



# Perceptions of learning and assessment in beginners and intermediate level Italian Studies

Category:  
Refereed  
Professional Practice

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Much research has been conducted into devising assessment that is FOR learning, rather than OF learning. Such research suggests this can be best achieved by giving students regular, low-stakes assessment, which aids both the student and teacher in measuring progress and gives an opportunity for more feedback to be provided to the student, thereby creating a more inclusive learning environment. In our discipline, Italian Studies, there have been attempts to give practical application to this research by giving students assessment on a more regular basis. It was decided, therefore, to assign students regular in-class tests of 20 to 30 minutes duration.

In taking this step, it was believed that regular in-class testing can provide students with smaller milestones to work towards, as well as giving teachers a clearer idea as to student progress, so any weaknesses can be identified and worked on. While regarded in the literature as best practice, we wanted to determine both staff and, more importantly, student perceptions as to whether they believed it creates a more inclusive environment which is conducive to learning for all students. Our study suggests that students (as well as staff) very strongly believe that their needs are better served by having regular, low-stakes in-class assessment. This result lends ongoing support to the ideal of assessment FOR learning across disciplines.

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## Introduction

Assessment can perform two different functions for the student. It can be a tool for the student (as well as the teacher) to evaluate their performance in a particular subject (assessment of learning). It can also, however, be a learning tool in itself (assessment for learning). As Brown (2004) states, “assessment is probably the most important thing we can do to help our students learn” (p. 81). For many students, knowing that they will be assessed on a certain topic gives them the motivation to learn as much about the topic as they can. If, however, they are told or believe that it will not be assessed directly then there is less of an incentive for them to really take the time to develop their linguistic competency; i.e., grammar, comprehension skills, oral skills, written expression etc.

Therefore, the challenge of devising assessment that is inclusive and engages students (Cooper 2006) is imperative. The bulk of recent research conducted suggests that an assessment for learning approach, which encompasses regular, low-stakes assessment, is better suited to achieving this goal. In the discipline of Italian Studies at the University of Western Australia, attempts have been made to put this theory into the practice of language teaching. By language teaching we mean students learning not only about all the various grammatical aspects of the written language, but also developing the necessary communicative skills (listening and oral comprehension and written and oral expression). A large amount of content is covered in language programmes. Therefore, any assessment format must take into consideration time constraints, as contact hours are less than those that have been in place in previous years. At a beginners’ level, it was not uncommon in many Australian Universities for there to be around six contact hours a week, whereas these days there are only four at the most. This reduced time impacts on the ability of staff to review the course content in a more complete way in contact time. Students therefore must somehow make up for this lost time in their own study time by completing grammar exercises and the like. However, members of staff interviewed for this project

have advised us that, in their view, more often than not, students do not put in the required extra time that is required when learning a language.

In light of the research which suggests that regular assessment is more desirable, which will be discussed further below, the first attempt at trying to adopt a model based on more regular assessment saw students at first year beginners and intermediate (ex-TEE/WACE) level being given a series of take home assignments to complete which would then be marked and returned to students in class. Whilst giving students scope to apply language competencies in a more creative way, the viability of these assignments as an assessment and learning tool was questioned by students and staff on the basis that it may not be an accurate measure of student progress, as take home assignments can lend themselves to overuse of dictionaries and internet resources, as well as student collusion. Further, given increasing time-constraints, regular in-class testing can provide students with smaller milestones to work towards, as well as giving teachers a clearer idea as to student progress, so any weaknesses can be identified and worked on. Thus, at both levels, take home assignments have been eliminated, or their weighting has been significantly reduced, with far greater emphasis placed on regular in-class tests of 20 to 30 minutes duration. In this way it was hoped that regular assessment would provide students with an opportunity to: 1) better understand the learning goals and the criteria that will be applied to judge the quality of their achievement; and 2) receive feedback that helps them make further progress.

