

Towards sustainable assessment formats in language teaching: testing integrated skills with portfolio-based tasks.

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Abstract

In this paper, we share our experience of using portfolio-based tasks to assess integrated skills in German and Spanish language modules at level C1. The modules, delivered during the academic year 2022-23, are part of the institution-wide language provision at Durham University, which means that students come from various disciplines different from Modern Languages. It is argued that this assessment model provides an effective way of developing and testing a wide range of skills (subject-specific as well as transferable) within a community of learners coming from different disciplinary and academic backgrounds.

The assessment system we have used is based on the principles of flexibility and choice. Throughout the year, students build up a body of work where they record and reflect on the experiences of a person living in a country where the target language is spoken. The portfolio contains both formative and summative submissions, so that students can benefit from the feedback received for formative tasks to fine-tune their summative work. In this regard, the system involves a combination of assessment for learning and assessment as learning. Every submission integrates different language skills, as well as transferable skills such as decision-making, autonomy, creativity, critical thinking and intercultural knowledge. Besides adding authenticity to the assessment tasks, the development of these skills is aligned with the principles of education for sustainable development (AdvanceHE, 2021). At the end of the paper is an explanation of what has been learned from the use of this assessment system, as well as the aspects that could be enhanced and those that could be improved in future editions.

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Keywords: Modern foreign languages, language assessment, sustainable assessment, assessment for learning, assessment as learning, portfolio-based assessment.

This paper describes the implementation of a portfolio-based assessment model to develop and assess integrated language and transferable skills in German and Spanish language modules at C1 (advanced level in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages; CEFR, 2020). These modules, delivered during the academic year 2022-23, are part of the institution-wide language provision at Durham University, aimed at students from various disciplines other than Modern Languages. In this context, the use of an assessment system where students are able to make decisions about the content and focus of their work allows them to combine the development of their language skills with their own academic, professional and personal interests. It thus promotes critical thinking, metacognitive capabilities and learner autonomy, which encourages a deep learning approach and is reflective of how language is used outside of the classroom.

The portfolio

For the purposes of this assessment model, students are asked to adopt the role of a person living in one of the countries where the target language (German / Spanish) is spoken. As an initial task, students provide an account of their chosen identity, highlighting the characteristics that define them (e.g. nationality, gender, age, social background, education, profession...). On the basis of the characters they have created, students are asked to record their experiences in the format of a portfolio as a person living in the country of their choice. The portfolio is hosted on PebblePad, which acts as a diary allowing students to narrate, assess and reflect on the events that take place in the lives of their characters. Students are required to create a total of six portfolio entries (an introduction of the character followed by five entries: two formative, three summative) for which there are specific instructions. The entries, which bear a mix of written and oral components, have to be based on authentic sources of information that the students

research and select themselves for every submission. Each of the summative portfolio entries is worth 25% of the overall mark for the module.

After the initial entry, students are required to submit two written tasks (the first one is formative; the second one, with the same format, is summative). In these tasks, students research and select an article, report or blog entry (of between 700 and 1,000 words) on a topic that is relevant to the life and experiences of the profile they have created. They write a short comment in character expressing their views on it. For the two following tasks (the first of which is formative, while the second is summative), students select a video, between 5 and 10 minutes long, and record a spoken critical commentary of its contents. For the final summative written task, they have to search for job opportunities that are suitable for their character and submit a cover letter that they would include as part of their application for the respective job. All materials selected for each task (texts, videos and job adverts) are included in the portfolio.

The final element of the assessment is a 1:1 oral exam (worth 25%) at the end of the year. In this exam students are invited to reflect, discuss and elaborate on the contents of their portfolios and the creation process.

Table 1 summarises the assessment plan.

