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Are our students ready for a shift in how grammar is taught and the format in which is presented for practice?

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ABSTRACT

A shift in how Spanish grammar has been traditionally taught has been advocated for some time now, thus moving from a behaviourist approach, with a focus on the form and the linguistic structure, to a communicative approach in which the communicative intention and the context are taken into account. On the other hand the use of digital tools has been increasingly applied to the field of second-language teaching. More specifically, the benefits of using online games and digital tools in the form of gamification for teaching have been highlighted in some studies. However, after years of explaining and presenting the grammar based on a behaviourist approach and by using a specific format, are our students ready for a change in the concept of how grammar should be taught as well as for a change in the way it is presented for practice? The main aim of this paper is to analyse, on the one hand, students' reactions to different approaches to how the same grammar content is taught and, on the other hand, to find out which benefits or constraints students find in doing the activity in different formats, namely, on a piece of paper or using a digital tool. Students had to complete two different activities. One of the proposed activities was designed according to a traditional approach to grammar teaching and was presented on a piece of paper, the other activity followed a cognitive approach to teaching the grammar and used the online tool *Twine* to create a game and was accessed online. In both activities students were practising the difference between Spanish indicative and subjunctive modes in relative clauses, and after completion they were asked about their experience by filling out a questionnaire. Students' mixed answers with regards to both activities raises some questions, namely, to which extent are advanced students willing or ready to shift the ways in which they have been traditionally taught, and what are the benefits and constraints of using a digital tool or a piece of paper in terms of enhancing learning.

INTRODUCTION: CHANGING PERSPECTIVES IN GRAMMAR TEACHING AND LEARNING

According to Nunan (1986, p.3), if we want to put students at the centre of learning, then we need to take into account their needs and attitudes. In this sense, the aim of this study was precisely to analyse students' attitudes and perceptions towards two different ways of explaining and presenting the same grammar content in order to introduce modifications and adapt the teaching materials to the students' needs and preferences.

As far as methods and approaches usually used for teaching Spanish is concerned, although the communicative approaches (advocated and promoted in the European Framework of References for the Languages CEFR) have been accepted and adopted by applied linguists and practitioners with enthusiasm (Nunan, 1986, p.2), there seems to be a mismatch between what teachers and learners perceive as useful in the classroom (Nunan, 1986, p.4). Hence, the need to identify and monitor students' perceptions about what should be happening in the classroom and how they think this should be happening. On the other hand, according to Llopis-García, Real-Espinosa and Ruiz-Campillo (2012) the teaching of grammar, and more specifically of Spanish grammar, has been focusing for many years on the form rather than on the meaning or the communicative purpose underlying a specific tense or mode, and there is a need to shift from the traditional approach to a more communicative one. The activities designed according to a traditional conception of grammar teaching have mainly consisted of filling the gaps exercises in which sentences were deprived of any context and the only cue to get the right answer was the analysis of the linguistic form or syntactic structure. On the other hand, a teaching of grammar based on a cognitive approach whereby grammar forms are dependent on the subjective ways in which the speaker perceives and organises reality (Slobin, 1996, p.76) has been consistently advocated and implemented in recent years in the field of second language acquisition and more specifically in the teaching of Spanish grammar (Llopis-García, Real-Espinosa and Ruiz-Campillo, 2012). According to this approach, not only the context but also the speaker's intention or purpose will determine which tense or mode is more suitable to meet those needs. In this sense, the activities designed according to this conception will have to immerse the learner in a specific reality—with more information provided—which will be

close to any actual situation with which the learner will be confronted in the future when using the target language, which will, in turn, prove to be more effective than traditional ways of presenting the grammar based on repetition and memorization (Molina-Vidal, 2016). However, and according to Ruiz-Campillo (2007, p.1) there is a lack of a pedagogical grammar based on the concept of cognitive grammar, and most Spanish textbooks still present the grammar from a behaviourist point of view (2007, p.5). These observations lead us to assume that advanced students who have been learning Spanish for several years have been mainly taught through tasks and activities based on the traditional model described above. Thus how can tutors know whether students are willing to reorganise the—in most cases—already settled ways of applying Spanish grammar rules, which have been consolidated over the years? On the other hand, do they prefer a more traditional paper-based way of presenting grammar practice or will they enjoy the alleged benefits of using digital tools and games? (Gee, 2003; Godwin-Jones, 2014; Garland, 2015; Figueroa-Flores, 2015). These are the two main questions that gave rise to the intervention proposed in this paper, which is to compare learners' perceptions of two activities dealing with the same grammar content but based on two different conceptions of how grammar should be taught and presented for practice.

TRADITIONAL, HARD COPY AND NON-INTERACTIVE VS. COGNITIVE, ONLINE, GAME

As mentioned in the previous section, a cognitive approach to teaching grammar regards tenses and modes as elements that interact with reality, as a means for the speaker of making sense and conveying meaning and intention. Thus, the importance of context and the need to immerse in the actual situation of communication that the cognitive approach prioritises, aligns with the idea of dialogues, situations or stories, as opposed to single sentences which lack the necessary pragmatic information required to make grammatical decisions. Therefore, an activity based on a cognitive approach should consist of at least a dialogue or a story in which enough context is provided, so that the learner can make a decision not based on mere memorization or application of a rule. In this sense, the online tool *Twine,* which allows the designer to create a story that unfolds according to the choices that the reader makes between two options that are given, seemed appropriate to design an activity according to a cognitive approach (Molina-Vidal, 2016, p.10). Such a tool provides context and it is interactive—it works like a game in which, depending on the reader's decisions between two tenses or modes (two different past tenses or indicative/subjunctive modes), the story will follow one path or another and will progress towards reaching a goal

or come to an end. This interaction also implied that the player or user is getting immediate feedback about the decisions that are made.

On the other hand, in the format in which the activity was presented, the concept of gamification (Werbach and Hunter, 2012) and its potentials benefits for learning were taken into account. According to Godwin-Jones (2014, p.11) "serious games" are designed specifically for educational use and therefore can be tailored to meet learning and curricular needs, and some of the affordances of using online games in language learning include:

1. It is highly motivating for students who are not interested in formal education. This idea has also been supported by Figueroa-Flores (2015).

2. It provides extensive practice of the target language.

3. It is a safe environment where multiple participants playing at the same time and interacting feel comfortable and create an 'affinity space' (Gee, 2003).

The consideration of both these aspects—cognitive approach and gamification—and the choice of *Twine* for designing one of the activities proposed in this paper has already been elaborated and supported in Molina-Vidal (2016).

Conversely, according to a behaviourist or traditional approach, there is no need to give a context in order to decide which tense or mode is the right one, provided that the activity includes a sentence with a specific structure, which is linked to a grammar rule that the learner will apply. According to this, another activity was designed consisting in ten sentences with a verb in brackets, which had to be written in the appropriate mode—either indicative or subjunctive. In most of the sentences there were some cues that helped the learner to decide which one was the correct mode. However, there were some sentences in which both indicative and subjunctive were possible and there was no information or enough context to assist in making that decision. In those instances, in which both options were possible, the student had to justify his/her decision by providing a plausible context in which either the indicative or the subjunctive (depending on their choice) would work. This activity was presented in a piece of paper, and contrary to the online activity, it was not designed as a game nor was it interactive—there was no goal to be achieved depending on the learner's decisions. Also, no answers were given to the students, so they could not receive immediate feedback or check autonomously whether they were right or wrong but the answers were discussed with the whole class.

In summary, the characteristics of the two activities proposed and compared in this paper are outlined in table 1:

Table 1 Characteristics of Activity 1 and 2

Activity 1 (Based on a cognitive conception of grammar teaching)	Activity 2 (Based on a behaviourist conception of grammar teaching)
• A story	• Sentences without a context or only few contextual information
• Online access	• On paper
• A game – interactive	• Not a game – not interactive
• Answers provided immediately	• Answers are not provided for self-correction

In addition to this, in the design of this study the potential benefits and downsides of the specific features in both activities—and their impact in the learner's reactions and perceptions of teaching and learning—were also taken into consideration. For example, while activity 1 could be more beneficial because the learner has to make decisions in situations, which are similar to real life and this will thus promote a practical use of the grammar content in real communicative situations, this could also constitute a downside. If students usually resort to their memorization of the rules and the purely linguistic cues to make grammatical decisions, they will not know how to use the context to define the speaker's communicative intention and hence to make the right choices.

On the other hand and as far as the context is concerned, although the activity presented using a digital tool is a game, and this could be motivating for students, there were also some potential benefits associated with the paper format in which the other activity was presented. According to Longcamp et al. (2005) handwriting as opposed to typewriting contributes to the recognition of letters. Also, a study conducted by Thomas and Dieter in 1987 (in Luttels, 2015, p.9) showed that handwriting facilitated the memorization of French words, and in general, the acquisition of new vocabulary in a second language (Pichette et al., 2011). The hypothesis that handwriting might facilitate memorization is based on the Involvement Load Theory, which argues that the involvement load of a task, influences the effectiveness of language acquisition (Hulstijn and Laufer, 2001). Accordingly, if handwriting takes more time than typing (Mangel and Velay, 2010), this means that the task will involve more load and thus, will promote more memorization.

A brief summary of the advantages and disadvantages of both activities is included in table 2:

Table 2: Potential Strengths and Weaknesses of both activities

Activity 1 (Based on a cognitive conception of grammar teaching)		Activity 2 (Based on a behaviourist conception of grammar teaching)	
Strengths	Weaknesses	Strengths	Weaknesses
▲ Linked to real life situations and use. ▲ Increased motivation and engagement through the game. ▲ Immediate feedback and answers.	▼ Students are not familiar with the approach or the format in which the activity is presented. The activity takes more time and effort to complete.	▲ It is a type of activity that students already know. It takes less time to complete. ▲ It is the type of activity usually used in exams and assessments. ▲ Handwriting promotes memorization.	▼ The lack of context makes it less related to real life situations or use of language. ▼ It is less motivating and less engaging because is not a game. ▼ Answers and explanations of different possible contexts are not provided immediately but discussed with the whole class.

CONTEXT OF THE INTERVENTION AND ACTIVITIES PROPOSED

Table 3 (overleaf) displays the profile of the group of students who participated in this intervention.

Students were asked to complete two different types of activities but both of them aimed at practicing the same grammar content, namely, the use of the modes indicative and subjunctive in relative clauses in Spanish. Students already knew from previous years this structure and the grammar rule, which determines the use of one mode or the other. The two activities were as follows:

Table 3: Group Characteristics

Group Characteristics	
Type of learner	University undergraduates studying Spanish as foreign language.
Number of participants	100
Level of competence in the target language	B2+/C1 according to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference). All of them had spent at least one semester in a Spanish-speaking country.
Language Learning Approaches used in the past for learning the language	Since all undergraduates had started learning Spanish before entering University, it is assumed that they were exposed to a variety of different learning methodologies and approaches to language learning, including the traditional-behaviourist one.

Activity 1: Online activity/game using the digital tool *Twine* and based on a cognitive approach to the teaching and learning of grammar.

