

The alignment process as good practice in Italy for linking learning and assessment: A case study

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Since the publication of the CEFR Companion Volume (CEFR/CV) (Council of Europe [CoE] 2020), research on aligning proficiency tests with new mediation descriptors remains scarce in Italy. However, the four Italian language certifying bodies (CLIQ Consortium), are developing projects that emphasize mediation in L2 Italian teaching and assessment. One such initiative, “Je le sais faire en Italien”, is currently being piloted in high schools in Marseille and Aix-en-Provence in collaboration with the French Ministry of Education. Building on this project, this study presents the initial findings on aligning mediation descriptors with CILS exams (Certification of Italian as a Foreign Language) at A2 and B1 levels. These exams are aimed at foreign students studying Italian in school contexts, in Italy and abroad. This study analyses data collected to gather evidence on assessment impact (Saville and Khalifa 2017). Notably in some Italian high schools abroad, this approach has positively influenced syllabi, aligning with the principles of learning-oriented assessment (Purpura and Turner 2018) principles.

Keywords: mediation, L2 Italian, proficiency test, learning-oriented assessment, CILS exams

1 Introduction

This article presents the initial results of a study aligning CILS exams (Certification of Italian as a Foreign Language) with the CEFR descriptors dedicated to mediation (Council of Europe 2020) at levels A2 and B1. These exams are intended for candidates of foreign origin who use the Italian language for different purposes and in various contexts, including educational settings, both in Italy and abroad. Given this characteristic of the CILS exams and also considering the complex nature of communication and therefore users'/learners' needs, mediation appears to be pivotal for the various communicative dynamics in which users/learners are required to use their mediation skills in order to perform their daily tasks and achieve communicative success. The article discusses the data collected during the first steps of the alignment process, with particular attention to the familiarization and specification phases. It supports and contributes to the process of aligning the CILS exams with the CEFR/CV. This process follows the one initiated through the use of the *Manual for relating language examinations to the CEFR* (CoE 2009), documented and disseminated both through internal reports and publications (Barni et al. 2010; Bagna et al. 2012). The alignment process includes among its various advantages achieving systemic coherence and transparency, establishing a basis for principled comparison, and monitoring for purposes of quality assurance (British Council et al. 2022: 11). In addition, for the CILS exams it also constitutes the starting point for the revision and updating of their construct.

2 Research background

2.1 Mediation in the CEFR (2001) and CEFR/CV (2020)

In the field of linguistic sciences, the conceptualization of mediation as a semiotic activity—as a process of meaning-making through linguistic and other symbolic resources—has only emerged relatively recently (North and Piccardo 2016; Machetti and Siebetchu 2017). This focus is central to the CEFR (CoE 2001) and to the more recent CEFR *Companion Volume* (CoE 2020). Both the CEFR and the CEFR/CV consider mediation as an essential and irreplaceable component in the processes of constructing and negotiating meaning and sense, and they discuss its characteristics, which go beyond a merely instrumental function. This entails that the use and learning of a language—through continuous interaction with other systems of signs and in situations of contact with other languages—requires each user/learner to engage in the mediation of texts, a process that “involves passing on to another person the content of a text to which they do not have access, often because of linguistic, cultural, semantic or technical barriers”; in the mediation of concepts, which consists of “facilitating access to knowledge and concepts for others, particularly if they may be unable to access this directly on their own”; and in the mediation of communication, which is essential to “facilitate understanding and to shape successful communication between users/learners who may have individual, sociocultural, sociolinguistic or intellectual differences in standpoint” (CoE 2020: 91). The mediation of texts, concepts and communication constitutes a set of essential processes that underpin communication across the diverse contexts in which it occurs. Without these processes, the level of communicative effectiveness—which relies both on contextual and situational factors and on the communicators’ ability to construct and interpret meaning—is at risk of breaking down, potentially resulting in misunderstanding or even a complete communication breakdown.

When viewed in this way, mediation emerges as a “normal”—that is, inherent and integral—process within communication, and indeed as virtually synonymous with it, insofar as its function lies in the production, transmission and negotiation of meanings and sense. As Machetti and Siebetchu (2017) argue, to communicate is to mediate, and this holds true whether communication occurs among users/learners who share the same language and culture or among those with different linguistic and cultural repertoires.

This perspective, moreover, aligns closely with what is proposed in the CEFR/CV, which conceptualizes mediation as a set of activities and strategies that vary according to the user/learner’s level of linguistic-communicative competence and their specific communicative needs. This diversification follows the CEFR model and thus develops along a vertical dimension—a sequence of levels describing the learner’s competence—and a horizontal dimension, aimed at identifying the domains and areas of use, communicative contexts, skills, and text types involved (Vedovelli 2010: 64). This framing conceptualizes mediation as one of the four modes in which the CEFR model organizes communication (reception, production, interaction, mediation). Therefore, mediation is a component that can be taught, learned, and assessed.