Table 1: *Plan for portfolio-based assessment*

When?	What?	In what format?	How long does it have to be?	How much does it count?
Week 2 Friday 14 October 2022, 14:00	Portfolio introduction: formative 0	Audiovisual	2-3 minutes	
Week 5 Friday 4 November 2022, 14:00	Portfolio entry: formative 1	Written	200 words	
Week 10 Friday 9 December 2022, 14:00	Portfolio entry: summative 1	Written	200 words	25%
Week 13 Friday 27 January 2023, 14:00	Portfolio entry: formative 2	Audiovisual	2-3 minutes	
Week 18 Friday 3 March 2023, 14:00	Portfolio entry: summative 2	Audiovisual	2-3 minutes	25%
Week 20 Friday 17 March 2023, 14:00	Portfolio entry: summative 3	Written	400 words	25%
Week 22 1-5 May 2023 (TBC)	Oral task	Portfolio discussion with the module convenor	10-15 minutes	25%

The rationale: flexibility and choice

The freedom that students enjoy in deciding who they want to write as and what topical issues they will cover in the portfolio is bound to two of the guiding principles of the tasks' design: flexibility and choice. Flexibility also applies to the fact that students do not have a fixed time limit to complete the different tasks, but work to a deadline instead. The task instructions and submission dates are released at the beginning of the academic year and students are able to submit at any point before the deadline. This helps them to plan ahead and manage their own workload. In this way, students can adapt the assessment schedule to their own paces and needs (Nicol, 2009), which is also reflective of tasks and skills required in real-life scenarios. Hence this format of assessment can encourage learning that goes beyond the timeline of the module and can help them to develop self-management skills (Boud, 2015).

The flexibility of the assessment tasks and schedule can be beneficial, too, for neurodiverse learners who may struggle to adopt, and to speak from, another person's point of view. In this respect, students are always reminded that they can write as themselves if they wish to, as long as they do so from a context of immersion in the language and culture of their chosen country. Additional support is readily available for learners who might require extended deadlines or modified assessment tasks.

Giving students the opportunity to make decisions about the contents of their portfolio increases their personal investment in the tasks and enhances their motivation and autonomy. Additionally, the multi-stage process of designing the portfolio further enables students to develop their language skills in a meaningful and authentic way.

Since students do not work under time pressure, they can revisit their entries at any point prior to the submission deadline, which allows them to identify, correct and learn from mistakes made and, consequently, make judgements about the quality of their own work. Therefore, the portfolio-based tasks adhere to the dimensions (realism, cognitive challenge, and authentic evaluation) of authentic assessment identified in the literature (Villarroel et al., 2019).

Assessment for learning; assessment as learning

The holistic nature of the portfolio, where every task has its place in the continuum of a personal account of experiences and reflections, facilitates the use of assessment tasks as learning opportunities, in line with the principles of assessment for learning: after every submission, students receive detailed feedback which focuses not only on how they have performed, but also on how they can enhance the quality of their future work (Carless, 2007; Sadler, Reimann and Sambell, 2022). As such, feeding back is as important as feeding forward, with a view to helping students act on the feedback they have received. In this model, the combination of formative and summative assessment tasks gives students the chance to discuss their progress in relation to the expectations placed on them, so that every submission becomes a learning experience in itself (Ferrell and Knight, 2022). Furthermore, the process-oriented assessment structure of the portfolio enables tutors to monitor how effective their teaching is and where students require more support, promoting a more constructive alignment between teaching practices and assessment.

Integration of language and transferable skills

Every portfolio submission integrates different types of language competencies, combining receptive and productive skills (reading and writing; listening and speaking). In addition, the nature of the tasks, where students need to discuss their experience of living in the country of their choice from their character's perspective, requires them to engage critically with a range of authentic materials in order to become acquainted with the current affairs of the target culture. They need to research and make decisions regarding the materials they select and the different sources of information that they will use as a base for their reflections and critical appraisals. Thereby, the format of the assessment promotes skills such as critical and creative thinking, problem-solving and self-awareness competency, which are at the core of both global citizenship education (UNESCO, 2015) and education for sustainable development (AdvanceHE, 2021).