Students could access through the virtual learning environment Minerva from the University of Leeds to an online activity designed using the digital tool *Twine*. The activity was presented as a story called *The Protest,* in which the player has to make the right decisions (choosing indicative or subjunctive modes in relative clauses) so that the main characters in the story avoid to be identified and arrested by the police. If the player/learner makes the right choices the story progresses and the player moves to the next screen, which includes and explanation of why that was the right choice, and a new situation with two new options to choose from. If the player chooses the wrong option, he/she will be led to a screen explaining why that was a wrong choice and why the goal of saving the main characters from the police was not achieved and hence the story has ended. Screen shot 1 shows the edit mode of the digital tool *Twine,* in which we can see how some boxes (screens) lead to other boxes through arrows and how other boxes or situations come to a dead end, meaning, that the option was wrong and the story is finished.

Screen Shot 1: How *Twine* works (edit mode)
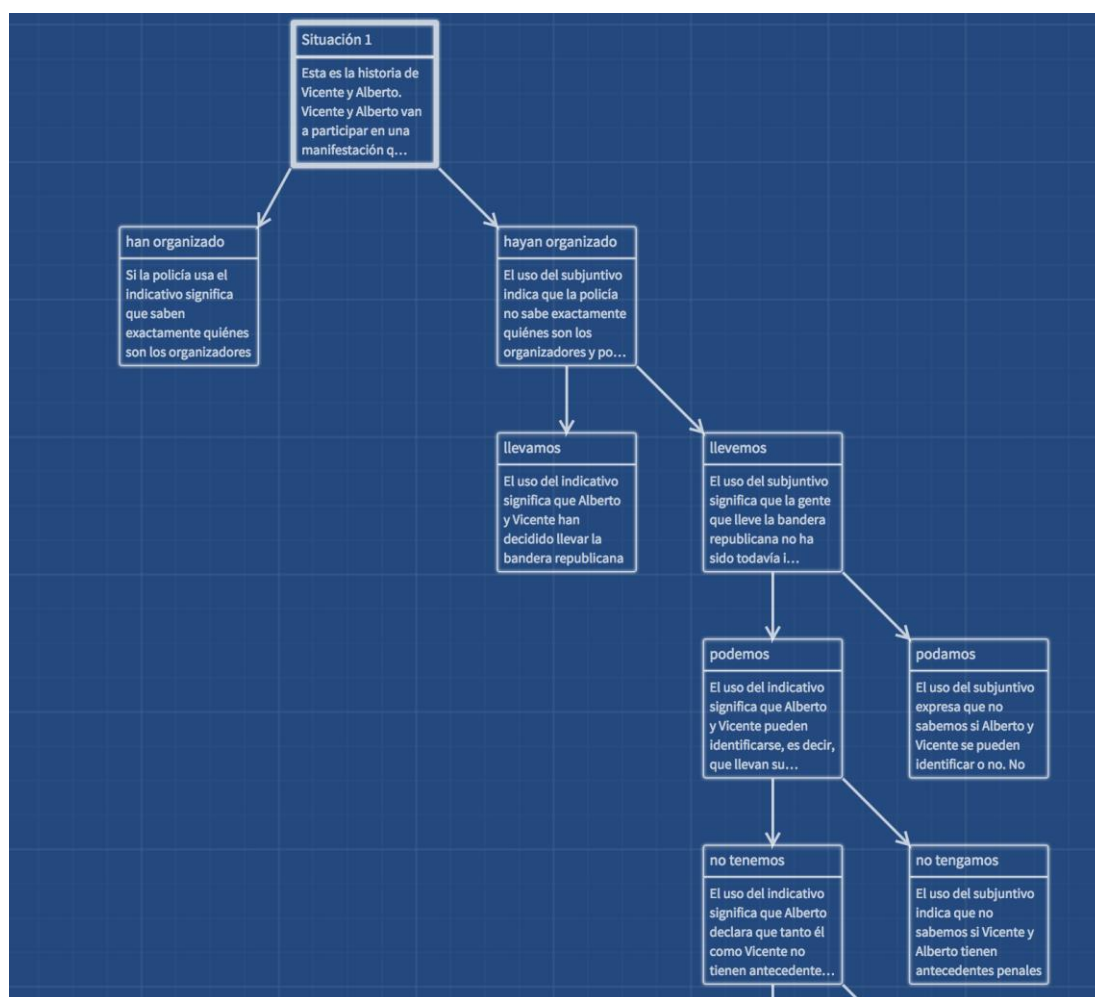
Screen shot 2 shows the first situation the player sees when using the digital tool and the two options highlighted as a link to the next screen.

Screen Shot 2: Situation 1: Presenting the story

The protest/La protesta

This is the story of Vicente and Alberto. They are attending a protest they have organized in front of the Spanish Parliament in Madrid. Acording to the new Law on Public Safety of 2015 there some situations that can lead to prison or being fined. Choose between the two options given (indicative or subjunctive) so that they can avoid prison and so the story will progress.

Alberto and Vicente are attending a protest they have organized in front of the Spanish Parliament in Madrid. The police have said that they will arrest all the people who have organized/might have organized the protest.

Which option will prevent Alberto and Vicente from being arrested?

Alberto y Vicente van a asistir a una manifestación que ellos han organizado frente al Congreso de los diputados de Madrid. La policía ha dicho que van a detener a los que **han organizado**/**hayan organizado** dicha protesta.

¿Cuál de las dos opciones evitará que Alberto y Vicente sean detenidos?

Screen shot 3 shows the screen that will appear if the player/learner chose indicative *'han organizado'* in the previous screen, which was the wrong option.

Screen Shot 3: Screen that appears after wrong option is chosen
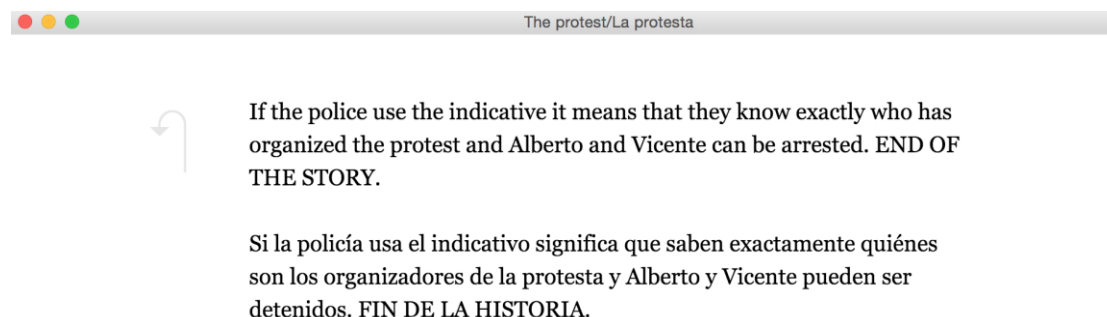
Screen shot 4 shows the screen that will appear if the player/learner chose subjunctive *'hayan organizado'* in the previous screen, which was the right option.

Screen Shot 4: Screen that appears after right option is chosen
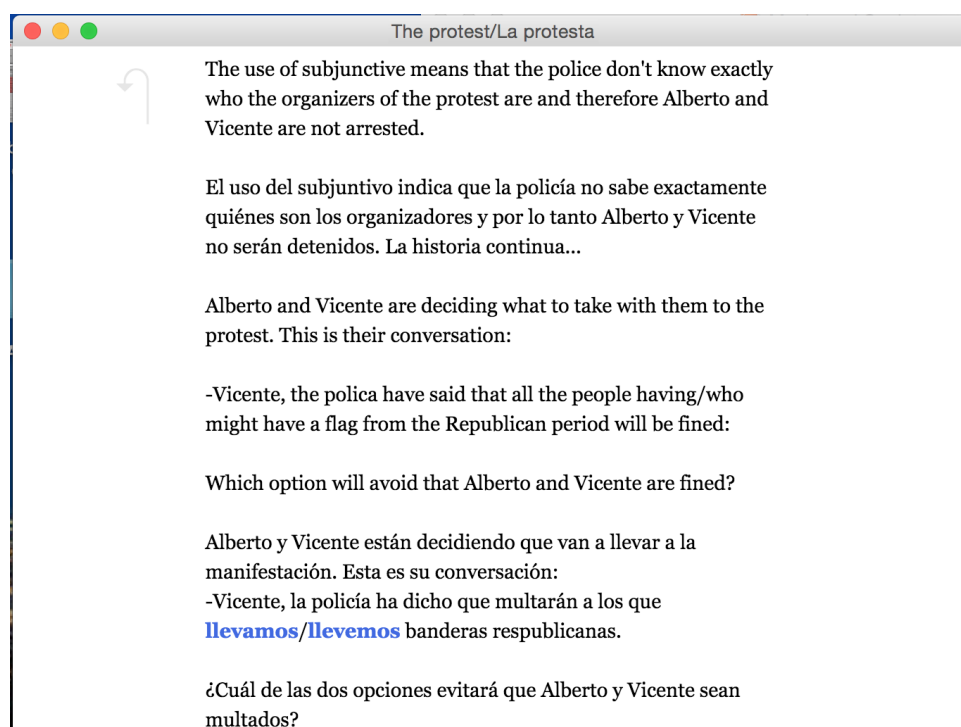
The activity was conducted in class but students had to complete it individually and autonomously. There was no need to check with the whole group the answers because the digital tool provides with explanations for all the choices, hence immediate feedback.

Activity 2: A sheet of paper with 10 sentences (some of them adapted from the Spanish textbook *Sueña 3*) to fill in the gaps and designed according to a traditional and behaviourist conception of language teaching. Screen Shot 5 shows this activity.

Screen Shot 5 – Activity 2: Sentences to Fill in with Indicative or Subjunctive

¿Indicativo o subjuntivo?

Pon el verbo entre paréntesis en indicativo o subjuntivo:

1. Quiero una cama que (ser)   cómoda.

2. A mi hermana le han regalado una cama que (ser)   cómoda.

3. Los graffitis que (adornar)   la ciudad fueron hechos por esa pandilla.

4. La empresa que (adornar)   las calles estas Navidades será elegida por los ciudadanos.

5. Los cristales que (romperse)   no se pueden reutilizar.

6. Las ventanas que (romperse)   serán reparadas por el Ayuntamiento.

7. Los árboles que (rodear)   la plaza fueron destruidos por la fuerza del viento.

8. El techo que (cubrir)   la piscina tiene que ser de plástico.

9. Instalarán unos semáforos que (tener)   sonido para que puedan cruzar los invidentes.

10. Los coches que (tener)   ABS son más seguros.

Adaptado de *Sueña 3*

Activity 2 was conducted in class but students had to complete it individually and autonomously. After completion all the answers were given and discussed with the whole group and in the case that both modes indicative and subjunctive were possible in a sentence, students were asked to provide an appropriate context in which each one of the forms will work.

Once students had finished both activities they were asked to fill out a brief questionnaire. The questionnaire had been designed using the digital tool *Survey Monkey* to collect learners' perceptions and reactions with regards to the two activities presented. The questionnaire included four questions –three multiple-choice questions and one open question– and were the following:

1. Which one of the two activities did you find more difficult?

☐ Online digital tool

☐ Activity on paper

☐ Both of them are equally difficult

2. In which one of the two activities did you have more right answers?

☐ Online digital tool

☐ Activity on paper

☐ In both of them

3. Which one of the two activities 'online digital tool' or 'activity on paper' did you find more effective to learn the difference between indicative and subjunctive? Why?

