LANGUAGE LEARNING

ASSESSING LANGUAGE LEARNING OUTCOMES IN ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS

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The changes taking place in our lives necessitate adaptation in our methods of learning. The online environment became especially relevant due to Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, which forced thousands of Ukrainian students to move away to other cities or countries. Many universities in vulnerable locations are unable to continue even remote studies. When offline schooling is not available, distance learning is an answer. Progress in technologies enabled digital broadcasting and the receipt of programmes of study making online learning even more accessible and convenient for everyone. Such technologies are currently increasingly used to bring lectures and teaching materials remote from an institution to students with regular testing of knowledge, which contributes to more effective learning.

The authors aim to present an overview of online language testing and assessment. However, this is not about testing for the sake of grading, but about testing that encourages learning. This means that the test tasks should encourage better learning of the material and have a minimal impact on the assessment. The focus is shifted from

simple questioning to different kinds of tests that would address individual difficulties, personality traits, attitudes and preferences for the acquisition process. Evaluating the outcomes while learning a foreign language online is not an easy task. During this process the teacher tries to find out whether the learners are meeting language course goals. This study outlines a number of problems related to fraud, lack of reliability, and increased workload for teachers using online teaching.

Key words: online learning, continuous learning, lifelong learning, testing, assessment.

Зміни, що відбуваються в нашому житті, спонукають до вибору найефективніших форм навчання. Онлайн-середовище стає особливо актуальним рішенням через повномасштабну війну в Україні, яка змусила тисячі українських студентів переїхати в інші міста чи країни, а багато університетів опинились в зоні бойових дій. Розвиток технологій забезпечує цифрову обробку даних для швидкої передачі та отримання інформації, що робить сучасне онлайн-середовище ще доступнішим та зручнішим для кожного. Такі технології наразі все частіше використовуються для проведення онлайн лекцій та практичних занять з використанням різноманітних навчальних матеріалів та регулярними заходами оцінювання знань.

Автори дослідження прагнуть представити огляд заходів онлайн-тестування та оцінювання. Однак мова йде не про тестування заради виставлення оцінок, а про тестування, що спонукає до навчання. Це означає, що тестові завдання перш за все мають сприяти кращому засвоєнню матеріала. При цьому фокус зміщується з формату простих опитувань на різновиди тестових завдань, які б допомогли виявити окремі труднощі, особистісні риси, схильності та уподобання. Оцінка результатів під час вивчення іноземної мови онлайн – завдання не з легких, оскільки виникає ряд питань, пов'язаних з проявами академічної недоброчесності, недостатньої надійності засобів оцінювання та збільшення навантаження на викладача.

Ключові слова: онлайн-навчання, безперервне навчання, тестування, онлайн-оцінювання.

Introduction. The educational system today witnesses the shift to online learning, due to the development of technologies and the benefits and challenges that online education offers to teachers, tutors and students. Those, who have no access to traditional educational institutions, for different reasons such living in remote regions, financial issues or others, have an opportunity to get a university degree.

Accessing educational materials, communication between participants of distance learning during on-line sessions are provided by the transmission of video, audio, graphic and text information in synchronous or asynchronous mode. Ukrainian educational institutions organize online lessons on special online learning platforms, such as Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, Moodle, Schoology and others. There, teachers publish tasks, information about classes, links to additional materials and tasks for independent work. The next, very important step, is measuring and assessing skills and knowledge received by

learners.

Many scholars find that online learning offers more flexible opportunities since it is personalized, collaborative and critical (Davidson, 2017). Researchers claim that it was COVID-19 that accelerated the transition to online studies. Educational institutions had to accept new digital technologies, work out new educational programmes, get students ready to take on these changes and prepare them for a changing job market.

