

Assessment plays a central role in the learning and teaching process, potentially influencing these processes positively or negatively, including the so-called «washback» effects (Rahman *et al.*, 2021). As a result, there is a growing demand not only to evaluate competencies but also to implement CBA. This approach is designed to enhance the graduation rates in multicultural learning settings by reconsidering the procedures outlined in the existing regulations (cf. Guidelines adopted with D.I. 12 March 2015) concerning the recognition and evaluation of competencies acquired by CPIA students.

In this paper, after an overview of the state of the art that provides the context for the topic at hand (§ 2), an explanation of the procedure, methodology, and research context is presented (§ 3), based on the author's experience in teaching foreigners. Finally, in § 4, the findings of CBA are analyzed, concerning the proposals (§ 5) that can be put forward for the assessment of competencies with Italian as a second language (L2).

2. COMPETENCY-BASED ASSESSMENT (CBA)

This section aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the modern definition of *competence* and the distinctive characteristics of competence evaluation within the domain of adult migrants learning an L2, particularly when contrasted with conventional assessment methodologies.

2.1. *School-Based Competency Development*

To fully comprehend the concept of CBA, it is necessary to discuss what is meant by *competence*.

Despite the crucial role the term plays in the educational field today and its foundation in the most recent regulations, it is important to note that, for a long time, scholars have not widely agreed upon the definition of competence (Gervais, 2016).

The Council of Europe (2017: 6) defines competence as «the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development». To emphasize the practical nature of competence, which requires the application of skills and knowledge, the UNIDO, i.e., United Nations Industrial Development Organization (2002), previously referred to it as the knowledge, skills, and attributes that enable a student to perform a specific task effectively and efficiently.

These definitions underscore the application of both theoretical and practical knowledge by students, independently and responsibly. Competency-based learning extends beyond the behavioral objectives set in traditional school curricula, which often limit themselves to rote memorization, followed by testing (Cardarello *et al.*, 2023). Schools, on the other hand, given their privileged role, must work, especially with a migrant student population, on the ability to comprehend, make judgments, and act, to improve their place in the L2 community and in the world, as stressed by the PISA

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for International Student Assessment (2018: 4).

In this vein, competence becomes knowledge in action, and the primary goal of school education can be summarized as stimulating L2 Italian learners to «mobilize, select, and combine resources relevantly to manage a situation» (Le Boterf, 2008). Emphasizing the verb «combine», the OECD PISA Global Competence Framework (2018: 7) highlights that competence is a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values successfully applied in face-to-face, virtual, or mediated interactions with people.

With a more precise definition of the concept of competence, it becomes easier to define the term *competency-based assessment* in the context of education and training. Assessing competencies implies an action based on competency education, which is an eclectic model that draws concepts from various modern learning theoretical fields (Gervais, 2016). In European countries, Competency-Based Education (CBE) focuses on interdisciplinary programs in which theory and practice mutually integrate (Wu, 2018). From this perspective, it becomes evident that the approach goes beyond mere rote memorization of information. Within the framework of the CPIA, CBE presents itself as an educational and assessment model that assigns primary importance to the acquisition of practical and applicable competencies necessary for the learner's success in real-world contexts. This assessment considers the skills, knowledge, and capabilities of young adults in a specific field or sector (Alt, Raichel, 2018).

Italian L2 learners, while focusing on improving their language competencies, may be exposed to and indirectly develop other essential competencies, including the eight key European competencies[5], thus demonstrating their ability to apply language in practical situations (Balboni, 2015: 35; Richards, Rodgers, 2001: 141).

Internationally, the idea that learning an L2 is intrinsically linked to the social setting in which it is used is reflected in the methodology of Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT). It is based on the application of CBE principles but places greater emphasis on the functional and interactional approach of the L2. The goal is to impart knowledge of the foreign language considering the social environments in which it will be used (Richards, Rodgers, 2001: 143).

Immigrant adults are not just students, but individuals who will be asked to make choices within the society where L2 is spoken; therefore, they need to acquire suitable competencies applicable in various everyday life contexts, such as school, work, or social life. These are essential competencies for making autonomous choices for themselves and others (Milana, Tarozzi, 2021).

2.2. *CBA in Migrant Student Education*

Evaluating the competencies of foreign students within a multifaceted educational environment such as the CPIA represents a complex challenge, especially considering the outcomes derived from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey[6], designed to gauge the competencies of adults. The data reveal that a significant portion (about 70%) of the competencies of learners aged 16 to 65 falls at Level 2 or below, out of a 5-level assessment scale. In other terms, they possess poor competencies that are not adequate to support social and work life within the Italian

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[5] Cf. Ministerial Decree D.M. of October 7, 2017, No. 742 for further details on the Skills Certification Sheet at the end of the first cycle of education, where the eight key European competencies are listed.
[6] *OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, 1st Cycle (2011-2017)* research, in https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/about/piaac1stcycle/.

L2 community. An additional complication arises from the fact that the effort to systematize the Council of Europe's guidelines (2018) on assessing basic competencies concerning adults at the end of First-Level education is still in its early stages.