4. Which type of activity would you like to do in the future to practice your Spanish?

☐ Online digital tool

☐ Activity on paper

☐ Both of them

☐ None of them

A hundred responses were collected.

RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the answers to question 1: Which one of the two activities did you find more difficult?

Figure 1: Q.1: Which one of the two activities did you find more difficult?
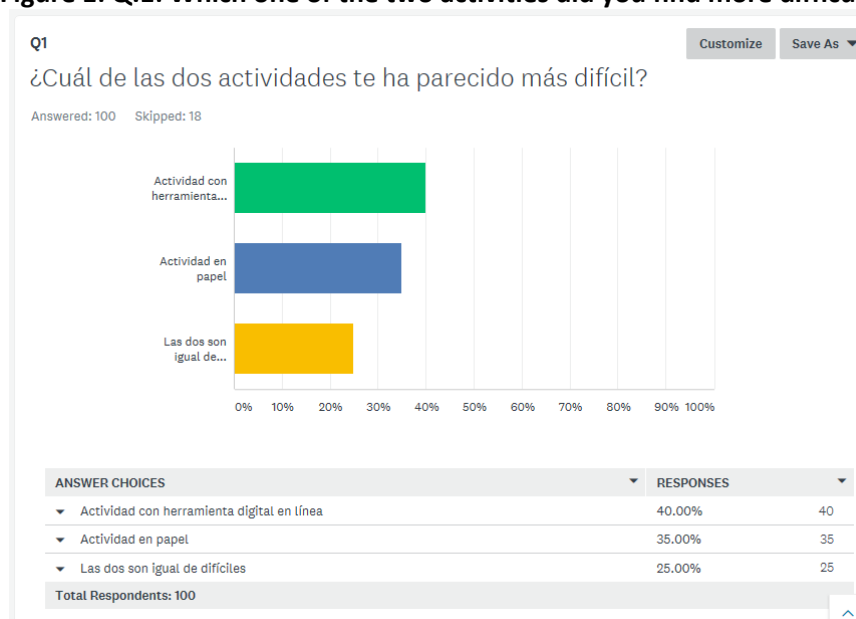
According to the responses, a majority of 40% of undergraduates found the activity using the digital tool *Twine* more difficult than the activity on paper. 35% of the students found the activity on paper more difficult than the online activity, and, finally, 25% of the students found both of them equally challenging.

Figure 2 shows the results for question 2: In which one of the two activities did you have more right answers?

Figure 2: Q.2: In which one of the two activities did you have more right answers?
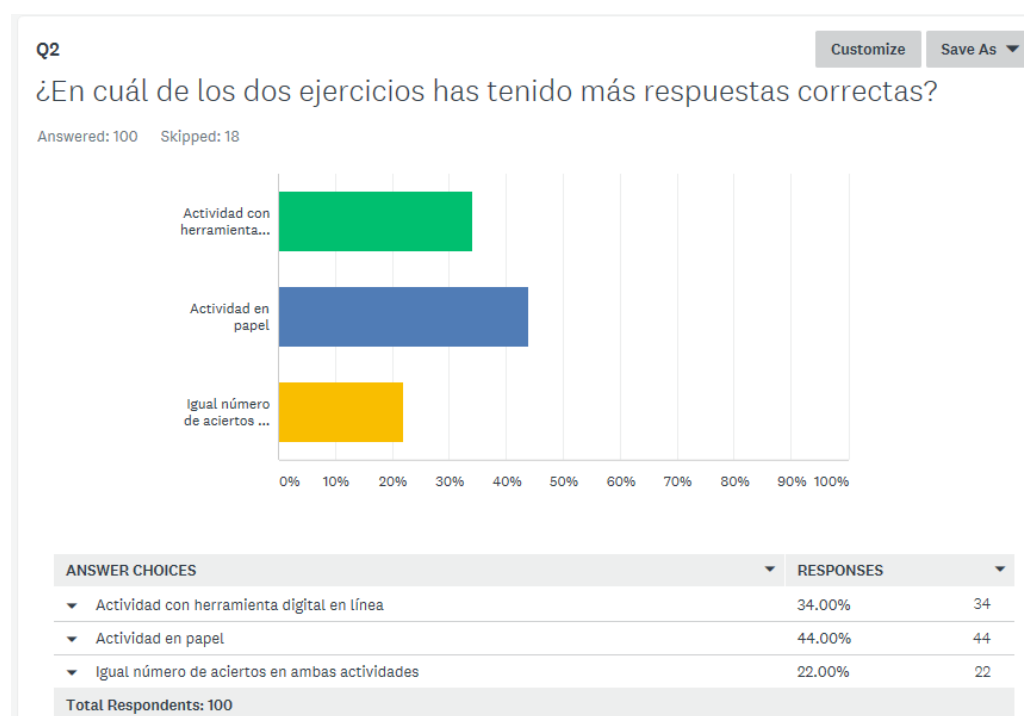
Most of the students (44%) had more right answers in the activity on paper than in the online activity (34%). A percentage of 22% of the participants had equal right or wrong answers in both activities.

Question 3 included two questions, firstly, which one of the two activities 'online digital tool' or 'activity on paper' did you find more effective to learn the difference between indicative and subjunctive? And, secondly, Why? The results to this question are twofold: On the one hand, how effective students found each one of the activities and on the other hand the reasons underpinning their choices. Table 4 shows the answers to the first question, namely, which one of the activities proposed was more effective for the practice of indicative and subjunctive in relative clauses for which four main categories of responses were identified:

Table 4: Which one of the two activities 'online digital tool' or 'activity on paper' did you find more effective to learn the difference between indicative and subjunctive?

More effective activity	Percentage %
Online activity	49%
Activity on paper	32%
Both	17%
N/A or not question-related answer	2%

As far as the second question of question 3 is concerned, that is, why students found one activity more efficient than the other in order to practice the difference between indicative and subjunctive, the answers will be presented in relation to each one of the four categories shown in table 4:

-**The online activity was more effective**: All responses in which the online activity was chosen as the most effective included one of the following elements:

- More context was helpful to make decisions (32 responses included this aspect).
- The situations presented are more related to real-life situations (7 responses).
- Immediate feedback and solutions (5 responses).
- Good and clear explanations after each screen (19 responses).
- Interactivity and the possibility of doing the activity again even if the answer was wrong (4 responses).
- It is a different and entertaining way of learning (5 responses).

Screen shots 6 to 13 (see appendix) show some of the answers supporting the choice for online activity as the most effective according to the factors mentioned before. A translation into English of those comments is provided below:

'I liked the online activity more because there was a story, which made it easier to understand individual situations'. (Participant 8).

'The online activity. Although none of my answers were correct, I think that knowing the context gives you more opportunity to choose the right option'. (Participant 45).

'The first activity because there is an explanation of the context, in which we have to choose between two options. This is more similar to a real-life situation.' (Participant 1).

'Online because it gives me "feedback" that helps me understand why I was right/wrong. In paper, it is possible to get the right answer without knowing the reason why'. (Participant 56).

'Online because the correct answers are explained in a way that it is easy to understand'. (Participant 10).

'Online is more interactive. There are consequences from our choices'. (Participant 51).

'Online you can try again and also you get immediate feedback. Also, there is no risk of losing the piece of paper'. (Participant 61).

'The online activity was more entertaining and with good explanations'. (Participant 71).

-**The activity on paper was more effective**: The answers of the participants who preferred the activity on paper are related to one of the following aspects:

- Easy to read and to memorize (2 responses).
- More examples and short sentences provided which make the activity look easy (6 responses).
- The possibility of making notes on the paper and accessibility to the activity for further practice and study (12 responses).
- Answers need to be discussed or explained by the tutor because no immediate feedback is provided (2 responses).
- There are no options and the conjugated form is not provided, so it is necessary to think carefully about the right response (6 responses).

Screen Shots 14 to 22 (see appendixes) include the comments that justify why students chose the activity on paper as the most effective according to the factors mentioned before. A translation into English of those comments is provided below:

'On paper, I find it difficult to pay attention to the activity on my phone. The text is small and external notifications may distract' (Participant 2).

'On paper, because I remember better the information after the activity' (Participant 11)

'On paper the sentences seemed easier' (Participant 57).

'On paper because I can write the correct answer next to the question' (Participant 33).

'On paper because it is possible to keep it in your folder and it is easier to find for further study. It is possible to forget if there are activities on Minerva. (Sorry for the lack of accents it is difficult in my ipad if it does not appear automatically haha). (Participant 39).

'The activity on paper because there are times when the difference is very subtle and it has to be discussed and, sometimes, defend the 'incorrect' answers'. (Participant 31).

'On paper because the teacher explains everything after completing the activity'. (Participant 38).

'On paper because you have to think more about the answer when the options are not provided in the activity'. (Participant 54).

'On paper because we need to conjugate the verb'. (Participant 98).

-**Both activities were considered equally effective**: 17% of the participants regarded both activities as equally effective for a combination of reasons related to the aspects mentioned before and referred to the online activity and the activity on paper. Screen shots 23 to 26 (see appendixes) present some of the ideas supporting the effectiveness of both activities. A translation into English of those comments is provided below:

'Both activities were useful for me because on paper you can discuss the context in each sentence and defend your decision in that sentence. On the contrary, the online activity was useful because there is a right answer for each given situation'. (Participant 12).

'I think that both activities are effective because they show different methods to learn subjunctive and indicative'. (Participant 17).

'For me, they are the same. I like the online activity because it is more fun and after each exercise the answer is explained. But the activity on paper present the grammar in a more formal context and it is more difficult'. (Participant 75).

'The first (online) helped me because it links the use of subjunctive to situations, while the activity on paper was easier, maybe because there are short sentences and it is easier to find the information that helps you to make a decision. Also, I can underline my thoughts on paper'. (Participant 77).

Finally, there were two answers, which were not considered for analysis because either the participant refused to give an answer and reply with N/A to the question, or the answer was not dealing with the effectiveness of the activities but with the difficulty of both tasks, which was the content of question 1.

The final question included in the survey was aimed at finding out students' preferences for future activities and practice of Spanish grammar. Figure 3 shows the results linked to question 4: Which type of activity would you like to do in the future to practice your Spanish?

Figure 3: Q.4: Which type of activity would you like to do in the future to practice your Spanish?

¿Qué tipo de actividad te gustaría hacer en el future para practicar español?