To study perceptions of this approach, that is, whether regular in-class assessment is preferable to one longer assessment at the end of the unit or take-home assignments, we have therefore:

1. surveyed students, asking them whether they believe regular in-class tests promote learning from their perspective; and
2. surveyed our colleagues in Italian Studies in order to ascertain their views on the subject based on their experience.

We will discuss the results in this paper. The aim here is to ascertain whether the use of regular, low-stakes assessment, advocated by the literature as a means of promoting assessment for learning, is in fact reflected in reality by those who are supposed to be doing the learning, namely, the students themselves.

## Research into value of regular assessment

A great deal of research has been conducted into the effectiveness of regular assessment for pedagogic purposes. This research explores the requirements of good formative assessment, as opposed to assessment merely as a summative assessment tool. A seminal definition of assessment was devised by Black and Wiliam (1998) and provides:

the term 'assessment' refers to all those activities undertaken by teachers and by their students in assessing themselves, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged (p. 2).

From this definition the concept of *formative assessment* is made clear. Formative assessment refers to assessment that is specifically intended to generate feedback on performance to improve and accelerate learning (Sadler 1998), whilst summative assessment refers to an assessment that is designed purely to contribute to an overall grade at the end of the study unit. More emphasis has been placed on formative assessment as it is argued that it helps students to appreciate the standards that are expected from them (Yorke 2003). In particular, learning is now more commonly conceptualised as a process whereby students actively construct their own knowledge and skills (Barr and Tagg 1995; DeCorte 1996; Nicol 1997). Further, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) suggest that:

motivation and self-esteem are more likely to be enhanced when a course has many low-stakes assessment tasks, with feedback geared to providing information about progress and achievement, rather than high-stakes summative assessment tasks where information is only about success or failure, or about how students compare with their peers (e.g. grades) (p. 212).

Gibbs and Simpson (2005) make the point that the assumption of most universities in the United Kingdom is that “frequent assignments and detailed written feedback are central to student learning” (p. 8). They go on to discuss the point raised by Vos (1991) that in those subject areas which have less frequent assessment tasks, students tend to study fewer hours (p. 13). In other words, students consciously study more often when they know that they are going to be assessed more often. In regards to the issue of on-going assessment, Gibbs and Simpson (p. 14) point out that:

Exams can have the effect of concentrating study into a short intense period at the end of the course with little study of, for example, lecture notes, until many weeks after the lecture. Frequent assignments .... or tests ..... can distribute student effort across the course, often on a weekly basis, ...

This formative assessment approach has also been explored by Yorke (2003). He argues that some assessments are deliberately designed to be simultaneously formative and summative – formative because the student is expected to learn from whatever feedback is provided and summative because the grade awarded contributes to the overall grade at the end of the study unit. In his view, summative assessments in relation to a curricular component (the student passes or fails a module, for example) can act formatively if a student learns from them. Yorke (2003) also suggests that:

The act of assessing (formally and informally; formatively and summatively) has an effect on assessors as well as on students. Assessors learn about the extent to which students have developed expertise, and can tailor their teaching accordingly (p. 482).

Another related concept to the issue of regular in-class assessment is the notion of feedback. Sadler (1989) describes feedback as “a key element in formative assessment, and is usually defined in terms of information about how successfully something has been or is being done” (p. 120). He maintains that students can “use it to monitor the strengths and weaknesses of their performances, so that aspects associated with success or high quality can be recognised and reinforced, and unsatisfactory aspects modified or improved” (p. 121). The benefits of regular feedback are crucial to students’ positive progress through a course; and more frequent assessment means that there are more opportunities for teachers to provide the students with feedback. With the use of regular tests in the Italian units discussed in this paper, students can be given feedback from as early as week four in the semester, and then every three weeks after that, which means that they have a significant amount of time to reinforce their strengths and work on any weaknesses before the final exam.