These findings underscore the need to encourage teachers to engage in continuous and ongoing assessment to identify competencies that are lacking or have not yet been achieved by learners (Goswami, Rahman, 2023). Assessment cannot be seen as an isolated process within the realm of language learning and teaching (Novello, 2014: 37). In line with this, according to the *National guidelines for the curriculum for pre-primary school and the first cycle of education*, «assessment precedes, accompanies, and follows the curricular pathways […]. It assumes a prominent formative function, accompanying the learning processes and stimulating continuous improvement» (D.M. 254/2012). Hence, assessment means understanding the extent to which the objectives have been achieved and interpreting the work carried out by the teacher and students up to that point (Maugeri, 2022: 15).

Considering the intricacy of L2 linguistic development, which inevitably demands differing durations for individuals based on their unique characteristics and remains exceptionally challenging to complete entirely within the initial educational phase (cf. D.M. 254/2012), efforts should be undertaken to surmount the linguistic barriers hindering L2 comprehension. This is to acquire the knowledge necessary for communicative intent in response to problem-solving situations that the learner must face in the classroom (evaluations, assignments, group work, etc.) as well as in extracurricular scenarios (collaboration and participation within the L2 community). From this perspective, CBA should be directly linked to the learning objectives in the social teaching context, allowing learners to transcend the limitations of learning in real-life situations (Alt *et al.*, 2023). This constitutes an essential progression towards the implementation of more extensive assessment approaches aimed at facilitating the incorporation of learning associated with the eight core competencies outlined in the *Recommendation of May 23* (2018), and the Key Competencies of Citizenship (D.M. 139/2007), which underlie the first-cycle learner's education and are expected to be acquired by the conclusion of compulsory education.

Therefore, the competency-based instructional design does not separate knowledge from real-life contexts; rather, it emphasizes that in such scenarios, knowledge can be mobilized and applied as resources to achieve specific purposes and cope with life situations, transforming into actions (Le Boterf, 1994). However, as Perrenoud notes (1997: 9), the acquisition of multiple knowledge does not automatically enable their mobilization into action. An assessment that is defined as authentic (Novello, 2022) cannot disregard the involvement of Italian L2 learners in concrete experiences or situations that mimic real life, through authentic and meaningful activities (Maugeri, 2021: 144). This transfer of skills from one setting to another allows the L2 Italian student to develop skills that can be applied in real life and transferred to different situations. For the young adult foreign learner, this means learning from the concrete experiences they encounter daily and analyzing them. The milieu of the L2 community that the young adult interacts with, and the often-challenging integration issues related to cultural and linguistic differences require the teacher to provide real-world application scenarios useful for their development as citizens.

Perrenoud (1997) formulated a broad conception of competencies, highlighting that these should not be limited to the acquisition of theoretical knowledge alone. Competencies, as noted by Griffith and Lim (2014), also encompass the practical ability and skill to apply theoretical knowledge and L2 in real-world frameworks. Given this, competency assessment becomes a moment of reflection that monitors structured problem situations created by the teacher to apply their knowledge, skills, and attitudes to the Italian L2 student, both in teaching and everyday life. On the other hand, the CPIA is

established as a multilevel organization to promote lifelong learning in teaching and training (Lamboglia, 2021: 239).

Below is a table that adapts and simplifies the model developed by Pace (2013). The purpose of the table is to illustrate the transition from a traditional instruction model to a competency-based teaching model. Although the original model was designed for university students, it can be easily applied and adapted to the student population of the CPIA. Within this learning environment, foreign students require special attention due to the specific modes of acquisition and learning patterns in the First Educational Period, facing the double challenge of acquiring a foreign language (L2) and the competencies necessary to obtain the Diploma.

Table 1. *The Transition from a Traditional Teaching Model to a Competency-Based Model*

	TRADITIONAL EDUCATION	COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL APPROACH	Learning occurs in a traditional classroom setting, with little to no adjustment to students' interests and learning styles.	Students choose from a wide range of learning experiences in school, online, and within their community. Teachers collaborate with students to create individualized learning pathways that consider their interests and learning styles.
LEARNING PACE	Students progress at the teacher's pace, regardless of whether they have achieved the learning objectives or need additional time.	Students receive personalized support and accelerated opportunities both in and outside of school to ensure they stay on track to graduate and are prepared for the academic and professional world.
ASSESSMENT TOOLS	They are used at predetermined times to assess and rank students. Students have only one opportunity to take the summative assessment at the end of the year.	A comprehensive assessment system is an essential part of the learning system. Formative assessments guide daily instruction and students' choices of personalized learning opportunities. Summative assessments demonstrate the achievement of competencies. Students face these assessments when ready and have many opportunities to show competency attainment.

Analyzing Table 1 it becomes clear that competency-based teaching and assessment can be effective and productive for a group of young adult migrant students attending the CPIA. Compared to traditional teaching, competency-based education allows for greater flexibility and student-centered instruction, with the teacher acting as a facilitator. Moreover, since the concept of competence is inherently context-dependent, it is more direct and engages the environment in which the learner is immersed, in this case, the L2 community. In parallel with L2 instruction, CPIA students can thus be exposed to specific and useful linguistic forms/skills to address the challenges of the contemporary world. More importantly for the subsequent reflections, so-called *traditional* assessment systems generally focus on learning outcomes and, therefore, evaluate skills like remembering and understanding, whereas CBA is a process that provides continuous support to individual student needs, primarily focusing on higher-order skills such as analyzing and creating.