Answered: 100   Skipped: 18

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Actividad con herramienta digital en línea	19.00%	19
Actividad en papel	26.00%	26
Las dos me gustan por igual	57.00%	57
Ninguna de las dos me interesa	1.00%	1
Total Respondents: 100		
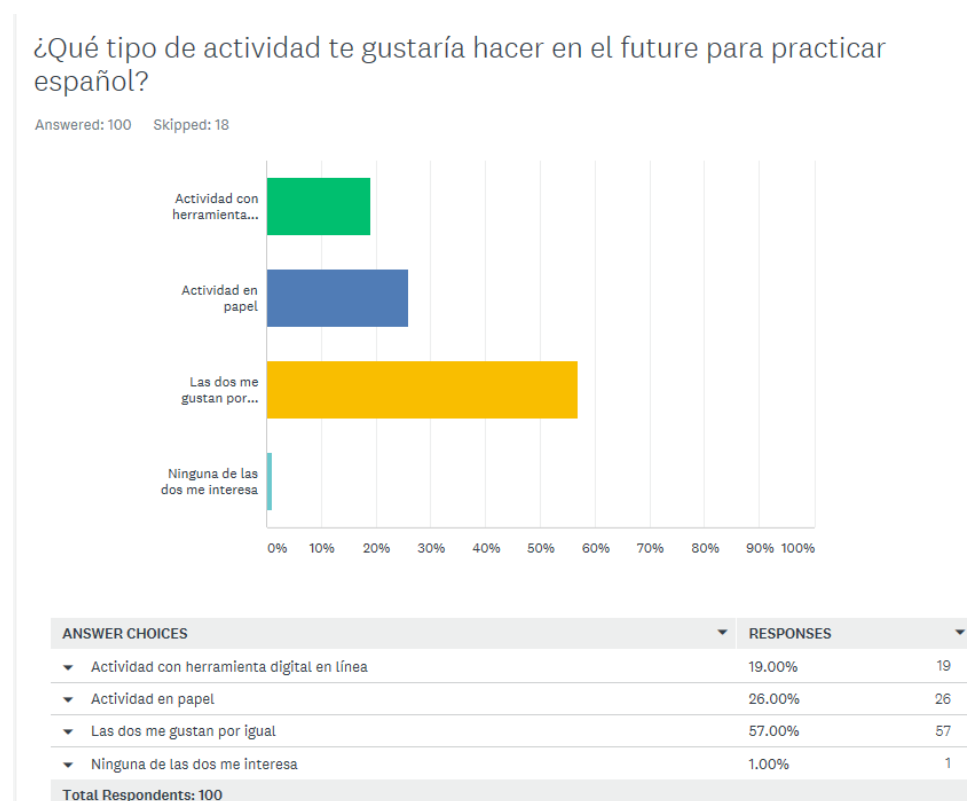
The figure shows that a majority of the students (57%) preferred to have both types of activities to practice their Spanish. 26% of them showed more interest in the activity on paper than on the online activity (19%) and 1% of the participants expressed no interested in neither of them.

DISCUSSION

According to results from question 1, a majority (40%) of participants found the online activity more difficult than the activity on paper. There might be some reasons supporting this idea:

- Students are not familiar with the type of format that is being used for presenting or practising the grammar. Thus, in addition to thinking about the grammar rule to be applied they need to understand how the activity works and the implications of their decisions.

- In the online activity only one of the options was correct and the story is designed in a way that if the student does not have a clear understanding of the uses of indicative and subjunctive in relative clauses, it is not possible to make a reasoned decision. In this sense, some of the students might have found out that, in fact, they thought they knew the rule in theory but they don't when it comes to applying it to real situations and contexts. Also, in the online activity only one of the options was correct, while in the activity on paper there was more flexibility and some sentences could accept both indicative and subjunctive and it was up to the student to provide a context in which his/her decision would work.

- As pointed out by some participants in question 3, the short sentences of the activity on paper as opposed to the long text/story of the online activity made the activity on paper look easier and more accessible than the online one.

On the other hand 35% of the students found the activity on paper more difficult. This could be due to any of the following reasons:

- The lack of context in the sentences made it more difficult to choose between indicative and subjunctive. Students might have felt that they were filling the gaps with one option or the other but they didn't really know why.

- As mentioned by one of the participants in question 3, the activity on paper demanded from the student to conjugate the verb in the appropriate form, while in the online activity the form in indicative or subjunctive was already provided. This may have posed an extra effort on completing the activity on paper.

- The fact that they were not getting immediate feedback or getting the option of repeating the activity—as in the online activity—might have put more pressure on making the right decision.

Finally 22% of the responses show an equal degree of difficulty in both activities. This might be explained by a combination of any of the reasons mentioned before in favour of one activity or the other. For example, the student might find the online activity difficult because there is only one correct answer while in the activity on paper in some sentences both

indicative and subjunctive could work, but, conversely, on the activity on paper there was no context and, thus, the student has to think about both the form and the appropriate context that would suit that verb mode.

As far as the results of question 2 is concerned, there seems to be a correlation between these and those of question 1, whereby a majority of participants 44% had more correct answers in the activity on paper. This aligns with the majority of responses stating that the online activity was more difficult (40%) in question 1, meaning, that if they found the online activity more difficult that is why their choices were incorrect. On the other hand, since some of the sentences in the activity on paper accepted both indicative and subjunctive as correct answers, this will explained why most of the students had more correct answers in the activity on paper.

Regarding question 3 in the survey, the analysis of the qualitative data allows to identify some trends in students' perceptions of both activities and how these relate to either the type of approach or the format. A majority of 49% of the participants thought that the online activity was more effective in terms of learning and practising the grammar, and this has been linked to some of the following factors mentioned in the previous section:

- More context was helpful to make decisions (this comment is related to the type of approach to teaching the grammar).
- The situations presented are more related to real-life situations (this is related to the type of approach to teaching the grammar).
- Immediate feedback and solutions (this is related to online game format)
- Good and clear explanations after each screen (this is related to the online game format).
- Interactivity and the possibility of doing the activity again even if the answer was wrong (this is related to the online game format).
- It is a different and entertaining way of learning (this is related to the online game format).

From these data it can be drawn that students prefer to have as much information as possible or context, in activities to practice Spanish grammar. Also, participants appreciated the similarity of the examples included in the activity with real-life situations. Immediate feedback and clarification of the responses is also highly valued in an activity, as well as the

possibility of repeating the exercise. Finally, the originality of the activity and the gaming component seem to be regarded as positive in an activity but only a few answers highlighted this aspect.

On the other hand the benefits and effectiveness of completing the activity according to a traditional approach of grammar teaching and on paper according to 32% of the responses were linked to the following aspects:

- Easy to read and to memorize (this is related to the format).
- More examples and short sentences provided, which make the activity look easy (this is related to a traditional approach to grammar teaching).
- The possibility of making notes on the paper and accessibility to the activity for further practice and study (this is related to the format).
- Answers need to be discussed or explained by the tutor because no immediate feedback is provided (this is related to the format).
- There are no options and the conjugated form is not provided, so it is necessary to think carefully about the right response (this is related to the format).

Some of the participants found it difficult to read and focus when the activity was presented online. Also, they felt it was easier and more convenient to keep a physical copy of the activity for further review and study than the non-tangible virtual one. The fact that they could write by hand on the piece of paper seemed beneficial for some of the participants as well, and some even highlighted that the activity on paper was better for memorization purposes. This information is relevant to understand how the physicality or tangible nature of some working processes and tools is still necessary for some students to retain and learn more efficiently as opposed to the virtual and non-tangible online tools. Also, this aligns with what has been pointed out at the beginning of this paper regarding the benefits of handwriting for the memorization of words. Thus it could be drawn from some of these observations that the contact through touch with the learning tools establishes a beneficial connection for some students, which promotes learning.

On the other hand, the provision of more context in the online activity seemed to be not so beneficial to other students who pointed out that short sentences made it easier to complete the exercise. Additionally, the need to conjugate the verb in the activity on paper was regarded as more effective because it forced them to think about tenses and forms.

Finally, it is worth noting that also for some of them immediate feedback was not as useful or effective as the need to discuss and reason the answers with the tutor and the whole class after completion of the activity. This piece of information is particularly useful for the analysis of students' preferences because it shows the importance of dialogue and the co-construction of knowledge for some learners as part of the learning process. This idea is in tune with Ausubel's conception of learning, according to which learning is a process in which pre-existing ideas in the cognitive structure assimilate new concepts through interaction (1985:75). In this same sense Vygotsky (1978:33) proposed the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), an area in which previous ideas and new information interact thus facilitating the development of new skills. Accordingly, for some of the participants in the survey this kind of interaction is necessary and useful for them to learn and it is more effective than immediate feedback or explanations that are read but not discussed.

Finally 17% of the participants thought that both activities were equally effective for different reasons and this was supported by a combination of the factors mentioned above and which favoured either the online activity or the activity on paper. This response is linked, in turn, with question 4 in which students are asked about their preferred activities to practice Spanish in the future. The aim of this question was to identify students' preferences at the beginning of the academic year in order to design materials that respond to their needs and introduce them over semester 1 and 2. The results of question 4, however, are not so aligned with responses in question 3 because, although a majority of the participants (49%) agreed in question 3 in that the online activity was more effective—leading us to conclude that this would be the activity most preferred in the future—in question 4 the majority of the students (57%) stated that they would like to have both activities for future and further practice of Spanish grammar. In this sense, it seems that learners acknowledge the different aspects that both activities are covering in the learning process and, although in general they see more effectiveness and practicality in the online activity, they are also reluctant to miss the aspects of the more traditional way of presenting content through the activity on paper.

CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the main question of this study, namely, whether our students are willing to practice Spanish grammar according to a cognitive approach, the analysis of results seems to

indicate that although they found the online activity more difficult (40%), they also considered that it was more effective (49%), and they are willing to incorporate it as part of their learning and practising experience along with more traditional activities (57%).

In general, students appreciate the provision of more context and the connection with real-life situations of the online activity as well as the immediate feedback and the possibility of multiple attempts.

As far as the second question of this study is concerned, namely students' attitudes towards the format in which the activities were presented, the answers are not conclusive as to whether they prefer the online format or the paper. Only a few participants explicitly mentioned the gaming component as a positive aspect and one student described the activity on paper as more formal that the online activity, meaning that learners may still regard games as informal and not suitable form of studying grammar. This may be due to the traditional view of grammar to which students have been usually exposed over the years. According to this traditional view, grammar is regarded as a hard, rule-based, strict discipline, which responds to the straightforward application of rules and based on memorisation rather than a more flexible approach in which contextual circumstances and the speaker's point of view play a role.

Conversely, participants highlighted the possibility of writing on a piece of paper—which promotes visualization and memorization of information—the need to discuss with the whole class the different options in the activity on paper and tutor's explanations as beneficial for their learning process. Thus, undergraduates appreciate the use of both types of activities in the teaching and learning process, which means that they acknowledge both the affordances and the limitations that each of them encompass. This, in turn, is related to the limitations of the study and the need for further exploration of this topic. Such limitations include, for example, the lack of information regarding autonomous learning and the setting where the activities have been performed. In this sense, another question could have been added to the survey, in which students had to reflect on the suitability of the activity for autonomous learning or learning with the whole class, and also the most suitable place to conduct this type of learning –at home/autonomous learning vs. classroom/learning with classmates and the tutor. In doing so, a more clear distinction and correlation between the nature of the activity (traditional, on paper/online, game), its suitability for a specific setting (classroom/home), type of learning (autonomous/tutor-guided in a group) or stage in

the process of learning (early stages of applying the rule or late stages of practice in which the rule is already known and activities are aimed at consolidating knowledge) could have been drawn.

Despite this, this study also offers some affordances and useful information, which may include:

- Getting first-hand information about students' conceptions of the teaching and learning process.

- Getting first-hand information about student's preferences for practising Spanish grammar.

- Getting confirmation of the need to cover different learning styles in the classroom by offering students different types of activities.

- Assessing the extent to which students are willing to accept new approaches and materials to learn and/or practice the grammar.