This correlates with Gibbs and Simpson (2005), who state that “feedback may need to be quite regular, and on relatively small chunks of course content, to be useful” (p. 17). Students may find it easier to take on board what has been said if it refers to smaller sections of learning and not the sum total of everything they have been taught during the semester. Brown (2004-5) also echoes these sentiments regarding the timing of assessment: “timing of assessment is also a key issue, since the responses given to assessed work need to allow opportunities for amendment and remediation of errors” (p. 83). As Gibbs and Simpson (2005) affirm, the more specific the feedback is, the more useful it is to the student.

Gibbs (2010) discusses various ways in which assessment and feedback can help to support student learning, and illustrates this through the use of case studies at Leeds Metropolitan University. One example he gives is of a unit dealing with animation concepts, which previously used formative assessment at the end of the semester and consequently had quite a high attrition rate. Subsequently changes were made to make the assessments not only more engaging but also have them earlier on in the semester so that students would receive more timely feedback. The result was that “there has been a reduction in non-submissions and an improvement in grades” (p. 33).

Our pilot study, in looking at perceptions of the effectiveness of regular in-class tests as both an assessment and as a learning tool, addresses some of the points noted above by the scholars cited, in particular: formative assessment and the relationship between regular assessment and useful feedback.

## Background

The unit co-ordinators of the first year Italian Studies language programme wanted to do some further study into the regular assessment approach. As part of this study, we were requested by the respective unit co-ordinators to undertake some curriculum development in addition to our regular teaching duties. This consisted of preparing:

1. Additional or “extra” grammar exercises to be undertaken by students. Such exercises were to be designed to supplement the grammar exercises students were required to complete in class, which were pre-assigned from the course textbook; and
2. The preparation (and marking) of in-class tests (of 20 to 30 minutes’ duration) to be given to students to assess their level of language competency.

This was designed to fit in with the communicative approach of the units, but still fulfil the students’ desire for structured drills. To gain an appreciation of how this curriculum development fitted into the units we taught, it is opportune to review their lesson and assessment structure.

## Structure – current language courses

Currently, the structure of the units the subject of our study is as follows:

- *Beginners Italian (First year, no background knowledge, 51 students enrolled in 2011)*  
One grammar lecture, two language tutorials and one conversation class per week
- *Intermediate Italian (First year, matriculated with Italian at year 12 level, 23 students enrolled in 2011)*  
Two language classes, one conversation class and one literature/culture lecture per week.

These contact hours are less than those that have been in place in previous years. At a beginners’ level, it was not uncommon in many Australian Universities for there to be around six contact hours a week. This reduced time impacts on the ability of staff to review all the linguistic concepts in a more complete way in contact time. Students therefore must somehow make up for this lost time in their own study time by completing grammar exercises and the like. However, members of staff interviewed for this project have advised us that, in their view, more often than not, students do not put in the required extra time that is required when learning a language.

More specifically, the unit programs are as follows.

### Italian 1102 (beginners)

In Italian 1102 the focus is on giving the students the foundations of grammar, as they have no prior knowledge of the language. There is a lecture each week which introduces a new point of grammar. In the language tutorials the students work through pre-assigned grammar and comprehension exercises from the course textbook. There are additional (extra) grammar exercises that are given to students (either in-class or via WebCT – an online learning management system) to complete, to assist them to practise further the various grammatical points that are the subject of study. Generally time constraints prevent these exercises from being reviewed in class, so students must complete them of their own volition, for their own private study purposes. If they want them to be corrected then they must approach tutors outside of class time.

### Italian 1104 (intermediate)

In Italian 1104 the focus is on developing fluency and communicative skills. There is no language lecture, but two language tutorials per week, during which students work through pre-assigned grammar and comprehension exercises from the course text book. There are additional (extra) exercises that are given to students via WebCT to complete, to assist them to practice further the

various language competencies that are the subject of study. Generally time constraints prevent these exercises from being reviewed in class, so students must complete them of their own volition, for their own private study purposes. Again, if they want them corrected then they must approach tutors individually outside of class time.