Competency assessment defines levels of competence at various stages of expertise, enabling foreign learners to progress gradually by not developing new skills but enhancing those they have already demonstrated (Hess *et al.*, 2020).

3. METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

This study is the result of the author's teaching experience within CPIAs.

A mixed research approach was employed, which involved both quantitative methods for scoring items and tasks, and qualitative methods for a process-oriented analysis of the effectiveness of assessment techniques. This approach offers a more comprehensive representation of linguistic interference phenomena and potential washback effects concerning CBA.

The research involved 24 students from a CPIA in the Northeast of Italy (average age 19.5; age range 16-43), the area with the highest average number (n=13) of distribution points connected to the school headquarters (Poliandri, Epifani, 2023). Among these students, 79.16% originated from African countries, while the remaining 20.84% came from China, Albania, and Venezuela. Notably, 12 out of the 24 students, constituting 50% of the total sample, hailed from the state of Senegal. Of these, five (n=5) Senegalese students arrived in Italy with limited schooling, having attended the Quranic school for an insufficient period to master writing, consequently facing numerous challenges.

Before the beginning of the experimentation phase, the learners had undertaken 180 hours of literacy and Italian language learning pathways (*Percorsi di Alfabetizzazione e di Apprendimento della Lingua Italiana*, also known by the acronym AALI), aimed at delivering courses for the A1 (100 hours, 50%) and A2 (80 hours, 40%) levels (CEFR). Additionally, they had undergone 20 hours (10%) of reception and orientation services[7], bringing the total to 200 hours (100%). Nonetheless, in keeping with Cacchione's thought (2022), such resources proved insufficient, especially for the African learners involved in the study, as they were designed by the CEFR for a target audience of learners with average educational backgrounds. Thus, at the onset of the pilot study and the First Educational Period in January 2022, the class exhibited a basic level of competence in the Italian language.

3.1. *The Pilot Study*

Before moving on to the evaluation phase, a written pre-test was administered to the students at the end of February 2022, during a learning unit on subjective and objective descriptive text. The purpose is to collect crucial information on *i)* the time required to complete the tasks and administer subsequent competency assessments after the pre-test; *ii)* the clarity and effectiveness of the instructions concerning the target group of learners; *iii)* the number of items proposed to calibrate the assessment adequately; *iv)* the levels of student learning at the time of the pre-test.

The information collected during the piloting helped in developing more comprehensive scoring scales for the various tasks, enabling a more accurate design of competency assessments compared to the information previously available to stakeholders.

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[7] For further insights into the literacy and Italian language learning pathways (AALI), please refer to the work by Deiana (2022), D.P.R. 263/2012, and the CEFR, developed by the Council of Europe, as specified in Article 4(1)(c) of the Regulation.

It should be noted that assessment can involve a variety of methods (e.g., practical tests, projects, presentations, oral exams, work portfolios, etc.), and the assessments outlined here represented just one of the possible approaches to test administration. Indeed, they are specifically tailored to preparing migrant students for the first written test in Italian, concerning learning outcomes related to the language competencies required for Diploma attainment[8].

3.1.1. *The Pre-Test: Preliminary Activities for Assessment*

The findings of the pre-test were assessed and analyzed, and its characteristics were documented to establish the final criteria for the competency assessment.

The primary objective of this preliminary research was not to merely enumerate errors; rather, its purpose was to verify the appropriateness of the stakeholders' performance and assess the level of difficulty of the final test activities.

Task 1. Item Categories: increasingly complex items; short answers.

Leggi il testo e completa la scheda di descrizione di Maria.

Ciao a tutti! Mi chiamo Maria, ho sedici anni e sono di Padova. Sono alta un metro e sessantasei; ho dei capelli corti e splendenti, color biondo scuro. I miei occhi sono di un blu intenso, le mie labbra sono voluminose e il mio naso è a punta. Oggi indosso un paio di bellissimi pantaloni bianchi e la mia maglietta preferita di Zara. Sono poco estroversa, ma simpatica e vivace quando voglio!

SCHEDA PER LA DESCRIZIONE DI UNA PERSONA:

• Nome: ………………………. *(1 point)*

• Età: …………………………. *(1 point)*

• Dove vive: …………………... *(1 point)*

• Come è fatta (caratteristiche fisiche):

• Corpo (altezza, corporatura): ……………………………………………………. *(1 point)*

• Viso (capelli, occhi, ecc.): ……………………………………………………….. *(3 points)*

• Abbigliamento (maglia, pantaloni, scarpe): ……………………………………… *(2 points)*

• Pregi e difetti (il carattere): ……………………………………………………… *(3 points)*

• Questo è un testo oggettivo o soggettivo? Perché? ……………………………………….