Online learning also offers the flexibility to combine studies and a personal life. All of this from the convenience of home (Hodges et al., 2020). In the book "Online Learning: A User-Friendly Approach for High School and College Students" (Bowman et al., 2010) the researchers offer strategies and tips that every online professor wants students to know before they sign up for an online class. They have provided a reference tool for students to develop self-directed learning skills that will help them become secure and knowledgeable in using technology, studying, communicating online and getting work completed on time. Bowman has created one of the best how-to guides' available: one that is beneficial for both online students and those new to teaching via distance learning. Dominique Boullier (2022), a French sociologist specializing in digital uses, has explored the impacts of digital technologies on various aspects of society, including online work and education. In his book "Sociologie du numérique", he analyzes how digital technology is transforming professional and educational practices. By presenting the new digital education format (Boullier et al., 2023) he emphasizes that digital technologies are changing the ways we learn and work, offering new opportunities while posing challenges in terms of adapting and managing social interactions. With proper evaluation, it becomes obvious whether a course is having an important impact or just sending the learners to sleep (Deller, 2020). Thus, variety of evaluation models including Kirkpatricks Model, Kaufman's Model, the CIRO Model, the Phillips ROI Model, and Brinkerhoff's Success Case Method (SCM) have been introduced to meet the challenges of online work and study (Kirkpatrick, J. & Kirkpatrick, W., 2016). The research of American scholars (Lee et al., 2023) proved that collaboration with teacher educators in terms of assessment help preservice teachers keep their feet on the ground. Reflecting the urgency of enhanced teachers' language assessment literacy, active research and conversations have been conducted in both fields of teacher education and language assessment.

Methodology. In order to collect data on students' achievements, assessments of their progress and to find any evidence of inappropriate online use such as plagiarism, cheating etc different methods of survey were used. The focus groups were engaged in interviews and written questionnaires to investigate their understanding of academic integrity policy, cases of cheating and discussing existing methods of assessments. Data collection procedures also carried out a comprehensive literature review of the existing evidence of online assessment methods. The study also employed a comparative research design to analyze the ways the assessment programs were integrated and implemented within the Ukrainian educational system.

Results and discussion. The authors set up **the objective** to research the ways of accurate assessment of students' knowledge, their performance of the tasks and to investigate the reliability of scores based on assessment results. Their aim was to find out the advantages and disadvantages of online assessments, compared to other assessment methods.

Online study provides many benefits, including flexibility, accessibility and learning adapted to an individual schedule. It allows learners additional time for development, work, hobbies and travelling. It offers a personal approach and tutoring. Students receive learning appropriate materials and a teacher's attention. Without a doubt, online classes can be just as effective and efficient as traditional ones, and bring other distinct advantages. This type of learning can promote active collaboration, but it also requires special attention to the learning process and to the interaction between the teacher and students. No matter which form of education, the teacher sets clear goals, determined by the curriculum, and also explains to students what is expected of them and what they should learn. These goals should be realistic, achievable and appropriate for the students' level. To develop skills the students need first to know their starting point, what their current strengths and weaknesses are, what they need to achieve to improve and how they are going to improve. Ways of developing this awareness include self-evaluation questionnaires, group discussion and tutor feedback on their work.

One of the most important factors of learning is motivation. This includes motivation from the teacher whose job is to make the course interesting and worthy. Motivation comes also from mechanical aspects of the course such as having fixed dates for assignments and tests. Students feel a greater obligation to revise when they know their grades depend on it.

Estimation of learning success, the results achieved by students, is measured by assessment. A minimum requirement for any assessment is that students can demonstrate the knowledge they have acquired. They are certainly expected to demonstrate learning outcomes at various levels.