Assessment in these units is therefore aimed at ascertaining if students have successfully mastered fluency in the language. Any exercises completed in class are specifically chosen to enable students to practise these concepts as well as their vocabulary and communicative skills. In order to assess the students' ability in this regard, as well as taking into account the reticence on the part of students to put in the extra study time outside of contact hours, it was decided that the students should be given a short twenty minute test (in the case of beginners students) and a twenty to thirty minute test (in the case of intermediate students) test during a tutorial every three weeks. These tests would assess them on the linguistic competencies that they had covered in class during those previous three weeks.

### **Assessment structures**

The assessment structure for Italian 1102 is as follows:

1. Oral activity – role-play to be completed in pairs on situations covered in conversation class, worth 10% of the final mark ;
  2. One listening comprehension test (15 minutes), worth 5% of the final mark;
  3. Five in-class tests – these are completed every three weeks and are worth 30% of final mark;
  4. Two homework assignments (due in weeks six and nine of semester), worth 10% of the final mark;
  5. Final exam (two hours' duration), worth 30% of the final mark;
  6. Participation mark (for conversation classes) – worth 10% of the final mark;
  7. Participation mark (for language tutorials) – worth 5% of the final mark;
- Total: 100%.

The assessment structure for Italian 1104 is as follows:

1. Oral activity – role-play to be completed in pairs on situations covered in conversation class – worth 5% of the final mark;
  2. Four in-class tests (grammar, reading, listening comprehension and written expression) – these are completed every three weeks and are worth 30% of the final mark;
  3. Final exam – worth 25% of final mark;
  4. Participation mark (for conversation classes) – worth 5% of final mark;
  5. Participation mark (for language tutorials) – worth 5% of the final mark;
  6. 2 tests on Italian culture/ literature – worth 30% of the final mark;
- Total: 100%.

Therefore, it can be seen that a significant weighting (30%) is given to regular in-class tests in both courses. We will now illustrate the methodology of our study to assess this regular assessment approach.

### **Methodology**

This pilot study sought the perceptions of both staff and students in the evaluation of regular in-class tests as a learning and assessment tool. Students in both learning streams were provided with a short questionnaire (containing three questions) to complete during their language tutorial. The advantage of a short questionnaire was that the students were able to complete it in the final five minutes of class time. Students were also asked for their views in relation to the extra grammar exercises they had been given throughout the semester, given perceptions on the part of staff that students are reluctant to put in the extra study time required to learn a language outside of contact hours. The questionnaire took the following form:

Please circle the answer that best describes your opinion

1. The extra grammar exercises I have been given this semester have been:  
 Very helpful      Helpful      Somewhat helpful      Not helpful

2. I find having on-going assessment throughout the semester to be:  
 Very helpful      Helpful      Somewhat helpful      Not helpful      Not sure      Don't care

3. I would rather have one longer assessment at the end of the semester:  
 Yes                  No                  Not sure                  Don't care

If you have any further comments regarding the above statements please write them below.

A total of 53 students completed the questionnaire out of 74 students enrolled in both units. Students were also given the opportunity to write any additional comments they might have had on the questionnaire form. Several students took the opportunity to provide written comments on the form, while others provided more detailed feedback via email. We have included these students' comments in this paper. The comments we received were similar across both learning streams, so we have grouped them together. Where a comment is specific to a particular unit, we have mentioned in which unit the student who commented is enrolled. Finally, by way of definition, it must be specified at this point that references to "on-going" assessment relate to the in-class tests that students must complete, given the significant weighting they have in both courses, as outlined above.

A total of four staff-members in Italian Studies, School of European Languages at UWA, provided written responses via e-mail to the following questions:

1. Whether regular in-class testing was a more effective method of assessing student progress as compared with take-home assignments; and
2. Did they consider if there are any viable assessment alternatives (e.g. online tests)?

The analysis of the results involved the extraction of descriptive statistics tabulated from the questionnaire. The major themes from the staff and student responses were collected from their written submissions, and have been elaborated on further below.