…………………………………………………………………………………… *(3 points)*

Points…/15

The average score for *Task 1* is 9.2 out of 15, which is equivalent to 6.1 out of 10. Most errors were found in the failure to transform from the first person to the third person singular (1), in the omission of predicates (2), in the lack of understanding of the item,

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[8] In conclusion of the First Educational Period, the main competencies encompass: reading, comprehending, and interpreting diverse types of written texts, as well as generating texts appropriate for varying contexts.

and in the subsequent use of a limited vocabulary (3). The item that proved most challenging to comprehend is the last one, wherein the students, to provide a complete answer, were tasked with examining not only the differences between objective and subjective text but also with providing a rationale for the closed response (4 and 5). Despite this topic having been addressed and elucidated during preparatory class sessions for the assessment, students encountered difficulties in its execution:

(1) Sono.PRES.IND.1SG. alta un metro e sessantasei
È.PRES.IND.3SG. alta un metro e sessantasei
'She is.PRES.IND.3SG. one meter and sixty-six centimeters tall'

(2) ? lei Ø alta un metro e sessantasei
Lei è.PRES.IND.3SG. alta un metro e sessantasei
'She is.PRES.IND.3SG. one meter and sixty-six centimeters tall'

(3) ? Pregi e difetti (il carattere): maglietta preferita di Zara
Merits and Flaws (Character): 'favourite t-shirt of Zara'

(4) ?/* Ogettivo perche non la giudico
? 'Objective because I don't judge her'

(5) ? Il testo è soggettivo, perché (Abbigliamento, bellissimi.) etc…
? 'The text is subjective, because (Clothing, beautiful) etc…'

Task 2. Item Categories: progressively more complex items; completion or cloze of adjective endings.

Completa gli aggettivi qualificativi con le terminazioni adatte.

1) Le montagne sono pien_ di persone. (*1 point*)

2) Le stazioni dei treni sono lontan_ da casa nostra. (*1 point*)

3) In Italia solitamente gli inverni sono molto fredd_ e lung_ _. (*2 points*)

4) Luca è un ragazzo intelligent_, ma molto impazient_. (*2 points*)

5) Tua nonna è vecchi_. È un'anziana davvero saggi_. (*2 points*)

6) I nostri amici sono molto simpatic_ e divertent_. (*2 points*)

7) Quel cameriere è davvero elegant_ e simpatic_! (*2 points*)

8) I miei compagni di classe sono tutti ragazzi educat_ e studios_. Solo un ragazzo non è mai attent_. (*3 points*)

Points…/15

The average score for *Task 2* is 9/15, which is equivalent to 6/10. Errors were identified in the agreement of masculine and feminine adjectives belonging to the second class, that end in *-e*, as well as in the noun-adjective agreement when the adjective has a single form for both masculine and feminine (items 2, 4, 6), as illustrated in examples (6) and (7).

(6) *Le stazioni.N.FEM.PL. dei treni sono lontan-i.ADJ-MASC.PL.
Le stazioni.N.FEM.PL. dei treni sono lontan-e.ADJ-FEM.PL.
'The train stations.N.FEM.PL. are distant.ADJ.FEM.PL.'

(7) *Luca.N.MASC.SG. è un ragazzo intelligent-o.ADJ-MASC.SG. ma molto impazient-o.ADJ-MASC.SG.
Luca è un ragazzo intelligent-e.ADJ-MASC.SG. ma molto impazient-e.ADJ-MASC.SG.
'Luca.N.MASC.SG. is an intelligent.ADJ.MASC.SG. but very impatient.ADJ.MASC.SG. boy'

Additionally, a cognitive simplification mechanism was observed, where adjectives were kept in the singular form without agreement, using the unmarked singular masculine endings, as demonstrated in (8):

(8) *I nostri amici.N.MASC.PL. sono molto simpatic-o.ADJ-MASC.SG. e divertent-e.ADJ-MASC.SG.
I nostri amici.N.MASC.PL. sono molto simpatic-i.ADJ.MASC.PL. e divertent-i.ADJ.MASC.PL.
'Our friends.N.MASC.PL. are very amiable.ADJ.MASC.PL. and fun.ADJ.MASC.PL.'

Task 3. Item Categories: written production with initial written prompt and words in the footer.

Osserva questa foto e presenta il luogo che vedi (minimo 50, massimo 70 parole). Usa queste locuzioni di luogo:

sullo sfondo • sulla sinistra • in secondo piano • in primo piano • sulla destra

Nella fotografia vedo ………………………………………………………………………………………
……….
È una giornata ……………………………………………………………………………………………
……….

Points …/20

Total point: …/50
Final evaluation: …/10

The average score for the last task is 10/20 or 5/10. This outcome highlights certain issues related to the written production of foreign students.

From a linguistic standpoint, errors have been identified in the adjective-noun agreement. For instance, in sentence (9), a Spanish speaker employs the structure (molt-i.ADJ-MASC.PL. + piedr-i.N-MASC.PL. + divers-o.ADJ-MASC.SG. + dimenzion-e.N-FEM.SG.) instead of (molt-e.ADJ-FEM.PL. + pietr-e.N-FEM.PL. + divers-e.ADJ-FEM.PL. + dimension-i.N-FEM.PL.). There are interferences with the L1, as evidenced in the noun 'piedri' for the Spanish 'piedras', and the presence of the grapheme <z>, realizing the

voiced alveolar affricate /dz/, instead of <s>. Furthermore, there is frequent repetition of basic vocabulary (10).