Research shows that students who are regularly tested (for example, at the end of each lecture) perform better than those who are not tested anywhere but exams. This also correlates with the educational method of **microlearning** – learning in small portions with mandatory testing afterwards. During online language teaching, tutors have a variety of tools for evaluating students' progress from written tasks, viva voce translation, peer and self-assessment to tests and exams. They have to monitor the learning process constantly in order to revise and adjust instruction, if necessary. It is essential to keep track of progress to ensure that students are meeting their subject targets. These can be written works (independent tasks and tests, questionnaires, in particular, competence tasks, as well as an educational project, etc.) The easiest way of testing during the learning process is to ask questions. However, there are two nuances. First, it is necessary to provide the correct answers after the students' answers. Secondly, it is necessary to involve everyone, not only those who want to answer voluntarily. It is important to ensure that the tasks reflect real language objectives. It means giving students an opportunity to use the language in realistic situations such as group discussions, dialogues or written assignments.

With distance learning there are specific problems that are not present with offline learning. These are, first of all, lack of interaction, isolation, and technical problems. Thus, providing clear feedback is crucial for online learning. Feedback should be related to the aims of the study, it must be actionable and specific. Assessing students' online work can be done by the use of various methods and tools in order to ensure fair and accurate evaluation. Doing different assignments such as essays, research papers and

presentations, students can submit their work electronically, through online platforms or email. The assessment of their work is based on specific criteria, or scoring guides provided by the teacher. Online assessments can be conducted using platforms that support quizzes, tests, or exams. These platforms often have features like time limits, random question selection and automated grading.

There is a myriad of tests to cover all aspects of a student's life: attitude and value, performance, projective tests, potential, ability, achievement, diagnosis of difficulties, reading readiness, language proficiency tests and many others.

The purposes of the test are several, for example, to diagnose a student's strengths, weaknesses and difficulties, to measure achievements or to identify readiness for a course. This is usually in a form of a pre-test normally designed to discover whether students have the essential prerequisites to begin a programme (knowledge, skills, understanding). These types of tests occur at different stages.

One can only assess how much a set of educational experience has added value to the student if one knows the student's starting point and starting abilities and achievements. Thus, an integral part of teaching foreign languages is diagnostic tests which are valuable tools to evaluate students' language proficiency, their strengths and weaknesses. These tests are mandatory at the beginning of the course as they will show the level of learners' knowledge and be a guide for teacher's strategies and planning. Diagnostic testing is an in-depth test to discover particular strengths, weaknesses and difficulties that a student is experiencing and is designed to expose causes and specific areas of weaknesses or strengths. The diagnostic test will focus on each of a range of very specific difficulties that students might be experiencing in order to identify the exact problems that they are having.

Comprehensive language tests assess students' skills in the main language areas: speaking, reading, writing and listening. The tests can be held in various forms of questionnaires, written and speaking assignments. The tests results give teachers valuable information about students' problems, identify and analyze their learning needs and difficulties so that educators can adjust the programs and promote effective teaching.

Formative testing is undertaken during a course and is designed to monitor and guide the learning process, students' progress, to measure achievements of sections of the programme and to diagnose strengths and weaknesses and provide ongoing feedback to both students and teachers. Formative assessment takes place throughout the learning process, allowing for adjustments and improvements in real time. By regularly evaluating student knowledge and progress, teachers can adapt their instruction to meet the different needs of learners, address misconceptions, and form learning experiences effectively. During language classes teachers monitor students' activities, their engagement in discussions and they assess comprehension knowledge by asking questions to stimulate deeper thinking and creative work. Methods such as paired discussions and exit tickets can be used to gather feedback. These measures will allow teachers to assess understanding in real-world contexts.

Summative testing is also an important method of the assessment of learning and academic achievements of students which is conducted at the end of a study period or course in order to assess the general level of knowledge, skills and abilities of students. In contrast to formal testing, which is carried out during the educational process for ongoing assessmnt and correction of learning, final testing is focused on evaluating the final results

of learning. The main characteristic of this test is evaluation of final results, to reveal how successfully students have learnt the material and improved their skills required by the curriculum. For example, it may be the case that the tutor wishes to discover whether a group of students has learnt a particular body of knowledge. With regard to this, it is important to consider the actual requirements of the test. The researcher should consider what type of test will best demonstrate this: multiple-choice questions, true/false statements, fill-in-the-blanks, matching pairs of items or statements, inserting missing words, short answer questions, incomplete sentences etc. Usually summative tests are held in the form of exams in which students perform tasks (e.g. translate into/from the native language; give their opinion on the suggested subject, etc.)

