

Chapter 5

A Framework for Meaningful Assessment: The PRIME Approach

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ABSTRACT

This chapter illustrates an innovative and easily adoptable approach to ensuring assessment is constructively aligned to course content and intended learning outcomes in foreign language teaching. Referring to two small-scale case studies in UK universities, this chapter presents the PRIME model of assessment design. This holistic and process-driven approach to assessment, in which the content and format of assessment is developed alongside the content and learning outcomes of the course, guides students towards becoming reflective language learners and creates greater learner autonomy. Grounded in, but not exclusive to, the academic standards for higher education in the UK, and in current research into the place and purpose of assessment in undergraduate courses, this chapter illustrates an approach adopted to create meaningful assessment in language degree programmes.

INTRODUCTION

Language learners in Higher Education (HE) change with the times, as do approaches to learning and teaching, and discipline-specific research (McLelland, 2018). Curricula need to be robust yet flexible enough to adapt to innovations in pedagogy, and questions regarding assessment – how, when, what format – are central to students' perception of their learning and also of their own abilities and efficacy in their chosen subjects.

The unprecedented shift in teaching and learning urgently necessitated by the global pandemic in 2020 had a tremendous impact on the means of teaching and on motivation toward learning. The communicative approach to language teaching suddenly and immediately needed to be re-directed into a virtual and online environment. At the time of writing, globally anglophone colleagues, themselves working in difficult and isolating conditions, are finding innovative solutions to delivering learning and assessment

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in conditions that are a sharp contrast to the previous interactive, participative, and communicative language classroom environment (Maican and Cocoradă, 2021). The rapid recreation of language teaching in an unfamiliar environment has generated a wealth of creative responses. This study hopes to provide a research-informed framework that supports learning and teaching and illustrates the centrality of aligned assessment in creating a dynamic, flexible, and motivating curriculum.

The UK QAA guidelines indicate that ‘assessment and feedback practices are informed by reflection, consideration of professional practice, and subject-specific and educational scholarship’ (2011, B6,11). The guidelines provide further detail on the roles and varieties of assessment underpinned by this conceptualization in the subject-specific benchmark ‘Language courses aim to enhance a very wide range of knowledge, skills and understanding, not all of which will necessarily be explicitly assessed’ (QAA, 2019: 16). The QAA 2019 guidelines evolved from its 2011 predecessor that stipulated expectations on the role of the assessment in a rather more research-led manner, asserting the functions of assessment as follows:

- the role of assessment in the learning process - assessment as and for learning as well as assessment of learning.
- the variety of modes of assessment, including the role of examinations, essays, multiple-choice tests, reflective journals, peer assessment, portfolios, and assessment of performance and creative work.
- the development of assessment activities which are closely connected with real-world situations or tasks. (QAA, 2011, B6,12).

Despite the changes, the role of the assessment is detailed in 6.13 ‘[r]egular and detailed feedback is an essential element in language learning’ (QAA, 2019, p.16). These guidelines view assessment as an integral and integrated part of the learning process, and support Biggs’s (2007) definition of alignment between teaching, intended learning outcomes (ILOs), and assessment. The framework adhered to by many European languages, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (2001), provides clear descriptors for communicative language activities and competences and the QAA review group recognized the CEFR as ‘the predominant international standard, gaining currency in North America and South Asia’ (QAA, 2019, p. 4). The detailed, plurilingual, and pluricultural descriptors allow teachers of European languages to work creatively within this framework to develop innovative responses that meet the needs of their specific institution – its descriptors however have also been used to map other languages, e.g. Chinese or Japanese Can-do statements. In the debate over what constitutes assessment, the validity and reproducibility of assessment, and the quantitative and qualitative indicators of achievement (Purpura, 2016), the CEFR provides stable criteria. These are not stifling constraints but parameters that allow teachers’ individuality of expression and design within these benchmarks. This chapter will begin by discussing two such creative responses in the form of case studies.

The purpose behind both case studies was the integration pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and mediatic language skills into an existing curriculum. The case studies centred around student- and process-driven approaches to integrated course content and assessment and prompted further reflection on articulating a process by which assessment can be created that potentially could be adapted to fit different modules and language levels. Reflection on the outcomes of these experiences, led to a more theoretical and generalisable consideration on the process of syllabus design. This contribution will firstly provide a

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