7 How Covid-19 has changed language assessments in higher education: a practitioners' view

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Abstract

This chapter examines the responses of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to assessment-related challenges introduced by the Covid-19 pandemic. The sudden move to online teaching and assessments required institutions to re-think their approaches to current practices and provide alternative solutions almost overnight. Our survey aimed to gather the perceptions of language teaching practitioners on how the languages sector dealt with the move to digital assessments, with particular emphasis on the delivery of online assessments, the impact on different language skills, as well as academic integrity. Results show that, whilst different institutions adopted varying practices, they seem to share similar concerns in addressing the fast-changing environment and ensure that academic integrity remains at the forefront in the move to the digital world.

Keywords: digital teaching and learning, computer-assisted language learning, blended learning, plagiarism, university language teaching, language skills.

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1.   Introduction

Since March 2020, HEIs have had to take a number of drastic measures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent move to online teaching and assessments (Marinoni, van't Land, & Jensen, 2020; Plutino & Polisca, 2021). So, in the 'post-Covid world', what will language assessment practices look like? Has the pandemic set the wheels in motion for a revolution in the field of examination and coursework assessments?

In this small-scale online study (n=27) language practitioners at HEIs were surveyed with the objective of gathering a cross-institutional picture on how the recent changes have impacted the testing of the different language skills. Findings suggest that there are perceived challenges particularly regarding oral assessments, as well as concerns related to plagiarism and academic malpractice on the part of the students.

Drawing on the results of our survey, this chapter offers an overview of how the sector has addressed the delivery of language assessment introduced during lockdown. We shall also discuss the question of whether the time has come for a sector-wide common approach to testing and what such an approach could look like in the future.

2.   The move to digital assessments: methodology

We created an online survey for distribution among language teaching professionals at HEIs. Apart from demographic background data (most notably the HEI and language(s) represented), the survey contained six questions, including sub-questions; among these were open-answer and multiple-choice questions as well as an open field to express additional comments. We asked participants about changes made to their assessments in the light of the pandemic, whether/how these changes affected different cohorts of students and different language skills, what software had been used for any online

assessments and how these were facilitated, and lastly how the effect of these changes on academic integrity and malpractice had been perceived.

We gained ethical approval for this study from Lancaster University. The survey was designed and distributed through Google Forms[5] and shared through various language-related Jisc mailing lists. The survey was intentionally designed to catch a snapshot of initial institutional reactions to the fast-moving changes in the modalities of language learning with particular focus on the different language skills. It was circulated twice, once in July and once in August 2020, and 27 responses were collated. Whilst we had hoped for a higher number of responses, both the time frame of distribution and the pandemic-related emergency may have hindered a higher participation rate.

3.   Results

Ten languages were represented in the survey: Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, French, English, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, and Russian. Responses came from 19 UK institutions, five European institutions, two from Australia, and one unspecified institution[6].

The survey aimed to collect information on what changes had been made, if any, to assessment practices in response to the pandemic; 45.5% of respondents (n=22) indicated that their institution had cancelled parts of the existing assessments, and 9.1% of HEIs represented in the survey allowed their staff to make *ad-hoc* changes to their practices.

A variety of solutions were implemented, which comprised:

- all or part of the assessment was moved online;

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5. Link to the survey: https://forms.gle/rWF7Qmzb5FfjqUTV6

6. It is important to note that not all respondents answered every question. Therefore, the following percentages do not always necessarily add up to the overall number of respondents.

- part of assessment was delayed;

- some of the assessment was cancelled (e.g. low-stake assessment such as oral and/or written examinations in Year 1); and

- alternative forms of assessment were implemented across the board with two emerging trends: grammar tests and writing were transformed into time-limited take-away papers and video submission in lieu of oral examinations/presentation were introduced.

Whereas 57.7% of respondents (n=26) claimed that their institution adopted a blanket approach in addressing assessment for the different year groups, 26.9% stated that year groups were dealt with differently according to modules and courses taken across the years of study. In particular, two of the six institutions that provided additional comments stated that individual tutors had the freedom to adapt assessments as seen fit.

In terms of assessment changes applied to the different year groups, the answers below were recorded (n=8).

- For Year 1, four respondents claimed that all assessments were cancelled.

- For Year 2, where not cancelled, oral exams were held online; two institutions modified the type of exercises for written language papers whereby a shift towards analytical skill was reported.

- For Year 3, which is often the period of residence abroad for most UK HEIs, assessments were held online often through video submission and in one case, one institution cancelled the whole assessment for the year.

- For Year 4, a wider number of practices mentioned for previous year groups was recorded as well as an increased use of open-book tests and examinations.

