

11 Using assessment to showcase employability in IWLP

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Abstract

Assessment is a critical part of teaching and learning so it is important that students are encouraged to engage positively with it. The Institution-Wide Language Programme (IWLP) at the University of Leeds redesigned its model of assessment for modules at upper-intermediate and advanced levels, broadly equivalent to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) B2-C1, to enable students to develop and evidence their academic skills – such as research skills, digital skills and critical thinking – and to showcase employability behaviours in addition to their language skills and intercultural awareness. This paper outlines the drivers for reviewing the assessment model, explains the design of the new speaking assessment and how this enhances their learning and employability, and provides a brief evaluation of the pilot.

Keywords: assessment, employability, evidence, academic skills, digital skills.

1. Context

This paper explains the rationale for revisiting the IWLP model of assessment, explains the outcomes and provides a brief evaluation. In reviewing the assessment of the credit-bearing modules at CEFR B2-C1, there were four key drivers:

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- to respond to the University’s principle of ‘less assessment done better’;
- to successfully engage students with the assessment;
- to integrate the development of academic skills;
- to provide evidence of these skills to prospective employers.

In responding to the principle of ‘less assessment done better’, the model of assessment was reduced from five components to three (see [Table 1](#)). Students are often strategic when it comes to assessment – they take into account the weighting of each assessment, to the point of deciding whether or not to sit individual components. This seems to confirm [Boud and Falchikov’s \(2007\)](#) observation that

“[a]ssessment, rather than teaching, has a major influence on students’ learning. It directs attention to what is important. It acts as an incentive for study. And it has a powerful effect on what students do and how they do it” (p. 4).

Streamlining the model of assessment ([Table 1](#)) resulted in each of the three components having a weighting of at least 30%. It was hoped that this would encourage students to engage positively with each component given the significance of the weighting.

The IWLP modules are offered as ‘discovery’ modules as part of *broadening*, a key part of the Leeds Curriculum, and they fall within the ‘Language and Intercultural Understanding’ and ‘Personal and Professional Development’ *discovery themes*. Students can broaden their skills and intellectual horizons by choosing modules from different disciplines as part of their degree. We reviewed the skills developed on the modules in this context and identified opportunities to develop some of the University’s graduate attributes². The

2. <https://leedsforlife.leeds.ac.uk/skills.aspx>

new assessment (1) integrates the development of these skills to complement the learning outcomes, which focus on linguistic development and cultural awareness, and (2) seeks to encourage ‘productive learning activity’ (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004-05) by highlighting the relevance of students being able to use the language. We also wanted students to have evidence of their skills which they could show to an employer, and this presented an opportunity for students to develop their digital skills. These were the key criteria in designing the speaking task.

Table 1. Models of assessment

Previous model		
Portfolio – individual	Semester 1	25%
Project – individual	Semester 2	45%
Reading task 10%		
Presentation 15%		
Writing task 20%		
Speaking exam – individual	Exam period	30%

New model		
Speaking task – group	Semester 1	35%
Writing task – individual	Semester 2	35%
Speaking exam – individual	Exam period	30%

2. Designing the speaking task

The term ‘speaking task’ is used to indicate that students are not expected to give a standard presentation. The task requires them to:

- work in groups;
- research a topic linked to their discipline and/or an aspect of cultural interest linked to the target language;
- demonstrate critical thinking in their analysis;

- present their findings using their choice of media – preferably digital media although this was not a requirement. This encourages them to become familiar with the digital tools available and offers the added benefit of pre-recording the presentation instead of presenting live in the lesson.

Students have the freedom to be creative within the task guidelines. There is flexibility with the choice of topic and the media they use to present their work. The task requires interactivity and this is reflected in the marking criteria: a group mark is given for ‘task completion & delivery’ and ‘content & organisation’ and an individual mark for ‘use of language’ and ‘pronunciation & intonation’ (Table 2).

Table 2. Speaking task marking criteria

Group mark	Individual mark
Task completion & delivery	Use of language
Content & organisation	Pronunciation, intonation & fluency

In addition to their linguistic ability, the task outcome enables students to demonstrate a range of skills such as research skills, critical thinking, teamwork, digital skills, and intercultural awareness, all of which employers are keen to see. Using digital media allows them to showcase these skills by uploading a link to their digital profile. Hitherto assessments have been recorded in class but have not been made available to the students. The new task gives students ownership and adds an extra dimension to the assessment.

When designing the speaking task, it was important to consider the influence of assessment on student learning and in particular the effect of ‘backwash’:

“Students learn what they think they will be tested on. This is *backwash*, a term coined by Lewis Elton (1987, p. 92), to refer to the effects assessment has on student learning. Assessment determines what and how students learn more than the curriculum does” (Biggs & Tang, 2011, p. 197).

With this in mind, there was an opportunity to develop a student-led assessment which would give students greater freedom and encourage active learning. This represented a deliberate move from tutor-led to student-led assessment. It would give students greater responsibility for their learning and, it was hoped, foster a high level of engagement with the teaching and learning from the start of the module given the nature of the assessment task, the weighting of 35% and its timing to the end of Semester 1. This reflects a conscious effort to empower students by handing over responsibility for their response to the assessment with simply the task outline and marking criteria for guidance. Students are however required to submit a draft proposal – this provides an opportunity for discussion with their tutor and acts as a check regarding, for example, the suitability of the topic.

