

Online Assessment Makes a Difference

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1. Introduction

Teaching and learning a foreign language takes time and effort. In Croatia, the teaching of English has become a major educational priority since it has become the global language of business, law, science and technology. International developments, particularly the Bologna process have brought new challenges for higher education development in our country. Throughout the years, the English language curriculum has been changing, and trying to cope with the specific needs of learners. Due consideration is given to learners' background and their study and target needs.

Most of the students belong to the Net Generation with sophisticated knowledge and skills in information technology. Their learning styles are changing, and as a result teachers need to adapt to modern ways of teaching. ICTs offer significant opportunities for new approaches in teaching and assessing language. The English language programs at the Polytechnic in Pozega are designed to meet the different language needs of students.

A well-planned course should measure the extent to which students have fulfilled its objectives. The English language online assessment, designed for first-year students of Administrative Study at the Polytechnic in Pozega has been developed to suit the specific curriculum needs of students. The purpose of this paper is to highlight online assessment at the Polytechnic in Pozega, which we believe will help inform and guide reluctant language teachers in the transition from pen and paper to online assessment.

2. Reasons for testing students

The continuous checking of students' progress is very important in the process of learning the English language. There are various forms of continuous assessment which give us insight into how well our students are doing. Such continuous recording may involve keeping a record of who speaks in lessons and how often they do it, how students interact in pair or group work, or how they perform in their homework tasks.

Computer based assessment plays a very important role in measuring the students' progress as it happens. However, choosing the most appropriate alternatives for a particular language context can be daunting. For some students checking the progress at various stages during a semester may seem as a 'sudden death' event [1].

Language assessment is much more than giving a language test. We use assessment tests to diagnose areas of a learner's need or sources of learning difficulties, to check the effectiveness of materials and activities, encourage better student involvement in the process of learning, and provide students with feedback about their progress [2] [3]. Equally important, assessment evaluates the teacher's performance, determines the extent to which the objectives are being achieved and reflects on the effectiveness of syllabus design and pedagogy.

3. Planning stage

When selecting an online assessment test we need to think about practicality, the feasibility of giving a particular test; reliability, the consistency of test results; validity, the fit between the test and the who, what, why and how of testing; and finally impact, the possible positive or negative outcome of using a particular test [4] [5].

In order to get a clear idea we should think about the following:

- our students' background
- how they acquired language knowledge and skills
- the characteristics of our students and our program
- our purposes for assessment
- how many parts the assessment will consist of which assessment tools to use
- administering and scoring the assessment
- how we will interpret and use the assessment scores
- what effects we expect the assessment to have on students and on ourselves
- the resources we have whether we can prepare everything alone
- whether adequate technical support during the development and use of online assessment can be ensured
- has the server containing the questions been isolated from the Internet in order to maintain security?
- is the server reliable?

4. Development stage

Continuous English language online assessment at the Polytechnic in Pozega measures students' progress and achievement as it is happening throughout the learning period and not just at the end of the semester. It is tailored to the content of the course and covers the language, grammar, vocabulary, phonology and functions of the English language. We aim to ensure validity which, as Anastasi defines it, is essentially the systematic examination of the test content to determine whether it covers a representative sample of the behavioural domain to be measured [6].

When developing our own online assessment tests we should be aware that it is a difficult and time consuming process. Therefore the following guidelines should help in its construction:

1. Consult the Computer Science staff to get the appropriate information about computer lab and available software solutions. The Polytechnic in Pozega is equipped with a software solution called MOODLE (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment). It consists of several modules, one of which is a Test module which we use for online assessment. In order to authorize and login students use the identification with the AAI @ EduHr (authentication and authorization infrastructure of the scientific and higher education system in the Republic of Croatia) as the AAI is unique for each member of the scientific community.

2. Compile written source materials that fit the contents of the curriculum. As Carroll and Hall have stated, these inputs should be authentic, coherent, comprehensible, at a suitable level of difficulty, and of interest to learners [7]. Appropriate materials can be obtained from various sources such as the Internet, newspapers, advertisements, leaflets, etc.