### Perceptions of assessment: Students

The questionnaire results have been grouped by unit. The results are summarised and expressed as percentages in Table 1.

**Table 1: Student responses by unit to questions posed in the short survey**

<b>Q 1 – The extra grammar exercises I have been given this semester have been:</b>					
	Very helpful	Helpful	Somewhat helpful	Not helpful	
Italian 1102	29%	61%	9%	0	
Italian 1104	22%	50%	27%	0	
<b>Q 2 – I find having on-going assessment throughout the semester to be:</b>					
	Very helpful	Helpful	Not helpful	Not sure	Don't care
Italian 1102	51%	45%	0	3%	0
Italian 1104	18%	63%	4%	13%	0
<b>Q 3 – I would rather have one longer assessment at the end of the semester:</b>					
	Yes	No	Not sure	Don't care	
Italian 1102	6%	77%	12%	3%	
Italian 1104	9%	81%	9%	0	

## Outline of results

*With regard to Italian 1102 (beginners):*

Total enrolments in this unit number 51. We received a total of 31 responses. Of those responses:

- In relation to the question regarding extra grammar exercises, 90% advised that they find them to be very helpful or helpful. Only 10% advised that they find them somewhat helpful.
- In relation to the statement about having on-going assessment throughout the semester, the vast majority, at 97%, advised that they find it to be very helpful or helpful. Only 3% responded “not sure”.
- In relation to the statement “I would rather have one longer assessment at the end of the semester”, 77.5% responded that they would not prefer a longer assessment, 6.5% responded “yes”, 13% responded “not sure” and 3% advised that they did not care.

*With regard to Italian 1104 (intermediate):*

Total enrolments in this unit number 23. We received a total of 22 responses. Of those responses:

- In relation to the question regarding extra grammar exercises, 73% advised that they find them helpful or very helpful and 27% advised that they find them somewhat helpful.
- In relation to the statement about having on-going assessment throughout the semester, 69% advised that they find it to be helpful or very helpful. 4.5% replied that they were not helpful, with 13.5% advising that they were not sure.
- In relation to the statement “I would rather have one longer assessment at the end of the semester”, 9% responded “yes”, 82% responded that they would not prefer a longer assessment, 9% responded “not sure”.

## Written responses: Major themes

Several students took the opportunity to provide written comments on the questionnaire. Some wished to provide more detailed responses and did so via email. We found that many student comments were reflected in both course cohorts, and we have therefore grouped them together below. Here are some direct quotes from those student responses, grouped under headings identified as a summation of the responses listed in the previous paragraph:

*Useful in preparing for exams*

1. “Take home assignments are not an effective means of assessment or learning as students are easily able to complete them by overuse of internet resources or by seeking the assistance of relatives and friends that are native speakers. This lack of accountability undermines the integrity of the assessment process”.
2. “Regular in-class assessment also prepares students better for exam conditions by focussing on preparation and being able to work to a time limit. Personally, I stress over the tests, however, I see value in the practice for exams”.
3. “Even though the thought of a test/exam makes me quiver at the knees and feel quite ill, I find the experience character building and I try to find ways to prepare better each time for the test so that when I sit my exam I have better strategies to cope with what I consider a stressful situation”.
4. “While I do agree that tests do put a lot of pressure on you and do cause quite a bit of anxiety, I think they are advantageous as they provide smaller goals to focus on, rather than simply the end of semester exam”.

*Useful as revision tool/promotion of consistent study*

5. “Regular in-class tests are effective as a learning tool. Not only do they encourage consistent study throughout the semester, they help you in recognising areas of weakness that are not fully understood. This aids in the planning the direction of study of revision and current concepts” (that are the subject of in-class material at the relevant time).

6. "Grammar is an important part in learning any language. I believe that we need a good foundation in order to build a solid understanding of the language. I use my tests for revision and refer to them when working on compositions etc."