2.2 Mediation in language testing and assessment. The Italian context

Five years since the CEFR/CV was published, research aligning proficiency tests with mediation descriptors remains scarce in Italy. This scarcity is not limited to Italian language proficiency tests but extends to the broader spectrum of Italian as a second or foreign language (S/FL) assessments. More generally, it impacts the entire teaching and learning process of S/FL Italian. In certain respects, this process remains anchored to a traditional model, in which the explicit teaching of grammar continues to occupy a central role. In other instances, it reflects a communicative approach, where the different skills interact, yet in practice they continue to be taught and presented separately.

With regard to the assessment of L2 Italian, it can be stated that attention to mediation is at present almost entirely absent. For instance, in the Matura exams (Italian high school final exams), assessing Italian consists of writing an essay on literary, historical, philosophical or topical subjects. The assessment takes into account grammatical and lexical accuracy, the coherence and cohesion of the text, the argumentation capacity and the originality of the essay, without any reference to mediation. The same occurs in the Italian school system, when students are required to take national standardized tests designed to measure learning outcomes. These tests are administered by the *Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Educativo di Istruzione e Formazione* (INVALSI), and their respective components have been elaborated following a specific reference framework for Italian which provides the necessary specifications according to school grade. According to this framework, the aspects of language proficiency that are assessed consist of reading comprehension, reflection on language and lexical competence, also in this case without any reference to mediation.

However, and going back to proficiency tests, the four Italian language certifying bodies that constitute the CLIQ Association (www.associazionecliq.it), with one ALTE full member and three ALTE affiliates, are actively developing projects that are targeting mediation in L2 Italian teaching and assessment processes.¹ Among these is *Je le sais faire en Italien*, a project developed in collaboration with the French Ministry of Education, which has reached its second year of implementation. In this project, which involves high school students in their second and fifth years in Marseille, Aix-en-Provence and Nice, as stated in the reference syllabus, the writing skill is also intended as the ability to interact with written texts, precisely to highlight the focus on the changes proposed by the CEFR/CV.

Notably in some Italian high schools abroad, an assessment where mediation is explicitly or implicitly taken into account has positively influenced teaching syllabi, aligning with the principles of learning-oriented assessment (LOA; Turner and Purpura 2016). In this context, and in cooperation with the Scenario-Based Language Assessment (SBLA) Lab at Teachers College, Columbia University, the CILS Centre developed the Italian SBA project, which explores the development of SBA for L2 Italian. Grounded in the theoretical framework of LOA, the Italian SBA emphasizes collaborative problem-solving, integrates learning and assessment, and focuses on the development of topical knowledge (Peri 2025). Mediation is fully embedded in the SBA tasks, particularly in activities of synthesis, re-elaboration, virtual interaction and argumentative production (Peri in preparation). The project, which was also piloted in the Turkish school context, was conceived within a broader research initiative launched in 2019 between Teachers College and the CILS Centre at the University for Foreigners of Siena.

3 The study context

Our study focuses on CILS exams. The Certification of Italian as a Foreign Language (Certificazione di Italiano come Lingua Straniera or CILS) is an Italian language qualification offered by the CILS Centre of the University for Foreigners of Siena (Centro CILS 2019; Machetti and Vedovelli 2024).

The exams are standardized tests of Italian measuring general language proficiency. The CILS exams are premised on the six CEFR levels—CILS A1, CILS A2, CILS UNO-B1, CILS DUE-B2, CILS TRE-C1 and CILS

1. Since 1993 Italy has recognized four official certifications for Italian as a foreign language: CELI (Certificato di Conoscenza della Lingua Italiana), awarded by the Università per Stranieri di Perugia; CILS (Certificazione di Italiano come Lingua Straniera), awarded by the Università per Stranieri di Siena; IT (Italiano), awarded by the Università degli Studi Roma Tre; and PLIDA (Progetto Lingua Italiana Dante Alighieri), awarded by the Società Dante Alighieri. These institutions operate synergistically, with the common objective of promoting the study of Italian worldwide through certifications suited to various learning goals and professional needs; introducing and systematizing language testing practices in the Italian context; adopting assessment principles aligned with international standards; developing expertise in language testing and fostering international collaboration; supporting teacher training in this field through dedicated courses; advancing research on language assessment in the Italian context.

QUATTRO-C2—and are aimed at a general adult population considering an average cultural level of Italian language users studying for educational, professional or general cultural purposes. However, CILS is also available for specific public groups: for young learners at A1 and A2; for teenagers from A1 to B1; for migration purposes at A1 and A2; for citizenship at B1.