The results of such tests will determine the academic status of students. They can also be used to evaluate the effectiveness of training and teaching, identify areas that require additional attention or improvement, and justify the need for changes in the curriculum or teaching methods.

A principal type of testing is an essay. At its core, it is a written composition that presents and develops an argument or point of view on a particular topic. Unlike other forms of testing, essays give candidates the opportunity to manifest their thoughts, demonstrate critical thinking skills and show their command of the language. This allows the assessment not only of the depth of knowledge, but also clarity of expression and coherence of ideas. The essay questions must indicate the task very clearly, e.g. "compare", "summarise", "explain", "illustrate", "evaluate". The essay questions must ensure that it is clearly linked to desired learning outcomes. By creating persuasive arguments, analyzing complex problems, or proposing creative solutions, the essay format promotes intellectual agility and develops analytical skills. However, the essay is not without limitations. Its subjective nature makes the assessment potentially susceptible to bias or inconsistency. Teachers may interpret and evaluate essays in different ways, leading to discrepancies in grades. Additionally, checking and grading essays can be time-consuming, especially for large-scale assessments.

Discussion boards or forums allow students to engage in asynchronous discussions. Instructors can assess students' participation, critical thinking skills, and ability to express their thoughts by reviewing their contributions, responses to prompts, and interaction with peers. Peer assessment involves students evaluating and providing feedback on each other's work. Online platforms can facilitate this process by allowing students to submit their work for review and rating by their peers. Peer feedback also has the potential for the development of learning and it needs to be encouraged and integrated into some combination with teacher's feedback, into the general assessment procedure, which seems to be necessary for pragmatic reasons (Ishchenko, Verkhovtsova, 2019).

Such approach fosters collective work, self-assessment, and the development of critical evaluation skills. Students can create digital portfolios showcasing their work, such as written assignments, projects, videos, or illustrations. Online portfolio platforms enable students to select and demonstrate their best achievements and gives teachers the opportunity to evaluate their progress, knowledge and creativity. Teachers can grade students works based on their content knowledge, presentation skills, clarity and depth of understanding.

These above mentioned methods can test the recall of knowledge, comprehension, analysis and application. Clearly the selection of the form of the test will be based on the principle of gaining the maximum amount of information in the most appropriate way.

Recommendations. While constructing a test the teacher should avoid ambiguity of meaning, some items might be ambiguous or unclear to the student and the true or false statement might be imbalanced. It is advisable to avoid trivial questions, over-long, and over-complex or generalized statements.

Frequent testing encourages a habit of regular study. Tests can be conducted at the beginning (to revise previously studied material) or at the end of each lesson (to consolidate new knowledge). Test tasks should also be used during self-study: for example, with the help of flash cards to develop a useful habit for regular study.

One of the main concerns when testing students' knowledge is that they may resort to cheating and plagiarism. As technology continues to play an ever larger role in education in the 21st century, the question regarding university students' online cheating habits is raised time and time again. One could think that students taking online courses would be more likely to cheat because they are not being monitored as closely as students in a live classroom. Cheating can occur during online studies, just as it can happen in traditional classroom settings. The remote nature of online learning and the availability of digital resources can create opportunities for academic dishonesty. A lot of students also think that universities do not care as much about cheating in online courses. That could not be further from the truth. Whether they are holding online classes due to the pandemic or they have always been entirely online, universities have rigorous standards to uphold. For that reason, preventing cheating will always be regarded as of the highest priority for every school.

It is time for both students and teachers to rethink cheating as it is a multifaceted problem that requires a collective effort. There are several reasons why cheating still happens on online tests. The most common reason for cheating is poor preparation .