#### *Utility of revision exercises*

7. "I think going through the test revision exercises in class really help and aid confidence. There is no point in doing the revision exercises if there is no opportunity to go through the answers and hear how other people have answered. By doing this, it maximises the opportunity of the test as a learning experience".

#### *Overall perspective*

8. "In a language course it is essential to have on-going assessment".
9. "On-going assessment is helpful, as it consolidates the grammatical points studied in the preceding weeks. Tests should be more, rather than less, frequent".
10. "I think that the class tests are a successful part of the current Italian beginners' course".

## **Perceptions of assessment: Staff**

### **Major themes**

The staff members we have canvassed in relation to the value of regular in-class tests as an assessment and learning tool offered written comments to the questions listed above (under the heading "Methodology"). The members of staff questioned believed that regular in-class assessment, either weekly or fortnightly, is extremely important to students' learning. This assessment helps students continually learn and revise their knowledge of the language. They are an important tool to reinforce what has already been learnt. In particular, given increasing time constraints from the point of both staff (less contact hours than in the past) and students (technological advances plus increasing work commitments mean less time is devoted to study) mean that increasing importance must be placed on in-class assessment. One member of staff advised students had told him that in-class testing was a fairer method of assessment compared to, for example, take home assignments. In view of the above, there was really no alternative to regular in-class testing. For the purposes of homogeneity with student responses, the staff questioned for this pilot study were those that teach at both beginners' and intermediate level. Here are some direct quotes from the written responses received from staff, grouped under headings summarising the responses taken from this paragraph.

#### *Time constraints*

1. "The student of today is different from the student of the past. He or she appears to have a different perspective with regard to learning that students of as little as 10 to 15 years ago. The availability of "Lectopia" (the UWA online recorded lecture system) has meant that students will no longer structure their lives around university, but structure university commitments around their lives. Most students work more hours than their predecessors did, and thus are content to give minimum effort in the hope that it will provide sufficient (not outstanding) results".
2. "Students are assigned exercises to complete from the textbook as part of the language programme. There is no way in which teachers can check if all students are completing these exercises, nor is it the role of the tutor to force students to complete the exercises. Time constraints (less time is being allocated for language classes in timetabling) mean that often there is a struggle to "keep up with the programme" and complete the course".
3. "Unless a task is assessable, students (in keeping with the philosophy mentioned at point one above) will not complete it. There has to be a direct correlation between the task and the final mark".

#### *Importance to student learning*

4. "Regular assessment is a very useful diagnostic for staff. The regular in-class assessments more often than not highlight areas that students need to work on and indicate to tutors areas of concern to revise and focus on. To give an example, students may have rote learned many words and grammatical rules but lack the ability to apply this knowledge effectively".



5. "When assigning tests, I include exercises of the same type that have been completed and reviewed in class as part of the learning programme, which greatly assists in identifying if various "threshold" concepts have been reached, and lend themselves to more effective feedback for students. At times, if students were found to have not understood a particular point of grammar assessed in a given test, this could be revised in class and then re-presented in a subsequent test to ascertain if the concept had been successfully understood".
6. "It is hoped that regular in-class assessment will give the student the incentive to complete the exercises for classwork during the language tutorials, in the knowledge that they may be revisited in an upcoming test".

#### *Fairness*

7. "Students have told me that the take home assignments lend themselves to being completed in a dishonest way by students (copying from internet resources, getting the assignment to be undertaken by relatives, etc.) and this was shown up in the huge discrepancy between the marks students received for assignments and the final exam".

#### *Alternatives?*

8. "I really don't see any alternative to regular in-class tests as an assessment tool. There is less chance of cheating by students. In my time as course coordinator I have eliminated take home assignments in favour of giving students four tests over the semester. Two of these I give a higher weighting and are assigned at mid-semester and at the end, with the remaining two being short tests, with a smaller weighting, which deal with the exercises completed in class. These tests serve as a "check" on student progress and hopefully are an incentive for students to complete the grammar exercises for class".