CILS exams are recognized by universities, employers, and institutions in Italy and worldwide. CILS exams were launched in 1993. In 2023, CILS exams were taken by 46101 test-takers. Since 1993, the CILS exams have been administered in Italy and in around 90 foreign countries. All CILS exams are paper-based and therefore delivered in person in CILS Test Centres in Italy and abroad (Machetti 2022).

4 Methodology

The methodology followed in this study adheres to the guidelines proposed by the handbook (British Council et al. 2022), thereby replicating its various phases. In the phase reported here, the study involved eight experts in language teaching and assessment (teachers, item writers, raters), along with two post-doctoral research fellows, all coordinated by a full professor who also served as head of the CILS Centre.

All participants had between five and fifteen years of experience in the field of L2 Italian teaching and assessment and were familiar with the procedures outlined in the Handbook. This familiarity stems from the fact that similar procedures had already been implemented as proposed by the manual for relating language examinations to the CEFR (CoE 2009). In addition, several of the experts involved in this study regularly used the manual in the context of CILS raters' continuing training and in the ongoing process of exam validation. The alignment process itself, consistent with the procedures set out in the manual, can be summarized in four principal stages. First, in the familiarization stage, professionals involved in the project developed a shared and detailed understanding of the CEFR scales and descriptors, as well as the content of the CILS exams. Second, in the specification stage, CEFR levels were assigned to each CILS exam task. Third, the standardization stage was implemented, consisting of training with calibrated CILS examples, benchmarking through judges' evaluation of sample performances, and standard setting to establish the CEFR level corresponding to different scores. Finally, in the validation stage, the internal validity of the procedures and the consistency of expert judgments were verified, complemented by qualitative analyses that included candidate feedback on exam content and administration.

In this article, we provide some evidence from the familiarization phase with the mediation descriptors, in addition to providing and analysing the main data from the specification phase. According to the handbook, "familiarization is designed to ensure that those involved in an alignment project have an appropriate knowledge of the CEFR and share a common understanding of the purpose of the project" (British Council et al. 2022: 19); and "specification analyses the content of any resource, existing or new, in terms of approach and coverage in relation to the categories presented in the CEFR" (British Council et al. 2022: 28).

In our study, the type of familiarization adopted was both generic and specific and so was the specification procedure. This means that familiarization took place in a single session and on an individual basis, but at the same time it also required group work, distributed across multiple sessions and guided by a coordinator. Specification involved a broad linking of the structure and content of the CILS exams to the content and level descriptors of the CEFR related to mediation; the specific procedure applied the same principles but at a much more detailed and fine-grained level. In addition, the method used for specification was the one indicated by the handbook, though it was used in a flexible manner. More precisely, the method involved an initial bottom-up phase in which analysis of existing exams (A2 and B1 levels) provided evidence of what they already covered on mediation (content analysis). Then, a top-down phase was conducted using the CEFR/CV as the basis for integrating the existing exams with mediation strategies and activities (needs analysis).

5 Data analysis and discussion

5.1 Familiarization

For the familiarization phase, forms 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 of the handbook were used. Among the most interesting data that emerged from the use of form 2.1 are those of the majority of experts with reference to the relevance of the scales in the CILS exams context. The three mediation activities (mediating a text, mediating concepts, mediating communication) were in fact all judged important, but for different reasons.

Mediating a text, as suggested in the CEFR/CV, namely “mediating a text for oneself (for example in taking notes during a lecture) or in expressing reactions to texts, particularly creative and literary ones” (CoE 2020: 106), constitutes a fundamental set of scales because it represents what every test-taker does/should do when taking the CILS exam. As one expert observed, “every item/task involves the management of a text, and not only when it comes to creative and literary texts, because the development of linguistic-communicative competence is nothing but a process of text management, from text, about text, to text” (Vedovelli 2010).

In the A2 and B1 CILS exams, mediating a text constitutes the initial and essential step for comprehending the oral passages presented in the Listening Test. This process, which essentially entails taking notes on the main ideas or key words of an oral text, is indispensable for the completion of the subsequent task (multiple-choice or true/false). Without it, performance relies solely on memory, rendering the task either unfeasible or considerably more difficult.

Mediating concepts is a process which “involves two complementary aspects: on the one hand constructing and elaborating meaning and on the other hand facilitating and stimulating conditions that are conducive to conceptual exchange and development” (CoE 2020: 91) and refers to another important group of scales, because it makes the language test a tool for constructing and elaborating meaning and, at the same time, a tool that facilitates and encourages the elaboration and sharing of concepts. In this regard five participants emphasized how these scales reminded them of the LOA approach as applied in the Italian SBA, on which all the experts participating in this project have gained some experience (Purpura 2021; Peri 2025). LOA assigns a central role to the socio-interactive dimension, including such elements as turn-taking, repair strategies, feedback and the construction of social identity through interaction (Purpura and Turner 2018).