- Getting information to design activities dealing with the same content but with different purposes: autonomous learning, application or consolidation of a rule, practice at home or in the classroom.

- Getting confirmation that students do appreciate the interactivity and discussion in the classroom with the tutor and the rest of their peers as part of the learning process, thus counteracting the fear that digital technologies would replace face-to-face tuition and the concept of technological determinism (Oliver, 2011).

To summarize, this study shows the benefits of designing activities according to different formats and various learning approaches to respond to different students' needs. Additionally, it also reflects the importance of exposing learners to new and innovative ways of learning and practising language content, so that they have a wide range of resources available to manage and monitor their own learning process. The results of the survey also show that in general undergraduates are willing to integrate new ways of practising grammatical content and they embrace the use of digital tools, while still holding on to the traditional and familiar ways of learning even if they think that the new ones are more effective. This way of thinking seems to be prompted, among other factors, by traditional visions of grammar as a strict, formal and difficult aspect of language while the online game may be regarded as informal, and also by the degree of familiarity of the student with traditional activities to which they are more accustomed. Anyhow, both the affordances and

limitations of using digital technologies in learning (as pointed out by many students in the survey) seem to be aligned with the concept of blended-learning, meaning, that different types of activities may coexist but online games might be more appropriate for further practice and autonomous learning at home while other formats would be more suitable for discussion in class.

Finally, the whole study emphasizes the need for tutors to engage in a constructive discussion and negotiation with our students regarding learning approaches and materials. If one of the aims of teaching languages is not only to teach how to communicate but also what means to be a learner and how to become a more autonomous learner (CEFR, 2001, p.141) then we must invite students to critically reflect on their own learning experiences and adapt our materials to meet their needs.

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Appendices

Screen Shots 6-13: The online activity was more effective

Screen Shot 6: Context

Me gustaba más la actividad en línea porque había una historia que se hace más fácil entender las situaciónes individuales.

10/3/2018 11:48 AM   View respondent's answers

'I liked the online activity more because there was a story, which made it easier to understand individual situations'. (Participant 8)

Screen Shot 7: Context

La actividad en línea. Aunque ninguna de mis respuetas era correcta, pienso que saber mas contexto se da mas oportunidad para elegir la opicion correcta

10/2/2018 12:25 PM   View respondent's answers

'The online activity. Although none of my answers were correct, I think that knowing the context gives you more opportunity to choose the right option'. (Participant 45).

Screen Shot 8: Real-life related situations

La primera actividad porque hay una explicación del contexto en el que hay que elegir entre las opciones. Esto se me parece más relacionado con la vida actual.

10/4/2018 11:25 AM   View respondent's answers

'The first activity because there is an explanation of the context, in which we have to choose between two options. This is more similar to a real-life situation.' (Participant 1).

Screen Shot 9: Immediate feedback

En línea porque me da "feedback" que me ayuda entender por qué estuve correcto/incorrecto. En pápel, es posible conseguir la respuesta correcta sin saber la razón correcta.

10/2/2018 10:26 AM   View respondent's answers

'Online because it gives me "feedback" that helps me understand why I was right/wrong. In paper, it is possible to get the right answer without knowing the reason why'. (Participant 56).

Screen Shot 10: Clear explanations

En línea, porque explican las repuestas correctas en una manera muy fácil para entender

10/3/2018 11:48 AM   View respondent's answers

'Online because the correct answers are explained in a way that it is easy to understand'. (Participant 10).

Screen Shot 11: Interactivity

En línea, porque es más interactivo. Hay consecuencias de nuestros elecciones.

10/2/2018 10:27 AM   View respondent's answers

'Online is more interactive. There are consequences from our choices'. (Participant 51).

Screen Shot 12: The possibility of trying again

En línea, porque puedes reintentarlo, y también, recibes feedback instante. También, no hay riesgo de perderlo como una hoja de papel.

10/2/2018 10:25 AM   View respondent's answers

'Online you can try again and also you get immediate feedback. Also, there is no risk of losing the piece of paper'. (Participant 61).

Screen Shot 13: Entertaining

En línea me pareció más divertida y con buenas explicaciones.

10/2/2018 10:18 AM   View respondent's answers

'The online activity was more entertaining and with good explanations'. (Participant 71).

Screen Shots 14-22: The activity on paper was more effective

Screen Shot 14: Easy to read

En papel. Me viene difícil prestar atención al ejercicio en móvil. Texto pequeño y notificaciones externas.

10/4/2018 11:25 AM   View respondent's answers

'On paper, I find it difficult to pay attention to the activity on my phone. The text is small and external notifications may distract' (Participant 2).

Screen Shot 15: Easy to remember

En papel, porque recuerdo mejor la información después del ejercicio

10/3/2018 11:48 AM   View respondent's answers

'On paper, because I remember better the information after the activity' (Participant 11).

Screen Shot 16: Sentences seem easier

En papel, las frases parecían más simples

10/2/2018 10:26 AM   View respondent's answers

'On paper the sentences seemed easier' (Participant 57).

Screen Shot 17: The possibility of writing on the paper

En papel, porque puedo escribir la correcion al lado de la pregunta

10/2/2018 12:26 PM   View respondent's answers

'On paper because I can write the correct answer next to the question' (Participant 33).

Screen Shot 18: Easier to keep for further learning

En papel porque es poisible ponerlo en la carpeta después y es mas fácil encontrarlo para estudiar mas tarde. Es posible olvidar si hay ejercicios en Minerva. (Perdón la falta de unas tildes es difícil en my ipad si no es automático jaja)

10/2/2018 12:26 PM   View respondent's answers

'On paper because it is possible to keep it in your folder and it is easier to find for further study. It is possible to forget if there are activities on Minerva. (Sorry for the lack of accents it is difficult in my ipad if it does not appear automatically haha). (Participant 39).

Screen Shot 19: The need to discuss the answers

> El actividad en papel porque hay muchas veces cuando la diferencia es muy sútil y hay que discutirla y, a veces, defender las respuestas 'incorrectas'
>
> 10/2/2018 12:27 PM   View respondent's answers

'The activity on paper because there are times when the difference is very subtle and it has to be discussed and, sometimes, defend the 'incorrect' answers'. (Participant 31).

Screen Shot 20: Answers are explained by the tutor

> En papel porque la profesora explica todo después de hacerla.
>
> 10/2/2018 12:26 PM   View respondent's answers

'On paper because the teacher explains everything after completing the activity'. (Participant 38).

Screen Shot 21: Thinking more carefully about the answer

> En papel, porque piensas más en tu respuesta cuando no hay opciones
>
> 10/2/2018 10:26 AM   View respondent's answers

'On paper because you have to think more about the answer when the options are not provided in the activity'. (Participant 54).

Screen Shot 22: The need for conjugating the verb

> En papel, ya que necesitamos conjugar el verbo
>
> 10/1/2018 11:24 AM   View respondent's answers

'On paper because we need to conjugate the verb'. (Participant 98).

Screen Shots 23-26: Both activities were considered equally effective

Screen Shot 23

> Las dos actividades fueron útiles para mí porque en papel se puede discutir del contexto de cada frase y defender tu decisión por la respuesta. En cambio la actividad en línea era útil porque hay una respuesta correcta en la situación dada.
>
> 10/3/2018 11:47 AM   View respondent's answers

'Both activities were useful for me because on paper you can discuss the context in each sentence and defend your decision in that sentence. On the contrary, the online activity was useful because there is a right answer for each given situation'. (Participant 12).

Screen Shot 24

Creo que las dos actividades son efectivas porque son métodos distintos para aprender sobre el subjuntivo y el indicativo.

10/3/2018 11:46 AM   View respondent's answers

'I think that both activities are effective because they show different methods to learn subjunctive and indicative'. (Participant 17).

Screen Shot 25

Para mí, son iguales. Me gusta la actividad en línea porque es divertida y depués de cada ejercicio se explica la razón por la repuesta. Aunque también la actividad en papel presenta la gramática en un contexto más formal y es un poco más difícil.

10/1/2018 11:29 AM   View respondent's answers

'For me, they are the same. I like the online activity because it is more fun and after each exercise the answer is explained. But the activity on paper present the grammar in a more formal context and it is more difficult'. (Participant 75).

Screen Shot 26

El primero (en línea) me ayudé porque entreteje el uso de subjuntivo con situaciones, mientras que la actividad en papel fue más fácil - quizás porque son frases cortas y es mas fácil buscar información que me ayude decidir. También puedo subrayar mis pensamientos en papel.

10/1/2018 11:27 AM   View respondent's answers

'The first (online) helped me because it links the use of subjunctive to situations, while the activity on paper was easier, maybe because there are short sentences and it is easier to find the information that helps you to make a decision. Also, I can underline my thoughts on paper'. (Participant 77).

Enhancing international students' experience with formative feedback through audio feedback

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ABSTRACT

Formative feedback can have a transformative impact on learning. Therefore, learners need to interact with this feedback to develop and achieve in their studies. This article outlines how international students' study experiences were further enhanced by audio formative feedback and how it added value to their overall learning. The small-scale case study employed a mixed methods approach (quantitative via a questionnaire and qualitative via a focus group interview) to a cohort of 16 international students and it evidenced that audio formative feedback was a positive experience. The results showed it promoted student agency, developed their listening and academic skills, encouraged them to revisit feedback to check their understanding and progression and engaged them with formative feedback. The primary message promulgated by this case study is that audio feedback re-engages international students with formative feedback as a tool for learner development which in turn will aid progression and achievement in their studies.

KEYWORDS: formative feedback, audio feedback, international students, listening skills, academic skills

INTRODUCTION

Formative feedback is essential to progress 'deep' learning (Biggs, 1999; Hyland, 2000; Higgins, Hartley and Skelton, 2002). The interaction that takes place between tutors and students can enhance learning by contributing to 'deeper' conceptual understanding and learning at higher cognitive levels. However, experience of teaching academic English in higher education in the UK shows that students do not always accord this feedback the attention it deserves. Observation, in this education environment, has shown that students measure their progress through their grades as these are viewed as concrete evidence of their progression (Wojtas, 1998 cited in Weaver, 2006, p.380; Brown, 2007 cited in HEA, 2013, p.13; Gedye, 2010).

This paper responded to this situation in the form of 'audio formative feedback' in an effort to engage students to interact with their formative feedback, in a concerted manner, as a primary tool to enhance their learning and achievement. This article outlines a case study with respect to audio formative feedback and evidences how audio feedback enhanced and added extra value to students' learning.

Researchers have confirmed that formative feedback should be supportive, multi-dimensional, non-evaluative, timely, specific and credible (Brophy, 1981; Schwartz and White, 2000) and that it can have many different forms (Hyland, 2000). Formative feedback in this article is identified as being specific, detailed and constructive to refocus students on the learning process and re-engage them with the intrinsic value of learning rather than focus solely on grades. It is very much within Vygotsky's (1978) socio-constructivist paradigm whereby students are provided with comments and suggestions and through dialogue are facilitated to take charge of their own revisions thus gaining new understandings without those understandings being dictated (Archer, 2010 and Evans, 2013).