## **Discussion**

It is clear that student perceptions are favourable to on-going assessment in the form of short, in-class tests. It appears that they believe them to be a fair and accurate method of assessment, as well as a valuable learning tool, for many reasons. They are seen as extremely useful in helping students prepare for exam conditions. The tests are used for revision purposes by students, or as a tool when writing compositions. Students believe they encourage consistent study throughout semester and assist the student in recognising areas of weakness that are not fully understood. This aids in the planning the direction of study of revision and concepts that are the subject of in-class material at the relevant time. The provision of revision exercises for personal revision by students outside of class is not as beneficial as it is hoped. Some students expressed the view that there is no point in being given revision exercises if there is no opportunity to review them in class and hear how other students have answered. Overall, students believe that on-going assessment is helpful to them.

The responses above also appear to confirm the results of a report of a survey undertaken of staff teaching languages at beginners' level at UWA, namely, that regular in-class assessment is extremely important to students' learning. The student perspective on regular in-class assessment is also very favourable to regular in-class testing. Regular in-class tests are not only seen to be an invaluable assessment tool, but an invaluable learning tool as well. This seems to concord with Yorke (2003, cfr above) and Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), who conclude that:

In order to produce feedback that is relevant and informative and meets students' needs, teachers themselves need good data about how students are progressing. They also need to be involved in reviewing and reflecting on this data, and in taking action to help support the development of self-regulation of their students (p. 214).

Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick go on to add:

Frequent assessment tasks, especially diagnostic tests, can help teachers generate cumulative information about student's levels of understanding and skill, so that they can adapt their teaching accordingly (p. 214).

From the students' perspective, the method of shorter, on-going assessment was found to have widespread approval. They believe that, not only is on-going assessment a beneficial way for them to gauge how well they are doing in the unit, but it also encourages and motivates them to study regularly, and go beyond simply what is done during class time. This correlates with the findings of Gibbs and Simpson (2005), referred to above. The questionnaires administered to the students clearly support these observations. Overall, 90% of the students surveyed stated that they found on-going assessment helpful or very helpful; and 79% stated that they would not prefer to have one longer assessment at the end of semester. This overwhelming preference that students have towards on-going assessment would indicate that students also believe that this approach is more engaging as a learning tool. This preference appears to be further underlined by the statistical difference between cohorts in the response to question 2. In Italian 1102, the beginners' unit, a total of 96% believed on-going assessment was either very helpful or helpful, versus 81% in Italian 1104. Such statistics would seem to highlight that the need for regular feedback is even greater for students enrolled in beginners units.

The views of staff canvassed as part of this study seem to accord with the student view. The staff we questioned noted a strong preference for regular in-class testing as a valuable learning tool, which accords with Yorke's (2003) view on the subject. Often, the tests will include exercises of the same type that have been completed and reviewed in class as part of the learning programme, which greatly assists in identifying if various "threshold" concepts have been reached, and lend themselves to more effective feedback for students. For example, if students were found to have not understood a particular point of grammar assessed in a given test, this could be revised in class and then re-presented in a subsequent test to ascertain if the concept had been successfully understood. It is hoped that regular in-class assessment will give the student the incentive to complete the exercises for classwork during the language tutorials, in the knowledge that they may be revisited in an upcoming test. Such tests are obviously not able to be manipulated as easily as take-home assignments; students must rely completely on their own knowledge.