(9) *In primo piano ci sono molt-i piedr-i di divers-o dimenzion-e
In primo piano ci sono molt-e pietr-e di divers-e dimension-i
'In the foreground there are many stones of different sizes'

(10) […] in secondo piano c'è un *bellissimo* lago. […] Sulla sinistra ci sono alberi molto alti e *belli*. Sullo sfondo c'è una montagna molto *bella*. È una giornata *bellissima* per la vacanza.
'[…] in the background, there is a *beautiful* lake. […] On the left, there are very tall and *beautiful* trees. In the distance, there is a very *beautiful* mountain. It's a *beautiful* day for a vacation.'

The transcriptions of two students (D1, D2) are accurately reported, demonstrating the divergence in sociolinguistic skills that teachers encounter in a diverse setting like the CPIA.

D1 (written in pencil):
*Nella fotografia vedo LUCEO MOTANA ALBERO ROSA BARA MARE
È una giornata BELLA

D2 (written in pen):
Nella fotografia vedo un bellissimo lago blue. In primo piano c'è un vaso con fiori bianchi sopra un balcone. Di fronte al vaso di fiori ci sono rocce. In secondo piano c'è un bellissimo lago blue e verde smeraldo. A sinistra del lago ci sono alberi alti e a destra del lago c'e una montagna. Nello sfondo ci sono colline
Il cielo è blue e chiaro. È una bellissima giornata
È una giornata calda e soleggiata.

It should be noted that in D1 some points of the task are only minimally addressed, there are significant omissions and gaps, and the language register is absent. Additionally, the organization appears confused, and it is difficult to trace the internal logical connections within the text, unlike what happens in D2. In fact, in the second example provided, morphosyntactic and lexical errors are rare and isolated (e.g., 'blue' for Italian 'blu', or the verb 'to be' in the third person singular unaccented), and the task is carried out in a coherent and well-structured manner.

3.2. *The Creation of a Competency Assessment*

The final creation of the proposed competency assessment followed four main phases.

1. **Definition of the context.** This phase began with the identification of candidate characteristics (number of candidates; countries of origin). Subsequently, the test administration methods (timings and locations) were identified.

2. **Selection of the competencies to be assessed.** In this phase, the test type, namely the competency assessment, was identified. Then, the knowledge, skills, and abilities to be tested were identified (Table 2).

3. **Choice of test verification techniques.** The contents to be verified, the test format, and the materials to be used for its composing were selected. Next, the precise number of items to be proposed to the learners was chosen.

4. **Item development and score definition.** This phase involved the construction of items according to specific types (e.g., progressively more complex items) and the selection of scores to be assigned to each item, the total score for the task, and the characteristics of the assessment scale for free written production (Table 2).

Table 2. *Assessment Grid for Written Production*

Score	The student's production presents...
10	A wide-ranging vocabulary, including specialized terminology. Orthographic and lexical inaccuracies are limited. Morphosyntactic structures are correct and varied; expressive patterns are contextually appropriate. Various connectors and cohesive elements are utilized. The task is executed comprehensively, displaying complete coherence to the requirements.
9	An almost consistently appropriate vocabulary, with some specific terms; however, spelling and lexical errors are present. Morphosyntactic structures show a good connection between sentences, and expressive patterns are nearly appropriate. The task is mostly fulfilled, implying that it is predominantly coherent and largely aligned with the provided requirements.
8	An appropriate vocabulary with rare spelling and lexical inaccuracies; morphosyntactic structures are correct with occasional sentence connection errors. Expressive patterns are suitable, and the task is fully completed, coherently.
7	A partially appropriate vocabulary with repetitions and, in some cases, not well-defined. Morphology, spelling, and punctuation are used with fair proficiency, although they are not well-maintained in more complex passages. Expressive patterns are largely appropriate. The logical order of information is generally coherent, although it may be unclear and confusing in some places.
6	A basic vocabulary with frequent errors and repetitions. Morphology, spelling, and punctuation are used with moderate proficiency, although reading may be challenging in some passages. Expressive patterns are not always appropriate, and the logical order of information is sufficient but inconsistent at some points.
5	Restricted vocabulary, inadequate in most cases, with various spelling errors, numerous morphosyntactic errors, agreement errors, poorly connected sentences, inappropriate expressive patterns, a logical order that is not fully sufficient, and/or failure to address a point indicated by the prompt.
4	A limited vocabulary with generic expressions and/or interferences. Grammar, spelling, and punctuation contain errors that make reading several parts of the text difficult, compromising the appropriateness of the expressive patterns. Logical order is sporadic, and one or more points indicated by the prompt are not addressed.
3	A frequently limited and elementary vocabulary with frequent repetitions and interferences. Grammar, spelling, and punctuation contain frequent errors that make reading the task difficult and the expressive patterns inadequate. Morphosyntactic structures are often below the B1 level. The task is carried out with little cohesion, and many points of the instructions are left unaddressed.

2	An extremely limited vocabulary, often marked by repetitions and interferences from other languages, is consistently present in the text. It exhibits systematic lexical, spelling, and punctuation errors, making reading almost the entire task incomprehensible and the expressive patterns almost entirely inadequate. Morphosyntactic structures, for the most part, fall short of the B1 level. The execution of the task exhibits a lack of cohesion, and logical coherence is conspicuously absent throughout.
0-1	An assignment that is either not completed or entirely off-topic.