This study asserts digital audio feedback is a necessary tool to engage students with their formative feedback. Audio feedback, in this study, is considered as formative verbal feedback delivered in a digital sound file by a tutor (Hennessy and Forrester, 2014) that can be easily disseminated to the student (Middleton, 2016).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The frameworks used to situate this case study concern the utility of formative assessment (Archer, 2010; Bennett, 2011; Barram, 2017) and studies concerning audio feedback (Orsmond, Merry and Reiling, 2005; Merry and Orsmond, 2008; Hooper, 2010; Lunt and Curran, 2010; Hennessy and Forrester, 2014; Middleton, 2016) which have found that it can have a positive impact on student learning with respect to their engagement with feedback. Further discussion of literature on audio feedback is considered in the Results and Analysis section.

In the feedback landscape, literature on audio feedback has increased in recent years. However, there appears to be a deficit of international students' experiences with regards to audio formative feedback. In the present neo-liberal climate of internationalisation, marketisation, financialisation and commodification in higher education (Hadley, 2015; Cruickshank, 2016; Ding and Bruce, 2017), it

seems pertinent for this case study to investigate audio formative feedback's impact on international students' learning.

METHODOLOGY

Audio Feedback

Audio formative feedback was delineated in two ways to the participants. One by using mp3 and the second by screencast 'technology'. This article has discussed audio feedback experience 'generically'. It has not outlined the differences in experiences of delivering and receiving audio feedback via mp3 or screencast. The scope of this study was not to compare but rather to experiment and become conversant with providing audio feedback. For detailed information on audio-visual feedback by screencasting see Martinez-Arboleda's (2018a and 2018b) research. The purpose of this study was to investigate to what extent participants engaged with audio formative feedback and its impact on their learning.

Ten participants were presented audio formative feedback via an mp3 recording combined with brief annotation by tracking changes asynchronously. This initially entailed reading the text and noting brief comments via 'track changes' on the pc. Then, detailed spoken comments with reference to examples in the text were recorded on the mp3 player. Six participants were provided audio formative feedback via screencast desktop capture synchronously. This necessitated reading and providing comments (oral and brief annotations via 'track changes') simultaneously.

All participants received their audio formative feedback as a sound file seven days after submission via email.

Ethical Considerations

The participants, who were all anonymised, were recruited from the researcher's teaching environment which raises questions pertaining to both the participants and the researcher with respect to power differentials, motivation, coercion and exploitation (Mauthner et al, 2002). This study has been mindful of these issues and it has ensured that all the ethical procedures were adhered to rigorously (such as informed consent and the opportunity to withdraw participation up to the point of data analysis).

Participants

The sample were international students from the researcher's academic writing class who were invited to take part in this study, 16 out of a total of 18 students volunteered. They were a mixture of nationalities: Arabic[1] (five males and two females), Chinese (four females and three males) and Khazak (one female and one male). Their ages ranged from 22-26. They came from a diverse educational background. It was their first experience of studying at a British university in preparation to commence their postgraduate studies in Arts, Humanities and Physical Sciences. Ten participants received audio formative feedback on their draft essay (written for summative assessment). Six received audio formative feedback on a piece of reflective writing (a reflection is included in the writing summative assessment). All participants completed the questionnaire survey. Six participants volunteered (two Arabic and two Chinese males and two Chinese females) to take part in the focus group. The group contained three participants who received audio formative feedback on their draft essay (via mp3 recording) and three on their reflection (via screencast).

Structure of Audio Formative Feedback

The audio formative feedback needed to be logical and easy for participants to access. The format was adapted from previous studies (Cann, 2014; Ryder and Davis, 2016; Barram, 2017) and it was structured in this way for ease and consistency:

- Greeted student by name and introduced self
- Explained feedback divided into four sections
    - Structure
    - Content
    - Language
    - Brief overall summary of key points
- Used specific examples with reference to page and paragraph numbers to enable participants to follow clearly
- Tone was conversational (to ensure access and engagement)
- Length was between four-eight minutes (dependent on the amount of feedback that was required for the individual participant)

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[1] The term Arabic is used to denote Saudi Arabian, Iraqi and Kuwaiti participants.

Data Collection

The research instruments used were mixed methods approaches to draw on the strengths and to minimise the limitations that each method brings (Johnson and Onwuegbuzi, 2004). In line with Searle's (2003) argument that triangulation of data sources aims to enrich understanding and multiple perspectives should be the focus by which qualitative research is measured, this study included two (albeit not multiple) forms of data collection - qualitative (focus group interview) and a brief 'quantitative' type survey (questionnaire with some qualitative data) - and they were analysed by using strategies designed to achieve triangulation by categorization, searching for recurring themes, developing a code for the themes and coding the transcripts.

Previous studies on audio feedback have also utilised this approach such as Ice et al (2007), Macgregor et al (2011) and Hennessy and Forrester (2014) to realise the strengths of both these approaches of data collection. However, primarily, the questionnaire in this study was employed to gain an overall sense of participants' views about their experience of audio feedback and it was divided into three sections:

- Participants' understanding/ perception of formative feedback and audio feedback
- Participants' usual experience of formative feedback
- Participants' perception of receiving audio formative feedback

These questions were structured with options from which the participants chose their response(s) with two questions which gave the option of adding further detail - see Appendix A. The data was collected via the Bristol Online Survey platform.

The data collection was extended to a small focus group interview (consisting of participants who completed the questionnaire), to enable further qualitative data. Its mainly inductive approach appeared to be the most appropriate for questions about behaviour, motives, views and barriers as well as to enable a collection of rich data (Johnson and Onwuegbuzi, 2004). Direct contact with the participants is necessary to understand their social world through their lenses and voices (Buchanan, 2000).

The focus group entailed a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions – see Appendix B - to collect participant-driven data to provide detail, depth and the participants' perspectives. Further expansion of their responses was arrived at by prompts and follow-up questions. The data was analysed by using open coding to identify themes (Charmaz, 2014).

The sample size of this study is very small which needs to be taken into account with respect to validity. Nevertheless, it could be argued, for a qualitative study the sample is a reasonable size. However, the participants' responses in one small focus group are not necessarily representative of a larger international student population. The mixed methods approach, questionnaire and focus group interview, enabled triangulation of the data which was correlated by previous studies as discussed in the Results and Analysis section.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Five key themes emerged on audio formative feedback in the qualitative data: participants' thoughts, delivery of the feedback, learner agency, impact on listening skills and a developmental tool for academic skills. It showed that participants view audio formative feedback not only as a mechanism for detailed feedback but also a means that encourages them to further develop their study skills and reflect on their learning.

Participants' Thoughts Regarding Audio Formative Feedback

The participants in the focus group confirmed their initial thoughts regarding audio feedback were positive:

> *"Interesting a new form of feedback."* (Arabic participant 1).
>
> *"I think it is a new useful idea."* (Chinese participant 3).
>
> *"I was impressed as the audio feedback was a new experience."* (Arabic participant 2).

This aligns with the questionnaire data collected for the study which found that it was the first time for all participants to receive audio formative feedback and this experience compared favourably with their previously received formative feedback in the 'traditional' way which was generally via annotation and written comments – see Figure 1. It confirms there is a general lack of interaction with new technologies that are ubiquitous and can engage millennials and post-millennials as a way to disseminate feedback.

This was encouraging as it demonstrated that participants were receptive to receiving a 'new' form of formative feedback. It is important as students need to engage with formative feedback to progress and achieve in their studies. As indeed Bellon, Bellon and Blank (1991) note, academic feedback is vital to achievement regardless of any other type of teaching behaviour and this is consistent irrespective of the learner's educational background. However, it could be argued that learners' positive engagement with audio formative feedback is the 'newness' of the medium used

to deliver feedback. This leads to the notion that tutors need to constantly deliver formative feedback in innovative ways but this is not practical, mainly due to time constraints. It is interesting to note that Ice et al (2007) in their study put into place elements to guard against any novelty effect that audio feedback may offer and their findings showed there was no significant relation regarding this factor.
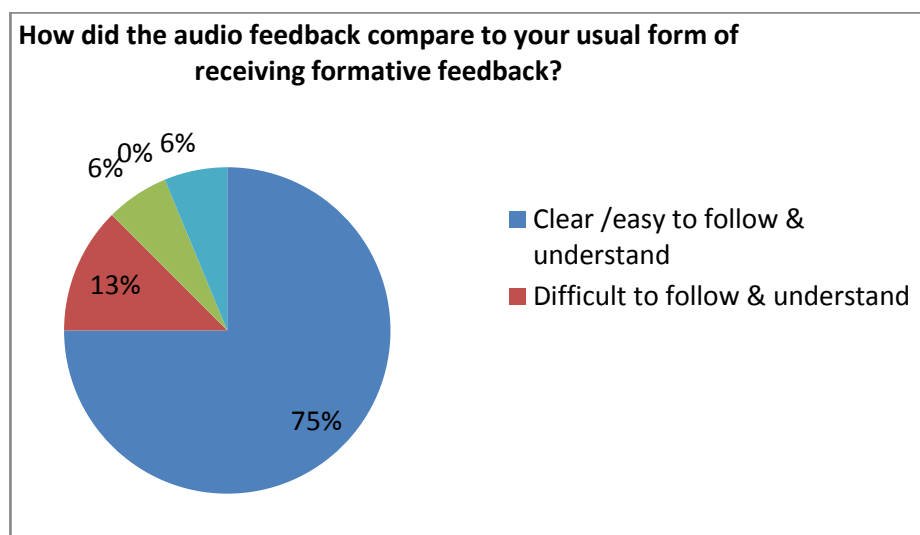

Figure 1: Audio formative feedback compared with usual form of formative feedback

Overall, this study indicates the participants' perception of receiving audio feedback was positive – see Figure 2. This is not surprising as this concurs with the literature in this field (such as Merry and Orsmond, 2008; Lunt and Curran, 2010).
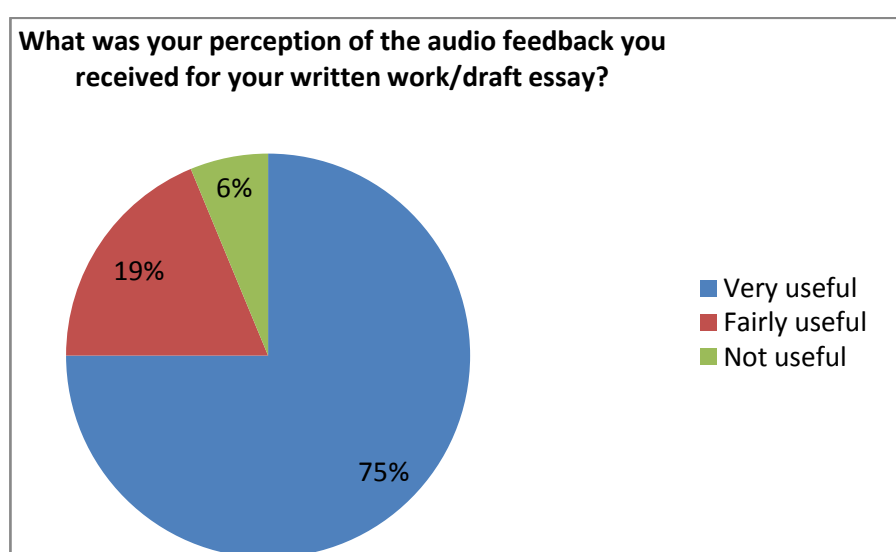

Figure 2: Perception of audio formative feedback

Delivery of the feedback

The delivery of the audio formative feedback was 'conversational' in tone. The general consensus of the focus group appeared to be that an informal tone was preferred.