For teachers, this means that they can see relatively quickly if the majority of students are keeping up and have achieved the required level of language competency, rather than waiting until the end of semester and potentially discovering that the students are not coping. As there is a large amount of course content, breaking it down makes it more manageable and somewhat easier to assess if the students have developed the necessary language skills in order to pass each milestone. This confirms Brown (2004-5) and Gibbs and Simpson's (2005) viewpoints that assessment and subsequent feedback needs to be regular to be effective. The comments collected from teachers in Italian Studies corroborate this view. As stated in the analysis section, the teachers felt that regular in-class assessment is very useful as a diagnostic tool to see if the students are actually keeping up with the language program, and believed that it gave the students an incentive to complete their tutorial exercises. Interestingly, while the questionnaire showed that overall 83% of the students find extra grammar exercises to be helpful or very helpful, the written responses from several students indicated that they did not see any point doing extra exercises if they were not able to then go over them in class. As mentioned in quote 3 under "Staff perspectives", unless a task is assessable students will not complete it. This ignores the reality that language acquisition requires regular practice, and completing extra exercises is a way for students to do that. This dovetails quite neatly with the teachers' comments about time constraints, which mean that it is physically impossible for them to check that the students are completing all of the assigned activities within class time. With less time being allocated to language courses in recent years, the suggestion here may be that languages actually need a bigger time commitment from students because of the large amount of content that is expected to be covered by staff.

## Conclusion

The challenge of devising assessment that is inclusive and engages students (Cooper 2006) is imperative. The bulk of recent research conducted suggests that an assessment for learning approach, which encompasses regular, low-stakes assessment, is better suited to achieving this goal. In the discipline of Italian Studies at the University of Western Australia, attempts have been made to put this theory into the practice of language teaching by giving students regular in-class tests which

comprise a significant component of a student's final mark. These tests are focussed on various language competencies including specific grammatical concepts, comprehension skills, oral skills, and competence in written expression, of 20 minutes' duration (for beginners) and 20 to 30 minutes duration (for intermediate students). In order to verify whether the move to more regular assessment enhanced student learning and was more engaging from their point of view, we sought the perceptions of staff and students with regard to the evaluation of regular in-class tests as a learning and assessment tool. Students in both learning streams were provided with a short questionnaire to complete during their language tutorial, with room for individual comment. Several students took the opportunity to provide written comments on the form, while others provided more detailed feedback via email.

Given the overwhelming preference of both students and staff for regular in-class assessment that we have found in this pilot study, allied with the reality that the challenges of devising assessment that is inclusive and engages students is not merely restricted to teaching one language (i.e. Italian), or, for that matter, language teaching generally, we therefore believe the results of this project can have application across many learning disciplines. In devising assessment structures, student perspectives must be borne in mind. An assessment structure may be devised because it is believed to have greater benefit for students; however, students should be included in this process to ascertain if THEY believe a particular assessment structure enhances their learning. In addition to the standard student evaluation forms, we suggest a short questionnaire of the type devised for this study could be given to students to gauge their response regarding assessment methods.

In this case study we investigated the views of staff and students, with a view to encouraging best practice. It is apparent that both staff and students in Italian Studies value regular in-class assessment with feedback, which further validates the current views of the scholars in the field, which we have discussed in this paper. We hope that by highlighting these issues we can encourage the application of this practice on a wider scale. This study was conducted via the use of short questionnaires, although there was an opportunity given to both students and teachers to write comments and give their personal views on the subject. This is a baseline study which could easily be further extended by:

1. adopting a more qualitative approach by the use of interviews. Interviewing a number of respondents would elicit more detailed information about how students and teachers feel about the nature of regular assessment, the advantages and disadvantages of having it, and the value of the feedback given and received. Interviews could also explore further the greater need for regular feedback craved by students undertaking beginners units – something which the questionnaire results appear to bear out; and
2. comparing the final marks for each unit with those from previous years where regular in-class assessment was not used in order to see if there has been any major impact on the students' progress.

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**Please cite as:** Sturniolo-Baker, R. & Loiacono, R. (2012). Perceptions of learning and assessment in beginners and intermediate level Italian Studies. In *Creating an inclusive learning environment: Engagement, equity, and retention. Proceedings of the 21st Annual Teaching Learning Forum*, 2-3 February 2012. Perth: Murdoch University. <http://otl.curtin.edu.au/tlf/tlf2012/refereed/sturniolo-baker.pdf>