Finally, mediating communication, whose aim “is to facilitate understanding and to shape successful communication between users/learners who may have individual, sociocultural, sociolinguistic or intellectual differences in standpoint” (CoE 2020: 91) represents, according to all participants, a set of scales that should be one of the objectives of any language test that should apply every time a test-taker takes a test.

In the A2 and B1 CILS exams, this activity proves to be decisive for the completion of Task 1 of the Oral Production Test, which consists of a face-to-face conversation between the candidate and the interlocutor. As highlighted by Masillo and Machetti (2023), in cases where the interlocutor does not act to facilitate and make communication effective with candidates who typically present different individual, sociocultural, sociolinguistic, or intellectual characteristics, the administration of the test as a whole is seriously compromised.

In sum, the evidence provided by the experts in the familiarization phase sees mediation as a fundamental process of the test/within the test, which could even be thought of as a mediation tool, capable of creating “the space and conditions for communicating and/or learning, collaborating to construct new meaning, encouraging others to construct or understand new meaning, and passing on new information in an appropriate form” (CoE 2020: 103).

In relation to mediation strategies, experts repeatedly commented on them being described as “the techniques employed to clarify meaning and facilitate understanding” (CoE 2020: 126). Specifically,

one participant underscored that “taking a language test always requires clarifying meaning, even to oneself”, e.g., when performing a task you are linking to previous knowledge, therefore you are adapting language and breaking down complicated information. This is a fairly common strategy adopted by candidates in certification exams. In some cases, however, it may be considered inadmissible. By definition, a language test should not provide evidence of knowledge and skills outside the construct under assessment, namely the language itself. Nevertheless, also with reference to the CEFR model of linguistic-communicative competence, a connection is recognized between this competence and extra-linguistic knowledge and skills. These, in turn, are essential for the development of pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence.

This evidence therefore suggests that experts were well aware of mediation strategies and their centrality, even if these strategies are not all explicitly and necessarily present in the current CILS exam construct.

5.2 Specification

The specification phase started from the analysis of existing exams (A2 and B2 levels) to collect evidence of what they already provide on mediation activities and strategies (content analysis). The procedure started by using Form 3.1, followed by the analysis of the test specification (in our case, CILS Guidelines for the A2 and B1 exams) using Forms 3.2 and 3.5 for which we used sample test items and tasks. The result for mediation activities, based as mentioned on the judgment of 11 participants, indicated that the mediation scales for which the current exams already provide evidence are the following:

- a. in Writing and Speaking Tasks—mediating texts: Expressing a personal response to creative texts; Analysis and criticism of creative texts (e.g., *l'ultimo libro che hai letto; un film che ti è piaciuto particolarmente* [the last book you read; a film you particularly enjoyed])
- b. in Writing and Speaking Tasks—mediating concepts: no evidence
- c. in Writing and Speaking Tasks—mediating communication: no evidence.

This result suggests that the current CILS construct provides only minimal evidence of mediation activities and entails the need to broaden this construct with relevant mediation activities, which would lead to revising the format of the test itself in the direction of:

- a. plurilingual assessment (from language A to language B), but also translation tasks
- b. tasks requiring work within a group
- c. tasks involving the description of tables, graphs

An analysis of the results of the Specification phase for mediation strategies showed that, for both the A2 and B1 exams, the mediation scales for which the current exams already provide evidence are the following:

- a. in all parts of the exam: “Linking to previous knowledge”. In fact, the entire test requires this recall in some way (e.g., To perform the writing task I need to retrieve a set of encyclopedic knowledge that is not necessarily provided by the input itself; at the same time, to understand a written text in the reading comprehension task, I need to do the same thing ...)

- b. in all parts of the exam: “Adapting language”. Particularly in the speaking task, it is necessary to adapt speech/speech speed
- c. in the Reading Comprehension task: “Breaking down complicated information”. This is an indispensable operation for the analytical reading of a text (e.g., *bando*).

This indicates that everything has to be made explicit in the actual construct; it is already there but needs to be more fully articulated and transferred to the tasks and the different items.

6 Future directions

The data collected and analysed so far are of fundamental importance for the completion of the alignment process, as they integrate the steps of standardization, standard setting and validation. These steps have been completed, but at present they still require a general revision. On the other hand, the data that will be collected at the end of this process for the A2 and B1 exams will be useful for extending the alignment process with the mediation descriptors to the exams of the remaining CILS levels. The aim is also to investigate whether it is possible to introduce mediation activities and strategies at levels A1 and pre-A1, in particular through the use of para-linguistic communication systems and translanguaging.

In addition, the alignment process appears to be useful for investigating the impact on candidates of assessment in relation to mediation activities and strategies. When candidates are student teachers, this impact should be measurable and of direct relevance to pupils, their families, and their overall school careers. A possible development of this research therefore concerns the engagement of various stakeholders in the educational field, fostering dialogue and debate among researchers and practitioners alike.

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8 Biographies

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