> *"It is clear natural voice just like a face to face talk."* (Chinese participant 3).

It was even suggested that a tutor's personality in the delivery is necessary.

> *"It is important to hear the tutor's personality…makes [for] good relations between students and tutors…otherwise robotic."* (Arabic participant 1).

The conversational tone could be deemed as a strength as it enables the feedback to be more approachable and accessible for the students. Moreover, as articulated by the participants, it could foster student-tutor dialogue and decrease the 'social distance'. As a result, the tone of the voice led students' to engage with their formative feedback. Various studies have confirmed this. For example, Ice et al's (2007) study found that audio feedback enabled students the ability to detect nuance - it gave them a greater insight in what the tutor was trying to convey. Hennessy and Forrester's (2014) research concurs that audio feedback is often more nuanced, that is meaning arises from both the spoken comment and tone of voice, which assists to convey an overall impression of the text. Sipple's (2007) study found audio enabled students to evaluate the significance of a comment because they could "*hear* [Sipple's italics] that some comments were of more consequence than others simply by the inflection in the instructor's voice" (p.26). Audio feedback increases a social presence and assists with a deeper level of understanding. Furthermore, students found that audio feedback was associated with the perception that the tutor cared (Ice et al, 2007) indicating the tutor has an investment in their learning.

With respect to the structure of the audio feedback (see 2.3), the participants found it easy to follow.

> *"I found it most helpful that my feedback was separated into three main parts."* (Arabic participant 2).

> *"Connecting your comments to examples in the essay helped me to understand better."* (Chinese participant 3).

The audio feedback is not a facsimile of the written feedback. The tutor's response is more personal, detailed and authentic (King et al 2008; Lunt and Curran, 2010). King et al's (2008) study discusses the more spontaneous and unguarded reactions from the tutor in the audio feedback which would generally be edited in the more formal and concise written comments. This spontaneity and authenticity, it could be argued, are a catalyst to activate students to interact with their formative

feedback. Ice et al's (2007) study revealed students were more conducive to applying higher order thinking and problem solving skills to content for which they had received audio feedback.

The length of audio feedback (varied between four and eight minutes) received positive comments from the focus group such as:

>*"Timing is okay…not too long and not too short."* (Chinese participant 1).

>*"For me it is more efficient than the feedback on paper…it has more details...because when written on paper it is a short comment which can be difficult to read and understand with audio I receive more details...length is good"* (Chinese participant 4).

With respect to these questions regarding delivery and length of the audio feedback, the questionnaire data showed 14 participants (88%) confirmed it was 'easy to listen' and 15 participants (94%) indicated the length was 'just fine' albeit one participant (6%) noted it was 'too long'. In this study, the length of feedback was dictated by the level of the individual's essay or their piece of reflective writing. According to Cann (2014), audio feedback is an ideal vehicle to provide formative feedback for essay and reflective assignments.

However, the focus group agreed that six minutes of audio feedback was the optimum length. King et al (2008) point out five minutes of audio will produce approximately 500 words of quality feedback which is much more than written comments produced in a similar time. Similarly, Lunt and Curran (2010) assert that one minute of audio feedback equals to six minutes of writing and word count is twelve times higher in audio feedback than written feedback (Voelkel and Mello, 2014). This suggests that detailed audio feedback, as opposed to brief concise written/typed comments, could further encourage learners to connect with their formative feedback. Furthermore, it can be claimed that audio feedback is more efficient (Macgregor et al 2011) and produces detailed feedback of a higher quality per unit of time, as argued by Voelkel and Mello (2014). It is also posited that audio feedback via mp3 recorder saves tutor time as it is more time efficient than written/typed comments (Rotheram, 2007); this chimes with the researcher's experience. However, studies (King et al, 2008; Macgregor et al 2011) show conflicting results. It should be noted that the efficacy on tutor workload delivering audio formative feedback in a timely manner compared to written/typed comments is not the scope of this article.

One response indicated hesitancy with regards to audio feedback.

>*"Afraid I would not be able to understand everything"* (Chinese participant 2).

The participant thought that it would be difficult to comprehend the feedback because of her *"poor listening skills".* This appears to express 'listening comprehension anxiety' (Vogely, 1998). However, even though the participant thought the audio feedback might be beyond her listening capability, she felt empowered as she was able to control the variables (such as personal and inter-personal attributes - emotional state e.g. nerves, fear of failing, high expectations and response from tutor - and environment) to reduce her anxiety .

> *"It is good because I can stop it when I want…doesn't matter how long it is or where I listen"*
> (Chinese participant 2).

This empowerment impacted positively on her receptiveness of audio feedback because she was able to work with it; it inspired her confidence.

Learner Agency

Learner agency was one of the key attractions for the participants to engage with audio formative feedback. This concurs with the argument that enabling opportunities for choice, control and collaboration are influential techniques for improving academic achievement and can lead to increased motivation and engagement with the activity when learners have a voice on how it is conducted (Toshalis and Nakkula, 2012). Studies assert audio formative feedback enables flexibility and convenience on how students are able to access their feedback (Carruthers et al, 2014; Issa et al, 2014) and enable student autonomy (Cann, 2014).

> *"Yes, more in control when receive it as audio feedback. Gives more freedom to listen whenever we want…It was very useful compared to face-to-face – more detailed and listen to it over again…when we forget we can listen to it again."* (Chinese participant 3).
> *"It enhances my experience…for example when I receive my feedback about my writing I can follow my tutor section by section because I can play and pause the feedback."* (Arabic participant 1).

The participants' response indicate that receiving formative feedback by audio is an enhancement as they have convenience of dictating how, when and where to engage with the feedback. The detailed comments are welcomed too.

A lack of detail in written comments or vague phrases or illegible writing is problematic for students and can lead them to view formative feedback negatively. This finding is supported in Higgins et al's (2002) and Weaver's (2006) studies. However, audio formative feedback can assist to alleviate this as participants found it not only empowering but also a tool which provides more salient (detailed and relevant) information than just written comments and it is easier to listen to than face-to-face

meetings because they are able to 'control' where, when, how much and how many times they access this feedback. Interaction with formative feedback is necessary for learners to develop in their studies. Research discusses the verisimilitude in the recorded voice and studies on audio feedback (Rotheram, 2007; Gould and Day, 2012) show that students value the 'closeness' and 'presence' of their tutors and how the spoken comments reduce misinterpretation of feedback (Sipple, 2007). This 'proximity' between the student and tutor provides an alternative sense of social presence and interpersonal connection (Sipple, 2007; King et al, 2008; Lunt and Curran, 2010) which can assist students' engagement with formative feedback.

Impact on Listening Skills

The participants acknowledged that audio formative feedback is beneficial for their listening and learner development:

> *"I listened to it three times...I can listen to the words…good for my oral English and pronunciation."* (Chinese participant 2).
>
> *"The more I listen and exposed to the language and comments on my learning the more I learn and become aware of my points of weakness, strength and opportunity."* (Arabic participant 1).

The questionnaire data overwhelmingly stated this too - see Figure 3. This is encouraging as audio is viewed as another avenue to develop listening skills particularly as the participants are international students. Furthermore, studies (such as Carruthers et al, 2014; Hennessy and Forrester, 2014) have shown that repeated listening also assists students whose first language is English as it enables them to become fully conversant with the formative feedback and understand it in a more meaningful way.

Did the audio feedback assist with developing your listening skills?
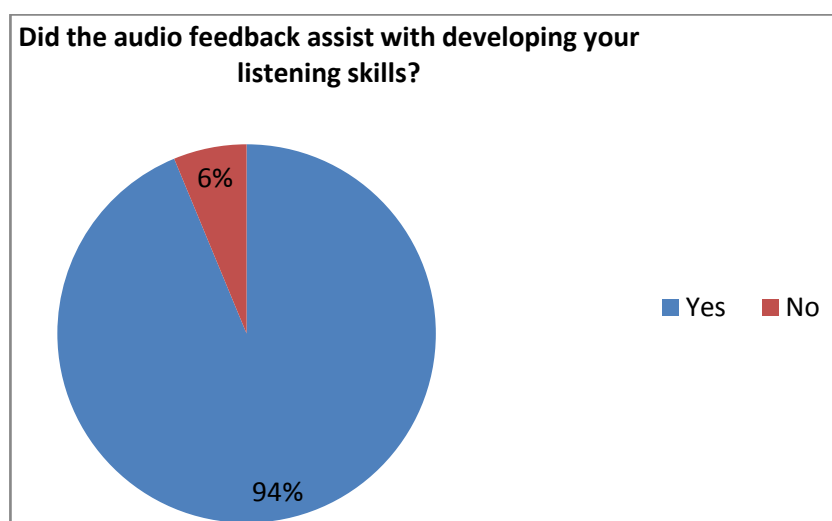
6%
94%
Yes   No

Figure 3: Audio formative feedback develops listening skills

The focus group data evidences that repetition plays an important role in student learning and is in line with studies that have shown repetition is effective in language learning and in facilitating comprehension in listening (Cervantes and Gainer, 1992; Bygate et al 2013; Ghazi-Saidi and Ansaldo, 2017). Audio formative feedback permits students the option of repeated listening which enables familiarity with content such as lexis, pace and pronunciation and this can result in learner confidence with not only their listening but also speaking skills, for example, with pronunciation of subject specific vocabulary.

Moreover, repeated listening can also assist with 'noticing'. Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, albeit controversial in some arenas, has since the 1990s claimed consciously noticing input promulgates language development. He asserts evidence is continually accumulating that noticing impacts strongly on second and foreign language learning (Schmidt, 2012). This is particularly pertinent for the learners in this case study.

Audio Feedback as a Developmental Tool for Academic Skills

The questionnaire data stated the majority (62%) of the participants found the audio approach added something "extra" to their formative feedback. This is interesting as they indicate that 'added value' can be determined from audio formative feedback and it is viewed as having other learning development purposes too. Additionally, participants in the focus group reported that the audio formative feedback experience was advantageous for their academic study skills and it encouraged reflection.

> *"I am listening and I need to make notes…helping my academic skills while I listen I can't remember it, memorise it; I need to make notes so practising my note-taking not just my listening."* (Arabic participant 1).
>
> *"I found it organised, cohesive and professional. It had deep analysis and condensed comments which deepened understanding and increased my realisation of my areas of weakness and strength."* (Arabic participant 2).
>
> *"It's not just about the essay but it is also about my future study so I will definitely listen to it many times as feedback can be applied to other areas of study…[with] audio feedback I receive more than the focus on the essay…it is a reminder…once we realise our weakness we can't change it very quickly so we sometimes need something to remind about the weakness and reflect on it to see if I made progress on this…I will reflect on it many times…with*

> *handwritten feedback I just put it away…when we finish the essay we hardly ever look at it*
>
> *again or read it again…with audio you can."* (Chinese participant 4).

