

## APPLICATIONS OF IT IN EVALUATING LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

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Any teaching–learning process concludes with a thorough evaluation of the knowledge acquired from its beginning to its end. The evaluation and the self-evaluation of the students' results along this specific process of teaching–learning a foreign language represents the final stage; one should say it is the most important but at the same time the most difficult stage. At this moment, both the teacher and the students are to establish to what extent the possibilities and the learning habits established beforehand as pedagogical objectives (items) were transformed into knowledge mastered by each of them.

### Requirements of evaluation and the place of Information Technology (IT)

The examination, the assessment and the marking are fundamental operations for the evaluation stage. The examination is the most important among them, mainly due to the fact that the objectivity and the exactness employed in undertaking this procedure will shape the contents of the evaluation.

Starting from the basic assumption of full knowledge of what is required in the learning activity, the students focus their efforts on those precise aspects/items of knowledge that the teacher considers as the most important. Their attention is thus channeled from the external motivation of the mark towards an internal one – that of the sincere wish to achieve the objectives established individually. At the same time, the evaluation techniques are set up on the foundation of the operational objectives; this should be done in such a way that the final checking procedure would meet the demands of the aims specified at the very beginning. Therefore, the scope of the evaluation concept extends over all the indices that reflect the student's personality.

Through these objectives one is enabled to formulate cognitive standards or levels (accepted minimal

performance and specific maximum performance). Based on these standards, one can create the types of exercises and subjects used in both the continuous and the cumulative (summative) evaluation.

The deficiencies found with certain teachers – arbitrary marking, favouring relationships, etc. – only bring along serious damages to the concept of a fair evaluation. Moreover, even in ideal circumstances, there might appear psychological variables in the evaluation of the results.

The activity of learning foreign languages is a complex one, presupposing an act of acquiring certain patterns of behaviour that can be developed through specific methods and procedures. This is the reason why the evaluation techniques have to be as diversified as possible, according to the established objectives.

Only 10 or 15 years ago, the use of computerized means in teaching-learning evaluation seemed a utopia in Romania. Talking about this subject, one should take into consideration the initial great costs of the necessary equipment, the reduced speed and capacities, the lack of certain utility programs able to offer adequate possibilities, etc. The computer age explosion, the unprecedented progress of the software and hardware industry have determined an amazingly rapid expansion, enhancing the opportunities to use the computer in various domains.

The evaluation and self-evaluation based on IT means presents a number of advantages in comparison with the classical means. Among them, one could mention:

- the possibility to evaluate several aspects (writing, and reading comprehension): this is extremely important when learning a foreign language;
- the diminishing of the time spent to produce a written piece of work by eliminating the preparation stages, such as jotting down the subjects of the test by the students;
- the possibility of long distance evaluation, with the advantages pertaining to this kind of learning;

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- the possibility of combining various types of subjects, which leads to a wider range of subject types. Therefore, the monotony of traditional subjects is reduced;
- the increased quantity of information / data and the relatively small storage space;
- the possibility of reducing the time devoted to marking.

In what follows I will attempt to present several software programs that can be employed when complex tests are to be designed.

### *Data Bases*

In a simplified definition, a data base could be explained as a collection of data. This collection can be manoeuvred in many ways, its uses being thus manifold.

In the examples that will be supplied, the data base employed in the demonstration is Microsoft Access, one of the most widely used type of data base. The data base offers the possibility of creating and storing:

- evaluation tests based on the question–answer type;
- multiple choice tests;
- cloze tests.

The answers are stored in the data base, and at a later stage they can go through a selection process and get printed.

But let us turn to an illustrating example: designing a multiple choice test.

Beginning with its name, the multiple choice exercise supposes that the student should choose the right answer from a cluster of 3 to 5 possible answers. We will not dwell on the methodological issues; they are not the object of the present article. We will deal only with the technical aspect of this procedure.

1. As we have previously mentioned, any data base is built upon a **table** where the data will be inscribed. The table is actually created by using the option **Tables, New**. It is highly recommendable that the table should be done with the help of DESIGN VIEW. The table will be drawn according to the envisaged purpose; for instance, choosing a specialized vocabulary item from an entire word list from a certain domain.

A primary key will be given; the term refers to an accessory that will give uniqueness to the exercise.

2. In the second stage, **the interface** will be created, that is **the form**; one should make sure that it has a pleasant and spaced shape in order to avoid

redundancy. The form is made with the option **Forms, New**. We recommend to make the form with the option FORM WIZARD. When the user opens the dialogue box **New Form**, he should select the option FORM WIZARD and will choose the table whose interface he wants to create. At a later stage, another dialogue box will open by itself, in which the user inserts the fields from the table, already existing in the dialogue box on the left corner of the screen.

After this, the user should select the option NEXT. The computer will then ask the user to select a format. The most frequently used and more comfortable of the formats is COLUMNAR. After selecting this format, he should select the option NEXT. The last stage is represented by the choice made in point of style, that is the graphics of the interface. Choosing the style can be done by selecting each of them in order to select the one that fits the user's tastes (the advanced users can create a style of their own, but this fact will not be the object of discussion for the present paper).

At the end, the user selects the option FINISH and the form can be used as such.

To this interface we add **command buttons**. In this respect, two types of command buttons are most useful: the SAVE and SEARCH command buttons.

3. The third and last stage is done after the student has previously filled in the form. This stage contains the designing of the query system and the final report regarding this.

Using the QUERY system, the sought data is selected, based on some criteria.