Throughout the assessment procedure, students were given a series of tasks structured to measure specific competencies, in line with OECD guidelines and ministerial competencies. The following are the knowledge, skills, and competencies selected for the Italian assessment, within the language domain.

Table 3. *Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies Tested on Students*

Knowledge	**Skills**	**Competencies in action**
• Understanding the structure of objective and subjective descriptive text, applicable to real-life, study, and work situations. • Understanding word meanings and syntactic and semantic relationships between words; understanding the agreement between adjectives and nouns. • Knowing the different methods of rewriting descriptive text.	• Understanding descriptive texts, identifying main characters, and the spatial and temporal setting. • Making hypotheses about the meaning of a word or expression. • Producing correct, coherent, and situationally appropriate informal texts.	• COMPETENCE 1: mastering the essential expressive and argumentative tools to manage verbal communicative interaction in various contexts. • COMPETENCE 2: reading, understanding, and interpreting texts of various types. • COMPETENCE 3: Producing texts of various types related to different communicative purposes.

A competency assessment was specifically designed and administered in March 2022 to evaluate the text type covered in the classroom and prepare students for the final exam.

In the provided assessment, the learner is required to: understand the meaning and communicative purpose of different text genres (describing people and places, presenting information); extract and rework the provided information (transferring information from a description of a person to that of a place); recognize the text's structure (identifying the opening and closing formulas of a descriptive text); use language appropriate to the situation (knowing the difference between objective and subjective descriptions and when to use them).

Furthermore, the descriptive text type implies a competency assessment of language usage, including knowledge and use of grammatical structures suitable for a level between A2–B1, and vocabulary related to various domains (completing and constructing

sentences using everyday vocabulary, school-related vocabulary, and workplace vocabulary for working students).

The criteria for the proposed assessment are based on:

- *Realistic stimuli* presenting equally plausible situations that require migrant learners to transfer knowledge, skills, and attitudes to new real-life situations and contexts (Hockly, 2016).

- *Situated proficiencies* that can be practiced or are essential in the new integration context in which learners find themselves (Purpura, 2021: A73). In this regard, language serves as a communication system for activities like introducing oneself, introducing someone else, and describing something or someone.

The competency assessment was developed based on a set of technical characteristics that incorporate and synthesize the *Item Writing Guidelines* (IEA, 2013) and the *Item writing for tests and examinations* (Withers, 2005). These characteristics encompass considerations during the design phase such as the duration of the individual assessment, the number of tasks and items to be included, item types, and any initial prompts to facilitate the start of the production. Additionally, it includes specifying the length of the texts that the learner will have to produce, with indications in the instructions regarding the minimum and maximum word count, as well as assigning scores to each item and the total score for the task.

3.2.1. *Competency Assessment: The Descriptive Text*

The first task (*Task 1*) focuses on reading and the ability to extract information from the provided text. *Task 2* requires an exercise in transformation intending to present other information. *Task 3* involves a written production. It is important to note that for this last task, no initial prompts are provided to the learners since it is assumed that competent and independent students will astutely rely on *Task 1* as an example to structure their written production.

Task 1.

Leggi il seguente testo. Poi, rispondi alle domande proposte.

1 Piacere! Mi chiamo Lucia, ho diciassette anni e abito a Venezia insieme ai miei genitori e ai miei due

2 fratelli Carlo e Maria, di dieci e tredici anni. Sono alta un metro e cinquantanove; ho dei capelli

3 lunghi e splendenti, color castano chiaro. I miei occhi sono di un azzurro luminoso, le mie labbra sono

4 sottili e il mio naso è piccolino. Spesso indosso un paio di jeans neri e la mia felpa preferita della Nike.

5 Quando io sono a scuola e parlo con le mie amiche sono allegra e felice. A scuola la mia materia

6 preferita è matematica, mentre la materia che proprio non mi piace è storia.

7 Nel tempo libero seguo un corso di danza: Infatti, da grande sogno di fare la ballerina professionista.

8 Sono una ragazza estroversa e simpatica, ma anche un po' pigra e permalosa se voglio!

1. **Come si chiama la protagonista della descrizione?** (*1 point*)
2. **Da dove viene?** (*1 point*)
3. **Quanti anni ha?** (*1 point*)
4. **Con chi vive?** (*1 point*)
5. **Cosa vuole fare da grande?** (*1 point*)
6. **Qual è la sua materia preferita? E quella che non le piace?** (*2 points*)
7. **Qual è il contrario della parola «pigra» (riga 8)?** (*1 point*)

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8. **Cos'è la parola «luminoso» alla riga 3 (nome, verbo, aggettivo ecc.)?** (*1 point*)
9. **Qual è l'infinito del verbo «indosso» alla riga 4?** (*1 point*)
10. **Cos'è la parola «mia» alla riga 4 e 5 (nome, verbo, aggettivo ecc.)?** (*1 point*)
11. **Qual è il contrario della parola «simpatica» (riga 8)?** (*1 point*)
12. **Alla riga 7 «Infatti» è scritto correttamente? Motiva la tua risposta.** (*3 points*)

Points…/15

Task 2.

Adesso tocca a te presentare Lucia! Trasforma questa parte di testo.