It marks a significant shift in focus by looking beyond the language skills developed, and helps students see the academic skills which are developed as part of their language module and how this contributes to the academic and professional skills they acquire as undergraduates. For the first time, the task provides an opportunity for students to evidence their skills.

Selecting Assessment Methods³ is a particularly useful tool when designing the parameters of a task and the optimum balance. Using this as a guide, the speaking task incorporates the following dimensions:

- **Timing and status:** early in course and summative (end of Semester 1).
- **Topic flexibility:** negotiable, choice of topic and students orient to their own world.
- **Interpersonal:** dialogic and for a public audience.
- **Task engagement:** group and collaborative.

3. <https://teaching.unsw.edu.au/selecting-assessment-methods>

- **Cost/benefit:** high student workload and significant weighting; low staff workload.

In terms of the linguistic focus, students are aware of the importance of being able to use the language and the opportunities which this presents. Student testimonials reflect their awareness that having good language skills gives them a competitive edge over a candidate with a similar degree and skills set.

3. Enhancing learning and employability: a brief evaluation

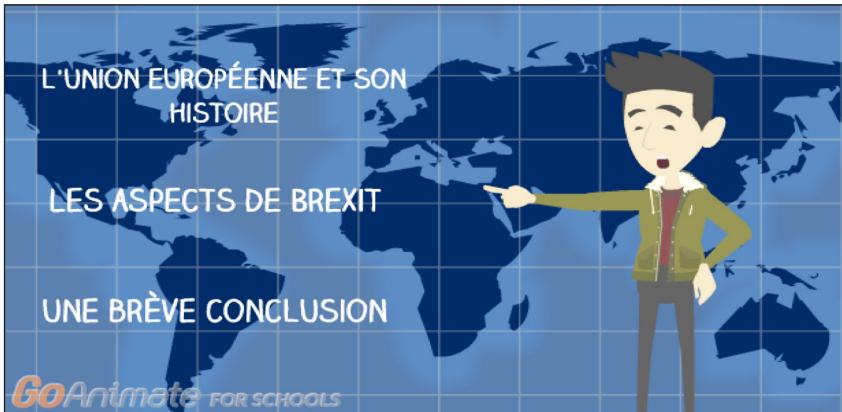
Although the sample of student feedback obtained via a survey was very small, and the limitations of this are recognised, when repeated, a more representative sample will be obtained. Feedback showed that students appreciated the freedom to choose the topic and the opportunity to be creative. They commented that their spoken language and their confidence in using the language had improved. Some also identified progress in their ability to work effectively with others. Only a minority of students used digital media so this requires further investigation to understand how it can be better promoted and supported. Those who did use a digital format commented on their confidence to use digital media. One student wrote: “It pushed me out of my comfort zone so I felt a sense of achievement once it was finished”. Applying to their own discipline the skills they have developed on their IWLP module – for example, the student choosing GoAnimate to give a presentation for his Law programme – shows transferability of skills in action. These are skills for learning and for life.

Students who use digital media (see [Figure 1](#)) have evidence – linguistic, academic and digital – which they can share by adding a hyperlink to their digital profile. This demonstrates the added value which language modules provide to an undergraduate degree, further enhancing students’ employability.

In a review meeting attended by the eight tutors who trialled the assessment, feedback was overwhelmingly positive. While some had initially had reservations

about handing over responsibility for the task and the potential negative impact on a student's individual/group mark in the case of poor engagement, they were generally very impressed with the results. For example, using GoAnimate, one group produced a fully scripted, animated debate about racial discrimination in the workplace; another one presented a critical review of the Cannes Film Festival; another presented an analysis of the news using the newsdesk format; others inserted a pre-recorded element within their live presentation.

Figure 1. Screenshot of Kane and Philip's presentation using digital media



Tutors observed that students were more engaged in watching their peers' presentations. This was partly because they were actively listening and concentrating on the quiz designed as part of the task rather than thinking about giving their own presentation, as it had been pre-recorded. The question and answer element is useful in assessing the students' knowledge of the topic and their ability to use the language spontaneously (Klapper, 2006). The results show that presenting a pre-recorded task reduces the nerves normally associated with giving a live presentation, allowing students to perform to the best of their ability. On a practical note, a student who was absent was awarded a mark based on the pre-recorded evidence presented in class – the assessment did not need to be rescheduled and his absence did not have a negative impact on his group.

4. Conclusion

Re-designing the model of assessment has brought a shift in focus with positive gains for students and staff. The outcomes demonstrate that IWLP modules offer much more than simply language skills – they make a valuable contribution to the knowledge, experience, academic skills, and graduate behaviours which employers expect undergraduates to demonstrate (CBI, 2015) – and using digital media has provided students with evidence.

The next steps involve deciding whether to make the use of digital media a requirement and assess the group interaction, both of which represent new learning outcomes, obtaining employer feedback, and investigating the impact that evidence of their skills has had on the students' employability.

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