Question 3 of the survey enquired more specifically about single language skills to establish how specific skills had been addressed across institutions.

Figure 1. Modification of assessments relating to specific language skills
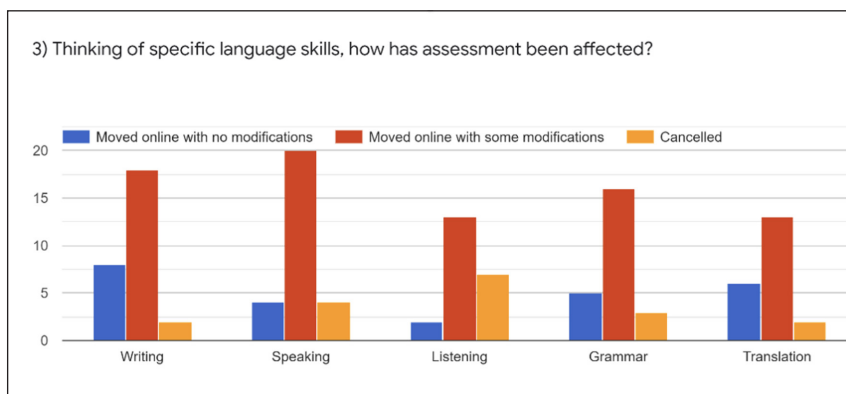
As Figure 1 shows, speaking and writing were the two skills that were moved online (with some modifications) more widely across the board. When moved online, two institutions lamented the loss of face-to-face interactions for oral examinations as students were asked to pre-record their presentation and upload it online. Listening skills assessments were the most frequently cancelled and the least moved online, perhaps suggesting that online modalities may not be suited fully to remote delivery in this area.

Four other institutions reported that the nature of changes was reflected in the re-thinking of assessment moving away from single-skills and embracing wider integrated-skills testing. For example, grammar was assessed within compositions in the target language and, due to the widespread use of take-home examinations (usually 24 or 48 hours against time-limited assessment held in person), two HEIs modified testing to include critical and analytical skills within the assessment of single language skills. At this point in the survey, three institutions also added that where test length was modified, it was due to the fact that students would have access to resources such as the Internet and personal notes to complete tasks.

Question 4 gathered data on the modalities of online assessment to establish whether some types of software were favoured over others (see Table 1).

Table 1. Software used to carry out online assessments

4. If your language assessment has been moved online, what software did you use? (n = 27)	
a. The institution's virtual learning environment	63%
b. An institutional-approved external software	11.1%
c. Any other external software	0%
d. A combination of software and virtual learning environment	25.9%

The majority of HEIs (63%) carried out their assessment through their virtual learning environment with Blackboard being most used; 25.9% of institutions relied on the combination of virtual learning environments and other software such as Zoom, MS Teams, Panopto, and Canvas. Of the latter, no specific piece of software was singled out as most used.

The penultimate question sought to find additional information on issues that may arise following a sudden move to online testing. We had noticed throughout our individual practices that online assessments had brought about new challenges compared to face-to-face examinations, particularly with regard to the freedom online assessments afford students in accessing external help. Our anecdotal finds were reinforced by respondents from the surveyed institutions. Two thirds of HEIs claimed that both plagiarism and academic malpractices had been raised as an issue since the onset of the pandemic:

> Has plagiarism/academic malpractice been raised as being an issue in your department/school since the beginning of the pandemic? (n=27)
> - Yes: 77.8%
> - No: 14.8%
> - N/A: 7.4%

When asked about what steps, if any, had been taken to mitigate the issue, responses were varied but some trends could be identified.

- Some HEIs modified assessments and others introduced 'controlled' conditions through live online sessions or using shared Google documents. One institution asked students to take pictures of handwritten work which was immediately uploaded to the virtual learning environment.

- Some HEIs used integrated software such as Turnitin.

- Where plagiarism was suspected, most respondents relied on existing procedures on academic malpractice, with one institution considering the promotion of a 'positive culture of academic integrity' for the future (to encourage such integrity, another HEI asked students to sign an honesty pledge). In one institution, students caught cheating were excluded.

- One institution implemented additional moderation strategies comparing online examination results with results based on coursework or face-to-face classwork, whilst another institution redesigned marking schemes.

Responses from this section seem to suggest that, whilst HEIs are aware of the new challenges in digital assessment, additional considerations are needed to develop successful strategies to deal with a common, expanding problem.

The last section of the survey invited additional comments from respondents. Three institutions stated that additional checks were put in place after assessment was completed to ensure that marks were consistent with previous cohorts. One respondent noted their surprise at some students who 'still made the same mistakes that they would have in a 'real' exam, whilst they could have simply looked things up', whilst another respondent found that marks were higher compared to previous years ('not necessarily because of cheating, students were often glad to do work whilst in lockdown').