Mi chiamo Lucia, ho diciassette anni e abito a Venezia insieme ai miei genitori e ai miei due fratelli Carlo e Maria, di dieci e tredici anni. Sono alta un metro e cinquantanove; ho dei capelli lunghi e splendenti, color castano chiaro. I miei occhi sono di un azzurro luminoso, le mie labbra sono sottili e il mio naso è piccolino.

Points…/15

Task 3.

Ora componi tu: è il tuo primo giorno di scuola al CPIA e l'insegnante ti chiede di presentarti ai tuoi compagni e di descrivere il tuo carattere.
Scrivi minimo 90, massimo 110 parole.

………………………………………………………………………………………………………
………………………………………………………………………………………………………
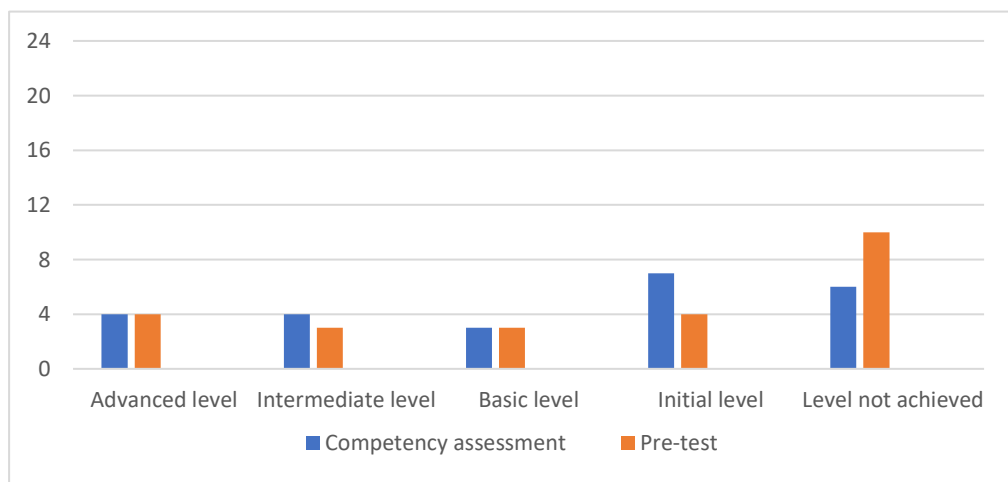………………………………………………………………………………………………………

Points…/20
Total points: …/50

Final evaluation: …/10

4. RESULTS

Based on the analysis of the results of the assessment administered and completed during the First Educational Period, different levels of competence emerged among learners (Chart 1).

Chart 1. *Proficiency Levels for the Evaluation of the Skills Test*

Specifically, the study revealed distinct proficiency levels of the Italian language: advanced level (9-10): n=4 students; intermediate level (8): n=4; basic level (7): n=3; initial level (6): n=7; level not achieved: n=6.

Eighteen out of twenty-four students (18/24) demonstrated a commendable level of competence, indicative of a significant degree of self-reliance in their learning process. Nonetheless, for six learners (n=6), i.e., one out of every four, the errors gathered prevented the attribution of a positive score, jeopardizing their eligibility for the Diploma in June 2022. Reasons are frequent grammatical errors, among which there are errors related to an agreement between articles, nouns, and adjectives (11); the widespread use of the masculine form for feminine nouns and adjectives (12); errors in verb conjugation (13) with specific interchanges between the 1st person singular and the 3rd person singular. Spelling, vocabulary, and formatting exhibit omissions, repetitions, and errors, with extensive use of uppercase writing, as well as a limited command of the appropriate linguistic register required for the given context (14 and 15).

(11) *Le.DET.FEM.PL. suoi.POSS.3SG.MASC.PL. labbra.N.FEM.PL. (sono) sottile.ADJ.MASC/FEM.SG.
Le.DET.FEM.PL. sue.POSS.3SG.FEM.PL. labbra.N.FEM.PL. (sono) sottili.ADJ.FEM.PL.
'Her.DET.FEM.PL. POSS.3SG.FEM.PL. lips.N.FEM.PL. (are) thin.ADJ.MASC/FEM.SG.'

(12) Qual è il contrario della parola «simpatica» (riga 8)?
*Antipatic-o.ADJ-MASC.SG.
Antipatic-a.ADJ-FEM.SG.
'(Lucia-she/her) unpleasant.ADJ-FEM.SG.'

(13) *Lucia voglia fare la ballerina professionista, quando è grande
Lucia vuole.PRES.IND.3SG. fare la ballerina professionista da grande
'Lucia wants.PRES.IND.3SG. to become a professional dancer when she grows up'

(14) * Ø suoi capelli sono lunghi e splendenti
I.DET.MASC.PL. suoi capelli sono lunghi e splendenti
'DET.MASC.PL. her hair is long and shiny'

(15) */? Da dove viene? Lei.3SG. sa.PRES.IND.3SG. a.PREP. Venezia
Da dove viene? Lei.3SG. abita/vive. PRES.IND.3SG. a.PREP. Venezia
'Where is she from? She.3SG. lives.PRES.IND.3SG. in.PREP. Venice'

Although some learners have shown a limited command of the linguistic register, they manage to address the points required by the items, thereby achieving sufficiency in their skills (16 and 17). In the case of (16), 'scritto falso' should be revised to 'scritto in modo errato' to clarify the concept. In (17), the noun 'documentazioni', i.e., documentations, is used incorrectly to refer to 'documentari', namely documentaries and newspapers. Nevertheless, despite the spelling 'é' instead of 'è' and the use of elementary vocabulary, the appropriateness of the linguistic expression remains comprehensible.