3. Select the test format depending on which of the skills in acquiring the English language you plan to cover in your assessment. The test format can be multiple-choice, true/false, gap filling, transformation, etc.

The following are a few examples of different test formats used in the 1st online assessment test for students of Administrative Study:

Choose the correct answer.

A barrister or solicitor who specializes in felonies and misdemeanours is a _____ lawyer.

a crime b felony c criminal d habitual e trial

Table 1: Test1, Section 1

<p>Match the two parts of the definitions.</p> <p>1 Common law and statute law used by the courts in making decisions is</p> <p>2 If you speak on behalf of clients in court, you</p> <p>3 Non-professional clients are known as</p> <p>4 Barristers working solely for a company are called</p> <p>5 The governing authorities of barristers are</p> <p>6 When a solicitor gives a barrister the details of a case, the barrister is</p> <p>1 ... 2 3 4 5 6</p>	<p>a provide representation.</p> <p>b civil law.</p> <p>c in-house counsel.</p> <p>d lay clients.</p> <p>e the Bar Council and the Inns of Court.</p> <p>f instructed.</p> <p>g substantive law.</p> <p>h public law.</p>
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Table 2: Test1, Section 2

Rearrange the underlined letters to make words in the extract below.

Member (1) eattss shall take all appropriate (2) russeame whether general or particular, to ensure fulfilment of the (3) tooglisnabi arising out of this Treaty or resulting from an (4) tcaino taken by the institutions of the (5) timmouncy. They shall facilitate achievement of the Community's tasks.

from Article 5, the EC Treaty

Table 3: Test 1, Section 2

Rewrite the sentence so that it means the same. Use the word in bold.

Even further confusion was caused by the witness's latest statement.

led

Table 4: Test 1, Section 3

Rearrange the words to make coherent sentence inside the first and last words given.

arrested taxed if will get you car be almost and certainly don't your

You _____ insured.

Table 5: Test 1, Section 3

Choose the correct answers.

The club is for members only. You _____ you're a member.

a can't go in if **b** can go in only if **c** can't go in unless

d can go in **e** can go in unless

Table 6: Test 1, Section 3

4. Instructions must be clear and unambiguous, with brief well-chosen wording. Weir recommends instructions to be candidate-friendly, comprehensive, explicit, brief, simple and accessible [8].
5. The assessment should be in harmony with the layout of the textbook. It will look more attractive by adding pictures and using different typefaces which can reduce anxiety [9].
6. The scoring and marking systems should be thoughtfully considered [10]. The marking system should be checked by your colleagues. Students must be informed of the marking criteria beforehand.
7. Analyse the assessment results statistically. The reliability coefficient-Kuder-Richardson- and the difficulty and discrimination coefficient tell us how reliable the test is and if the items are at the right level of difficulty and how well they discriminate [11].
8. Present the assessment results to the students making it clear that you plan to review and revise the teaching of content or skills in which the test has shown students to be weak.
9. Discuss the assessment results with students to get the positive as well as negative feedback and profit from those comments.
10. Take into account the pedagogical effects that the assessment may have on teaching.

5. Conclusion

Assessment is of essential importance in the development of students' language competence. The increasing use of information and communication technologies enables teachers to diversify assessment tasks and broaden the range of skills assessed by accepting the advantages of new technologies and move from pen and paper to online and computer based assessment.

Our experience indicates that the design of an online assessment tailored to the content of a particular course is complex and time-consuming. Throughout the process, a large number of technical and educational decisions have to be made. The useful guiding principles when starting to develop online assessment are to start with clear educational, teaching and learning objectives and aim for quality rather than quantity.

The brief nature of this paper does not allow for an in depth description of the planning and development process of online assessment which has been developed to suit the specific curriculum needs of the English language students at the Polytechnic in Pozega. The intention is to provide a helpful model for integrating teaching and online assessment and to encourage reluctant teachers to develop and implement their own online assessment scheme including some of the suggestions given.

The reward for this challenging and time-consuming task will be an assessment program that will positively affect both students and teachers.

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