The fact that students approach and analyse the current issues in the respective countries, not based on their own attitudes and perspectives but on that of their invented characters, adds another layer of reflection, as it requires an elevated level of empathy to

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assume another person's perspective. This element of the assessment, which involves students changing perspectives without limiting them to a predefined identity, can enhance their willingness to leave the comfort zone of their usual way of reasoning and communicating by entering someone else's reality, thus helping them to understand how other realities might be constructed in the first place and how interconnected and interdependent these are.

In this respect, the format of the assessment encourages the development of multiple perspectives and can develop the student's intercultural awareness by promoting learning objectives and skills (e.g. interpreting and relating, curiosity and openness, and critical cultural awareness) that are also outlined in Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 2021).

In addition, the designing of the portfolio fosters the development of digital literacy skills (UNESCO, 2018), as students learn how to work with different applications (e.g. PebblePad) and have to design their portfolios incorporating a range of different (visual) media, online sources and text formats. Sourcing the materials themselves can foster competencies and knowledge vital for the careful selection and reflection of information available in the limitless space of the internet. These skills are especially significant in the context of higher education, where students have to be able to consciously select information that is both factual and relevant in order to form an educated opinion (Santos and Serpa, 2017).

Moving forward: considerations for the future

Our experience during the first year of the implementation of this assessment system shows that students have developed a range of competencies that would not have had a place in a more traditional model, from language skills to transferable skills such as decision-making (in determining the profile of the person the portfolio will be inspired on), autonomy and creativity (in the freedom they have to choose what type of materials they include in their entries), critical thinking (evidenced in a series of commentaries they need to provide on the sources of their choice) and intercultural knowledge (acquired through the research of the society and culture of the country where the recorded experiences

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take place). The freedom that students enjoyed in deciding who their character would be, what they wanted to talk about and how their portfolio narrative would develop means that they were able to expand their knowledge beyond the scope offered by conventional forms of assessment, such as essay-based tasks or oral presentations based on given prompts, where learners are expected to adjust to a set of predefined standards in terms of discourse and content.

Contrary to our initial fears, students took to the inventive nature of the portfolio seamlessly: they displayed high levels of initiative and imagination, and the high standard of the work they produced reflected their investment in the tasks. Despite the fact that submission dates were only given as soft deadlines and students were told they would not be penalised for late submissions (though they would not receive feedback for them), 96% of the entries that students submitted during the year were on time. This rate, together with the credibility and authenticity of the stories they created for their characters, attests to the high levels of commitment and motivation that the tasks brought out in learners.

Students were also confident in working with the platform PebblePad and required little help with technical issues. Whilst setting up the assessment and preparing examples and guidance for the students were time-consuming to start off with, the actual marking and feedback process via PebblePad was user-friendly.

As the academic year progressed, we realised that students were able to reach the highest levels of critical thinking in their portfolio entries after completing in-class tasks that required them to apply this skill. For this reason, future editions of the portfolio will be aligned even more closely with the contents of seminar sessions, which will act as scaffolding throughout the year. With every submission students grew more familiar with their characters, which positively impacted the credibility of their entries and how they were linked to the overall narrative of the portfolio.

On a more practical level, we plan to review the word limits for written submissions. These have proved to be insufficient in some cases, where students would have benefited from more space to develop their ideas. In this respect, we will need to strike a balance between the additional time required to mark and give feedback to these submissions

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and the management of staff time. In terms of workload, however, the assessment system also had a positive effect as students chose their materials independently, so no assessment material had to be sourced.

The feedback received from students, both formally and informally, has been very positive, with many of them enjoying the creative freedom the assessment system allowed them and the reduction in the levels of anxiety often caused by exams set under time constraints. In future editions of this assessment model, student data will be gathered through questionnaires and interviews, with the aim of collecting evidence of the impact of portfolio-based assessment on the acquisition of discipline-specific and transferable skills.

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