(16) No, é scritto falso. Dopo i due punti una parola é scritto piccolo.

'No, it is miswritten. After the colon, a word should be written in lowercase.'

(17) Sono una persona simpatico e sono interessato in tanti temi. Mi piace
comunicare e guardare le documentazioni e gli giornali. Questo è importante
per me; da avere le informazioni di cosa succede nel mondo.
'I am a friendly person and I am interested in many topics. I enjoy
communicating and watching documentaries and newspapers. This is
important to me; having information about what is happening in the world.'

Based on the data collected it is possible to put forward some suggestions for creating effective competency assessments and evaluations to be offered to a target audience of young adult students and working individuals who aim to obtain the Diploma.

– Use the checklist. Provide L2 Italian learners with a checklist in preparation for the assessment to verify the competencies, skills, and knowledge that will be assessed in a plenary setting.

– Employ preliminary tests. Pre-tests offer CPIA students the opportunity to practice their competencies in preparation for the assessments, with the possibility of repeating attempts and comparing their performance with the teacher and peers (Cardarello *et al.*, 2023: 25).

– Develop competency-oriented assessment items. This approach will acquaint foreign students with realistic problem scenarios that can be addressed using the strategies they have developed through their individual experiences and classroom training.

– Clarity of Instructions Regarding the Required Task. Instructions should specify the reference text type and the minimum and maximum word count to be used (e.g., 90-110 words), thereby setting boundaries to make items more objective and the assessment more reliable and consistent[9].

– Formative Feedback. Relying solely on passive and quantitative evaluation may not provide the migrant learner with a limited educational background with a comprehensive understanding of the identified errors and areas requiring improvement. This type of feedback offers details on the aspects in which the student has succeeded and those in which improvement is needed (Pace, 2013). Moreover, this approach helps the migrant learner develop greater awareness in the L2 (Norris, 2018: 15). As reported by Alt *et al.* (2023: 6), formative feedback is valuable for encouraging and motivating students to progress and achieve their learning goals.

– Transparent Assessment Criteria. Consistent with the recommendations of the Council of Europe (2017) and the *CEFR Companion Volume* (2020), well-defined and measurable assessment objectives and criteria need to be defined to assist both teachers and migrant students in specifying which outcomes demonstrate competence mastery. In both competency assessments and the final exam for obtaining the Diploma, the predominant goal is not to achieve a high score, but rather to demonstrate the migrant learner's ability to successfully apply the acquired competencies during the First Educational Period.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has outlined the process of designing and administering competency assessments, focusing solely on an observational study of written products from the First

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[9] Cf. *Writing Constructed-response Items and Scoring Guides*, in IEA (2013: 14).

Educational Period at the CPIA. Consequently, it would be interesting to investigate not only the receptive and productive abilities of learners but also to delve deeper into the learning of immigrants in the AALI pathways and the Second Educational Period.

Nevertheless, considering the gathered data, it is possible to draw attention to certain actions to be undertaken, and criteria to be implemented during the assessment phase in a diverse migratory context, such as that of CPIAs:

i) *Learning to Balance.* This involves the careful selection of criteria for CBA of evaluation objectives (Hopkins, Antes, 1990: 156-7). *Balancing* implies ensuring that tasks administered to learners are appropriate for measuring the intended content and expected behaviors. Achieving this balance can be realized through the creation of assessments that consider both specific and general knowledge, aligned with the *curriculum*, especially when it comes to foreign students who require specific support in learning a second language.

ii) *Selecting Relevant and Applicable Competencies in Assessment.* This means identifying skills and knowledge that are pertinent to the evaluation objectives and can be applied or used to address real-world situations, in line with the recent updates to the National Assessment System (SNV[10]), also promoted in the CPIA for the 2022-2025 *triennium*.

iii) *Implementing Objectivity.* It is essential to aim for the utmost clarity in the instructions given to migrant learners and the items presented while avoiding any distractions that could interfere with students' performance. Test elements should be formulated so that participants, especially in the challenging context of an L2, understand what is expected of them and that there is a well-defined correct response. In conjunction with the test creation process, specific descriptors should be used to articulate the knowledge, skills, and competencies in action required of foreign learners.

With the paradigm shift in education increasingly oriented towards a competence-oriented model, reconsidering the traditional approach to assessment for a foreign learner audience becomes paramount. This implies the integration of multiple domains of learning and applicable methodologies. From this perspective, CBA represents – and should represent – a tool that recognizes and values the cultural and professional diversity of foreign students, thereby contributing to their educational progress.

Therefore, young adult learners need to feel adequately prepared to face the challenge represented by the Lower Secondary School Diploma. To foster and promote a globally applicable education in the circumstances of everyday life (Milana, Tarozzi, 2021), it is hoped that CPIAs will value the differences of migrants and facilitate their access to social networks, evolving increasingly as local networks of inclusion (Gabrielli, 2020).

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[10] Cf. https://invalsi-areaprove.cineca.it/index.php?get=static&pag=home.

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