Students are more likely to cheat when they feel anonymous in class, when no one is paying attention to them. The increasing availability of digital testing and online resources has made it easier for students to access fraudulent materials that were not always so easily available in the past. For some, this is a shortcut to gaining an advantage, such as extra credits needed to continue their studies or receive a scholarship. The desire to meet family and community expectations also puts additional pressure on students to succeed, even if it means taking the easy way out. To mitigate cheating the teacher should establish clear academic integrity policies and communicate them to students at the beginning of the course, clearly outline what constitutes cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic misconduct and emphasize the consequences of such actions. To reduce the chances of cheating a variety of assessment methods can be used. These can be project-based assignments, open-ended questions, case studies, and discussions that require critical thinking and application of knowledge rather than simple regurgitation of information.

Test sequences can also be randomized so that responses cannot be transmitted undetected. The teacher can create multiple versions of the test with different order of questions and content, which reduces the likelihood of copying someone else's answers. It is better to offer the students more open ended questions that require thoughtful responses. The teacher can use plagiarism detection tools such as *Antiplagiarism detection*

or other similar software to identify instances of copied content in student submissions. These tools can help deter plagiarism and provide evidence if academic misconduct occurs.

Students should be aware that cheating may provide temporary advantages and short-term benefits, but it hinders personal growth and undermines the real purpose of education. There is no better way than to remain committed to learning and achieving through hard work and dedication.

Online assessments can have both positive and negative impacts on teaching load, depending on various factors. Implementing online assessments typically requires some initial setup, such as creating assessment templates, digitizing content, and familiarizing oneself with the assessment platform. This initial setup may require additional time and effort from the instructors, temporarily increasing their work load.

Of course, developing online tests, creating questions, planning exams, developing evaluation criteria takes a lot of time. Educators have to take extra efforts to ensure that assessments are effective, fair, and relevant to learning objectives. In addition, online assessment may involve solving technical problems and providing support to students, which can increase the workload.

Online assessments often generate digital materials that must be assessed and graded. Depending on the nature of the assessment and class size, assessment of digital materials may take longer than traditional paper-based assessments. Providing timely and meaningful feedback to students on their online assessments may also require additional effort on the part of teachers.

Online assessment can create issues related to academic integrity and fraud prevention. The Faculty may need to spend additional time and effort designing tests that minimize opportunities for cheating, monitoring online grades, and using technology tools or methods to detect plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty.

On the other hand, online assessments can offer certain advantages that can reduce teaching load. They provide flexibility in terms of scheduling assessments and can streamline the grading process through automated grading features or the use of learning management systems. Once the initial setup is complete, online assessments can save instructors time in the long run by automating certain tasks.

It is important to note that the impact of online assessments on teaching load can vary based on the context, the specific tools and platforms used, the level of technological familiarity of instructors and students, and the overall instructional design. Ultimately, effective planning, efficient use of technology, and clear communication with students can help manage the teaching load associated with online assessment.

Conclusion. Feedback and different constructive comments via online tools will help learners understand their improvement and encourage them. It is easier to study and save time if there is a method for working and learners are well-organised. A skilled student uses strategies and with practice these strategies become automatic.

Holding regular assessments in various ways, such as progress checks, tests, mini-tests, quizzes will help to monitor students' progress in learning.

Additionally, clear instructions, rubrics, and criteria should be provided to students to establish expectations and promote fairness in evaluation. Assessing language learning outcomes in online environments requires careful planning, thoughtful

consideration of assessment tools, and ongoing monitoring of progress, the effective fulfilment of which will ensure for students to achieve their language learning goals. It is important to foster a classroom culture that values academic integrity and emphasizes the importance of honest and ethical behavior and encourages students to take pride in their work and the learning process rather than focusing solely on grades. Providing timely and constructive feedback on assignments helps students understand their strengths and weaknesses and encourages academic honesty.

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