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# FROM COVID-19 TO ASSESSMENT IN ONLINE LANGUAGE COURSES – A FEW CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

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In the middle of March 2020, all teaching was switched from contact teaching to the online learning mode practically overnight. Language teachers had already earlier experiences of asynchronous online learning and/or a hybrid learning model of teaching and learning. Moodle as an online learning platform, for example, had been providing a separate online course area or it had been alternatively a part of contact teaching where content had been available for students to access materials as well as assignments to complete and/or submit by some specific deadlines.

Language teachers did not only make changes in the teaching and studying arrangements but were forced to rethink exams and other customary assessment methods and forms used in contact teaching. Many questions swarmed around in minds: What now? What can I do? What am I allowed to do? What do I need to do? What do I need to know? What do I need to change? What could replace proctored pen-and-paper exams? What about non-proctored online exams? Moodle exams? What about the risk of cheating? Something else instead of exams? Is it possible? Is it enough? What is enough? Presentations online? What about feedback? What about big groups? What about the students; how prepared are they? What about the workload of teachers' and students? How do you deal with quiet students? What about those with learning difficulties...?

## Answers to some of the questions regarding assessment methods in online language learning

The assessment of students' written, and oral language skills was transferred to the online environment. Teachers had to adapt the forms of assessment to new prevailing circumstances. Instead of pen-and-paper exams teachers planned and constructed online exams.

Taking written exams online, however, increases the chance of cheating in comparison with proctored paper exams. Participants can cheat by searching for answers in other tabs, using dictionaries or by sending screenshots or photos of the exam to other participants. Even though the total prevention of cheating is impossible, teachers can try to prevent cheating, for example, by randomizing the questions. Each participant gets a different selection of questions. This requires teachers to add a lot of questions to their online exams. Language teachers, however, could collaborate on planning and collecting a joint question bank for teachers to copy and/or modify the questions.

Another solution is to change traditional exams to assignments or exams, which require application and reflection instead of mechanical tasks. All in all, dictionaries and translations engines could be used as part of the learning process in general. Students could be given assignments and ask them specifically to make use of dictionaries and translation engines in their working on the assignment and the final product. (Aronen 2021.)

The learning environment changed. The nature of working during lessons also changed. The earlier ways of assessment during lessons had to be adapted or altered. In contact teaching the assessment of learning and teaching processes is natural in a classroom because all verbal and non-verbal interaction increases a teacher's knowledge of the ways how to gear and target her teaching (Atjonen 2005, 146). In a classroom, the teacher can, for example, observe

students' communication more comprehensively. Whereas, in an online environment it is challenging to see and recognize non-verbal communication (e.g., micro-expressions, gestures, body language), because you can see only photos, faces or just names on your screen or students work in separate breakout rooms.

The online learning environment sets the parameters for synchronous online teaching. In order to observe students' working and learning online, the teacher has to move actively from one breakout room to another close to the students and notice as well as listen carefully there and then to what they are telling her– not only vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation but also what it is they are saying.

The online environment affects the modes of feedback. In a classroom, a teacher can observe students' simultaneous working from a distance and not only respond to a single student's verbal and/or non-verbal cues for needing assistance or guidance but also give him feedback immediately. In online learning, this kind of spontaneous and coincidental possibility for encounter is in principle limited if not missing in total (Saarinen 2021, 151). A student, on the other hand, may experience that there is less interaction between a teacher and students. This might affect in turn a student's possibility to provide spontaneous feedback on teaching and learning to a teacher.

Students could be offered a variety of opportunities to give and receive feedback in online learning. A teacher could, for example, allow students to join the Zoom session in good time before the teaching itself starts. She could also stay in the virtual classroom after finishing her teaching session. Another possibility is to establish regular virtual office hours on Zoom, which students could join unannounced through a Zoom waiting room and ask

questions, receive feedback on their learning process as well as emotional support. In general, students should be given time to assess their progress as well as provide feedback to their fellow students during teaching also in the online learning environment (cf. Kukkonen & Marttila 2017, 80). These occasions also give a teacher time to move from one breakout room to another and stay there with the students.

### **Effects on teachers as assessors**

Switching from classroom to the (new) online learning challenges teachers' customary and familiar language assessment methods and tools. The earlier accustomed usage of the traditional tool, for example, a proctored paper exam, has to be taken under scrutiny. The teacher must assess and reflect on the reasoning – e.g., tradition and its suitability for testing and assessing a large group of students – behind the usage of pen-and-paper exams (Lappalainen 2017, 202).

A teacher's views, opinions and beliefs are weighed in the new situation as well, thus forcing her to modify and change these. She needs to adopt and study some new tools and procedures that do not match with her earlier knowledge and experience of assessment and its soundness and effectiveness (cf. Murtonen 2017, 82). This matching process can cause contradictions. Along with other changes in teaching due to the coronavirus outbreak the need for change in personal, habitual preferences regarding assessment can affect a teacher's self-efficacy i.e., her belief in her ability to effectively deal with the challenges related to assessment and other activities (Barni, Danioni & Benevene 2019).

Changes and challenges caused by the new context and choices can conflict with personal values. These, on the other hand, are the ones that affect teachers' behaviour, goals of working and choices they make regarding tasks and activities to deliver the

contents and to help students to reach their learning goals. Personal values also influence their views of assessment and their choices of assessment methods and tools.

The conflict can, in turn, have emotional repercussions: feelings of frustration, anxiety, ineffectiveness, or anger. In other words, teachers can suffer initial moral distress (Jameton 1993, 544; Fry et al 2002, 374; cf. Riiali 2021, B6–B7 on ethics-related stress).

On the other hand, switching from classroom teaching to (new) online learning provides teachers with a chance to examine, modify and alter their assessment methods and tools regarding both assessment of written and oral skills. Reflecting on and adopting new ways to assess, enhance and increase teachers' learning and teaching thus enabling the pedagogical development. The (new) online teaching enables the change in or of one's viewpoint. The large group sizes along with a teacher's possible hesitations towards administering online written exams may act as a trigger to include more peer assessment and/or self-assessment as part of students' assessment. In this way assessment in addition to its reporting function supports students' learning. Increasing peer-assessment and self-assessment as part of working supports the development of reflexive skills (Kohonen 2005, 40). At the same time, students practise and train skills that are needed in work life.

### **In conclusion**

COVID-19 has been a catalyst for and an accelerator of change. It has required teachers quick thinking and perseverance. It has caused many challenges to teachers as well as has given them a chance to look at the assessment from another perspective. It might have forced a teacher to choose but it has also given an impetus for trying out something different and learn at the same time in the process.

What about after Covid-19? Teachers have learnt new online tools and teaching online feels more or less natural to teachers. The value of seeing and meeting with students and teachers face-to-face has increased, altered, or reached a new level (cf. Korpela in this book). Synchronous and asynchronous online teaching are to remain. These will be blended with face-to-face teaching and learning. This will apply to assessment as well. Language teachers can choose where and how to assess and what environments serve as arenas for assessment. In teaching and learning languages for occupational purposes, the needs and goals of different fields can be taken into consideration more comprehensively also in the assessment. With nursing and social services students, for example, classroom time could be utilized in the face-to-face interviews and discussions between a client and a professional and assessing them in the classroom. Whereas in business studies, students can practice international online meetings, for example, and they and their language usage can be assessed online accordingly.

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