Three other respondents suggested the possibility of modifying exam-based assessments and moving them towards forms of continuous assessments, whereby either formative tasks become part of summative tasks or the weighting

for continuous assessments such as portfolios are increased. Different practices such as the latter, "would allow for assessment to be more creative, varied, diverse, meaningful, and fair to accommodate different learning styles and preferences. Also, [this would] allow students to discover and develop more ways of learning useful skills", one respondent claimed.

One additional point was also raised in a different comment, which highlighted the need for professional language staff to have "been consulted before these blanket assessment changes were introduced as many issues that we experienced were obvious from the start". Conversely, anecdotal experience of informal chats with colleagues in our department seems to suggest that language assessment equality should continue to be pursued across institutions to the extent that, as one respondent proposed, "[the University Council of Modern Languages] could be involved […], to avoid us re-inventing the wheel, or, worse, end up with different or opposing guidelines in different institutions".

4.   Discussion of outcomes and suggestions

The pandemic has brought about significant challenges for the education sector. It is perhaps not surprising that not a single institution represented in our survey chose to proceed without making any alterations to their assessments at all. Whilst practices differ not insignificantly across institutions, some parallels can be observed.

- The number of assessments is often reduced.

- Assessments are moved online and need to be adapted accordingly.

- Digital approaches to assessments bring about particular challenges. One widespread concern is around academic honesty and plagiarism.

The languages sector is at a pivotal point when it comes to its assessments: if anything, the evolution of the situation in recent months has shown that the

pandemic will have a lasting effect on our teaching and assessment practices. Consequently, lockdown-induced changes to online and blended learning environments have enabled both tutors and students to achieve a greater level of IT literacy. This is an opportunity to be embraced.

Going forward, the new experiences could encourage a long-lasting re-thinking process when it comes to assessment practices. The results of the survey have demonstrated that issues of academic malpractice and plagiarism have increased across most institutions. This is a point that has been stressed by distance education providers for many years (see e.g. Rovai, 2000). Online assessments work best when they do not simply replicate traditional offline practices. A move towards methods of assessing that involve higher levels of critical thinking has to be encouraged and fostered. Whereas an in-class test may be perceived to be best suited to assess e.g. knowledge of grammatical forms, a longer, take-home, open-book type of assessment has the potential to assess students on their broader communicative competences in the target language. This could be an opportunity to acknowledge all the resources that can be accessed nowadays, and to devise our assessments accordingly, thereby reproducing situations which, though still as controlled as possible, are closer to real life (such as the job application process, collaborative projects, and hybrid forms of working).

This would also enable a closer integration of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, in particular with regard to the mediation skills that are highlighted in the Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2018). This competence can be understood on a 'cross-linguistic' level – an approach which could present an opportunity to rejuvenate traditional translation tests in an enhanced form, at a time when machine translation tools are becoming more and more accessible and reliable. Similarly, survey results have shown that listening tests in particular have become a challenge in an online environment. This leads us to suggest approaching mediation competence also on a 'cross-skills' level, whereby an assessment would integrate various skills, such as a listening component leading to a debate on the topic, for example. This would again reinforce the focus on analytical skills and critical thinking as an integral part of language testing.

As suggested by Rovai (2000), a thoughtful approach to digital assessments can enhance tutors' and students' experiences: "creativity in design and approach to assessment and measurement strategies can assist both the instructor and the learner in the distance education setting" (p. 144). The proposed shift would drastically remove the issues of plagiarism and academic malpractice that were highlighted in our survey responses. It would also allow for more asynchronous testing – a key factor at fluid times, in which students might even find themselves in different time zones. Moreover, integrating skills will enable us to set up fewer assessments, reducing the risk of testing and marking 'fatigue', sometimes felt both towards the end of terms and over the course of the academic year.

5.   Conclusion

The changes induced by the pandemic have created many opportunities for the language sector such as the introduction of hybrid forms of learning and assessing. Our survey results offer some insight into different practices at HEIs as well as perceived challenges and opportunities. We argue that it is time to rethink our practices to create a new generation of modern true-to-life assessments which would take the resources at the students' disposal and the progress of society into account, thus helping our students develop more transferable skills whilst learning a language. Rather than a one-off circumstantial change, we call for a structural evolution that will re-shape language assessments in the long-term. However, such a move cannot and should not happen in isolation, as was suggested by one of our respondents who called for a 'national debate in the [modern languages] sector resulting in nationally agreed guidelines'.

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