The **report** represents a table containing the sought data, and having a professional graphic design, as they are conceived to be printed at a later stage. The reports are optional, and they can be replaced with tables where the information is saved. However, these do not have a pleasant aspect from the graphics point of view. This final version – be it a table or a report – represents the “test” which is going to be marked.

### *Programs used to design audio–visual files*

Along the decades, in the history of methodology there have been several tendencies that, one by one, exalted or diminished to a minimum the role and the pedagogical importance of the audio–visual means in learning foreign languages. The present day tendency is to reconsider the didactic potential these means have, in a lucid and realistic manner.

The primary factor that necessarily imposes the use of these methods is, of course, the major importance of communication in the contemporary world.

A basic requirement is to avoid artificiality as much as possible, and thus use authentic language instances, covering a wide range of expressions and situations. Starting from this, the visual documents, as well as the audio ones, prove to be extremely efficient and important, by placing the message into a real life context and by engendering a special motivation.

Naturally, the classical audio-video means (audio and videotapes, slides, didactic films, sketches, graphs, charts, etc.) bear a significant weight. However, IT has various advantages on its side in comparison with these, such as:

- the possibility of combining several types of data;
- easy usage;
- the large quantity of information and the concentrated storing space which it occupies;
- the possibility of transmitting the data at great distances, irrespective of the size of that information, etc.

Consequently, we will present in the following lines several programs that allow the user to process, take over and run the specified data.

In the first place, regarding **the programs** specialized in **taking over** the data, we should mention the fact that they are closely connected to the peripherals (input/output devices), which enable the user to take over the information, for instance: video camera, TV, video player, scanner, microphone, CD player, etc. These means are specific to IT, and each peripheral has specified programs for each type of file. It is highly recommended to request the logistic help of a qualified IT professional when installing or running input/output equipment.

Secondly, there are various **data processing programs** which differ from the viewpoint of the processed data. Thus, for static image files users rely on such programs as Corel, JASC Paint Shop Pro and Adobe Photoshop.

Thirdly, when the user chooses **the running programs**, he always bears in mind the aims of his actions. Such programs are:

- Windows Media Player – to present the dynamic audio and/or video;
- MS Office Power Point – to present static images (photographs, sketches, graphs, charts, maps, etc.). In this case, the static images may be accompanied by a caption (text) and/or sound;
- Windows Sound Recorder – to record live instances of speech.

In order to explain these programs and their applications better, let us take the example of how to use MS Office Power Point.

**Step 1.** The user designs the set of questions, after he has pre-viewed the selected images. These questions will be designed to serve a pre-set purpose.

**Step 2.** The user chooses the type and the graphic performance of the interface to be used. This should be done according to the final aim that he has in mind. When setting up the type of interface, the user should choose a pleasant-looking one, in order to avoid too crude colours or a design that annoys the viewers' eyes.

**Step 3.** The user inserts the information on the slide (photographs, text, sound). Thus, the information – be it a text or an image – is copied from the source file and is inserted on the slide, with the command PASTE. In order to insert sound files, the user has to follow a more complicated route. If the user encounters difficulties in applying the necessary chain of commands, he should resort to the help of a qualified IT professional.

**Step 4.** The user arranges the information within the margins of the slide, and makes the final modifications regarding the colour, the graphic aspect, etc. These are applied in order to move easily from one slide to another. To do so, the user clicks on SLIDE SHOW button. Next, on ACTION buttons, selecting the type of button the user wants to apply to his slides. There are two buttons that are absolutely necessary: FORWARD and BACK.

### IT in Open and Distance Learning – Considerations and perspectives

The very notion of long distance learning is relatively new in Romania. This type of learning has replaced the old form “without mandatory attendance”, at the same time bringing along a whole series of innovations.

The most important innovation is the fact that the organizer has to facilitate the access of the students to the body of courses. This can be done in various ways: printing the textbooks as such, virtual courses on CDs or ON-LINE, TV programs broadcast on their own TV stations, etc. The virtual courses and questionnaires have the advantage that they can be accessed and sent to long distances at any time.

In the present paper I have already presented the ways in which the user/student can answer questionnaires. These questionnaires can be then presented on the Internet with the help of some specialized software languages, as for instance HTML – by far the best known and most used one.

The data is sent to a certain site that administrates and decodes them. Recording and printing these courses is much more simple and faster than a video recording.

The latter can take hours to be recorded; besides, the video recording needs a large storing space on the video tape, resulting in high costs.

Long distance evaluation “live” is at the present moment possible due to recent developments in the software and hardware technologies. Various audio and video programs that enable long distance communication are already extensively used. This fact represents a true “revolution” in telecommunication systems, bearing important effects in different domains of activity. Teaching/testing could not stay out of the main stream. The audio and video equipment used in this type of communication is 10-20 times cheaper than the traditional one (for example, video cameras), while the costs of the phone bill is not higher than the usual local call costs. All these underline the immense advantages brought by the new technology.

The programs used in long distance communication are often offered freely either as such (full-version programs) or as a supplement to an already bought package of programs. As a typical example, we should mention the Net2Phone program, and Net Meeting (see Figures 1 and 2).



Fig.1 Net2Phone



Fig.2 NetMeeting

## Conclusions

The technical and scientific progress over the past decades, and especially at the turn of the century, have caused important changes in the teaching system. However, information technology does not strive to be considered as a competitor to the traditional teaching means. More likely, IT is seen as an alternative in the cases when its usefulness is obvious. IT is not a purpose *per se*, it is a way of taking action when the traditional means prove to be inefficient or outdated. For all these reasons, the teaching staff should take action at any time, aiming to improve professionally within the new boundaries set by recent educational requirements. Yet, the traditional principles of education cannot be set aside, as many of them are still valid at the present moment.

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