The purpose of formative feedback is development (Weaver, 2006). Participants in this study acknowledge that audio formative feedback assists to develop wider academic skills such as note-taking, deeper listening, monitoring their progression and gaining transferable skills. This indicates that participants have noticed that engagement with their formative feedback is necessary to further develop in their overall learning. It is also worth noting that audio feedback is also encouraging reflection. A skill which is integral to a deeper approach to learning and it is paramount both in the enhancement of learner development as a student and also beyond the academic sphere in professional practice (Gibbs 1988; Moon, 1999). The participants' emphasis that audio assists to 'deepen' their understanding is in line with studies (Ice et al, 2007; Middleton, 2016) which argue that higher level cognition takes place on content where audio feedback is received. Studies such as Issa et al (2014) also confirm audio feedback enhances students' learning skills, particularly their writing skills. However, it should be noted that this 'measurement' is not the scope of this study.

Furthermore, if the participants had to choose one preferred form of formative feedback, they responded as shown in Figure 4.
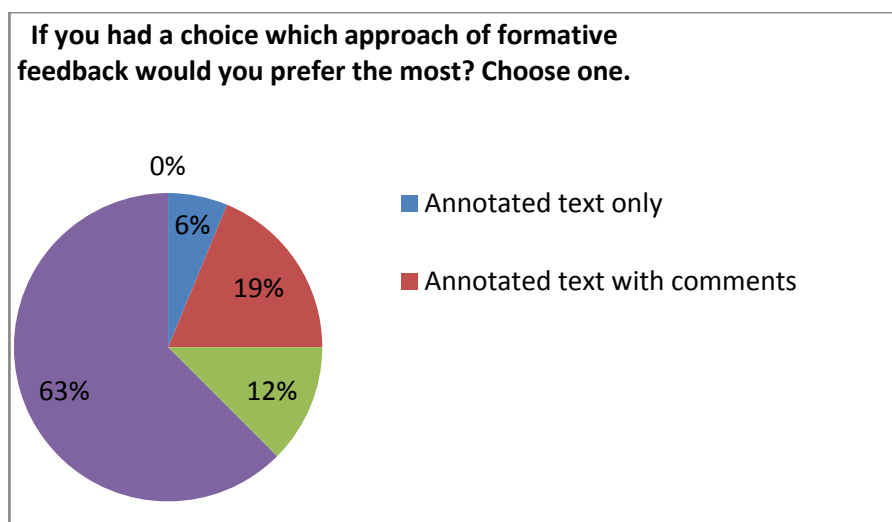
Figure 4: Preferred approaches to formative feedback

This response reinforced the positive regard towards audio feedback as a viable way to deliver formative feedback and it was interesting to note that two participants (12%) preferred audio feedback only. Previous studies have also had similar results whereby the majority of students have veered towards audio feedback for future assignments (Lunt and Curran, 2010; Gould and Day, 2012; Voelkel and Mello, 2014) and some would like both audio and written comments (Brearley

and Cullen, 2012). However, in McCarthy's (2015) study which evaluated written, audio and video feedback, video was the favoured option to receive future feedback, written comments was second and audio third and Fawcett and Oldfield's (2016) research evidenced no significant differences in the experiences of receiving audio or written feedback. Nevertheless, Fawcett and Oldfield (2016) concluded audio feedback is a useful mechanism for providing feedback which indicates audio feedback has value.

The data, in this study, overall indicates learners enjoyed the experience and are receptive to engaging with formative feedback if presented via audio. The participants also recognised that audio formative feedback is not only providing feedback but it is also adding extra value specifically with respect to developing their listening and academic skills. This highlights that audio formative feedback provides opportunity for skills development too which is not the case with the traditional – written - method of delivering formative feedback.

CONCLUSION

This case study conducted with a small group of international students evidences all participants responded positively to audio formative feedback. In brief, they found they engaged with the feedback in a *"deeper way"*. This finding has the potential for audio feedback to play a key part in developing students' learning as the purpose of formative feedback is to 'deepen' students' learning and understanding and it corroborates with previous studies linking audio feedback to higher order thinking. Additionally, audio formative feedback promoted learner agency, assisted to further develop listening and academic study skills and encouraged learners to revisit their feedback to check and reflect on their understanding and progression. In short, personalised and timely audio feedback enhanced international students' interaction with formative feedback. It can be concluded that audio formative feedback is an important pedagogical intervention which engages the learner, particularly with the ubiquity of smart portable electronic devices.

Even though it is indicated in McCarthy's (2015) study that audio may not be first choice for students to receive feedback, the vast majority of the research in this area demonstrates that audio formative feedback is student-centred, and a positive learner development space which needs to be valued as a flexible pedagogical medium. Moreover, research evidences that audio feedback assist learners to better understand new concepts and encourages high level cognition. Hence, the key message is for tutors to explore 'audio' as a means of presenting formative feedback and to engage with it as a tool

to further enhance students' experience with formative feedback and further develop in their studies with greater understanding. In addition to the above, audio formative feedback can also be viewed as a way to further develop international students' English language skills. Plus, the researcher's experience indicates audio feedback has the potential to reduce the tutor's workload in providing formative feedback; however, further research is required in this area. Overall, new technologies have enabled audio to be an alternative viable and an effective medium to deliver and receive formative feedback that enhances student learning.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Questionnaire

1.   What is your perception of formative feedback?
2.   How do you usually receive formative feedback for your written work? Choose all that is applicable.

     Annotated Text Only

     Annotation and written comments

     Only written comments

     Tutorials

     Other   If other, please specify _____

3.   What is your understanding of audio feedback?
4.   What was your perception of the audio feedback you received for your draft essay/reflection?

     Very useful

     Fairly Useful

     Not Useful

5.   How was the delivery of the feedback?

     Easy to listen

     Difficult to listen

     Other   If other, please specify _____

6.   How was the length of the feedback?

Just fine

Too long

Not enough

Other   If other, please specify _____

7.   Did the audio approach add anything 'extra' to your formative feedback?

   Yes/ No

   If yes, what did it add?

8.   How did the audio feedback compare to your usual form of receiving formative feedback?

   Clear and easy to follow and understand

   Difficult to follow and understand

   Too much detail

   Not enough detail

   Other   If other, please specify _____

9.   What did you find engaging (positive) about the audio feedback?

10. What did you find not engaging (negative) about the audio feedback?

11. If you had a choice which approach of feedback would you prefer the most? Choose one.

   Annotated text only

   Annotated text with comments

   Audio feedback only

   Audio feedback with some annotation/ comments

   Tutorials

   Other   If other, please specify _____

12. Explain why you chose your preference.

13. Did the audio feedback assist with developing your listening skills?

   Yes/ No

   If yes, how?

14. Are there any other comments you would like to make regarding audio formative feedback?

Thank you for taking part in this survey.

Appendix B – Semi-structured interview questions

Tell me about your initial thoughts when you listened to the audio feedback?

How did you find the whole experience of receiving audio formative feedback?

What aspect(s) of the audio feedback did you find most useful/helpful/engaging? Why?

What aspect(s) of the audio feedback did you not find useful/helpful/engaging? Why?

Tell me your thoughts about the tone of voice/speed of delivery (e.g. did it sound natural/ conversational/robotic/hesitant/mumbled/clear)

Is it important for the tutor's personality to be heard in the audio feedback? Why/Why not?

Was the length of feedback sufficient/too long/not enough? Why?

Did you experience any difficulties with technology in accessing the audio feedback? Tell me about it…

Can the audio formative feedback be improved in any way? If so, how?

Did the experience of receiving audio formative feedback enhance your experience of receiving this type of feedback? If so, how? If not, could you please explain why?

Do you have any further comments to add about audio formative feedback?

Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this focus group.

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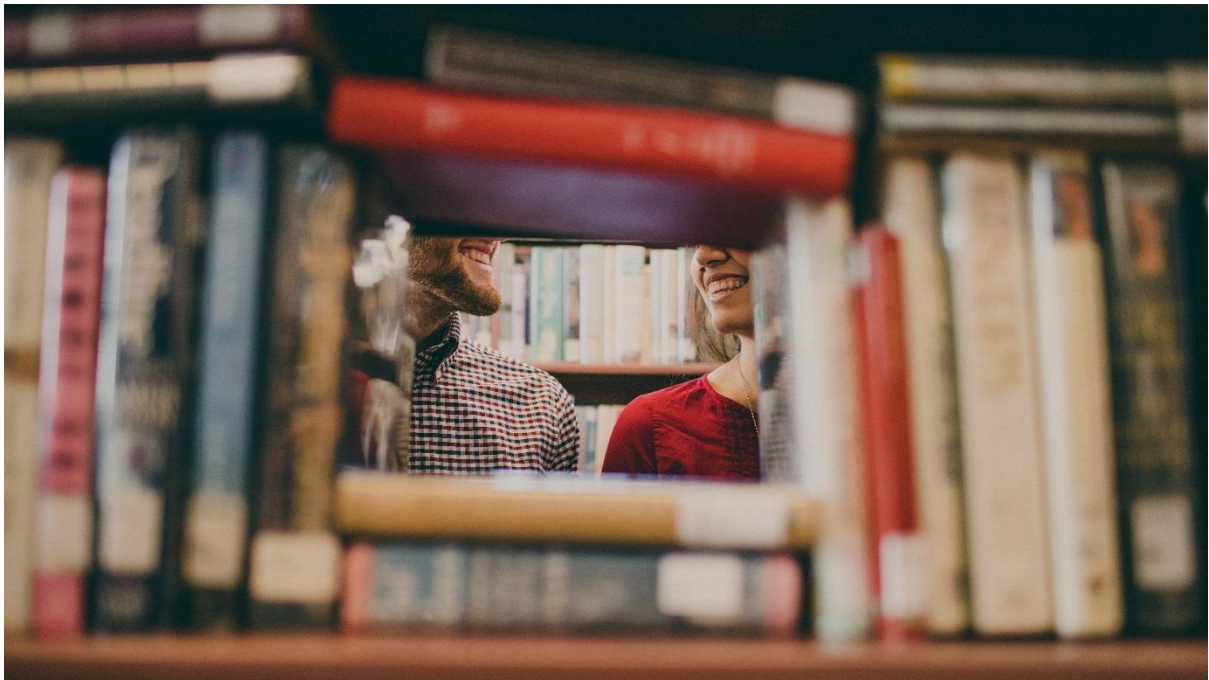
A reflection on my experience of teaching Arabic at the University of Leeds

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KEYWORDS: teaching Arabic, foreign language, dialectal variations, root system, teaching methods

This paper aims to provide a reflection on my teaching experience of Arabic as a Foreign Language of 2017-18 cohort at the University of Leeds. This experience was a combination of observing Dr Soliman's lectures and seminars as well as replicating her approach. It is also the aim of this reflection to provide comparisons between my former experience on teaching Arabic and English as foreign languages with my last experience as a module assistant of Arabic for beginners. In addition, the paper aims to clarify some useful teaching tools that would help many language teachers.

At first, when I was asked to write a reflection on my teaching experience, I was very excited but also unsure of where to start or what to include. Yet, when I began to plan my response, so many important points came to me that I thought would be worth mentioning. So, let me start from the very beginning. Having already taught Arabic as a foreign language in a high school in Leeds in 2016, I was very keen to gain more experience by teaching in Higher Education, especially at the University of Leeds, one of the UK's best universities.

TEACHING ARABIC IN CONTEXT

In our first meeting, the module leader, Dr Rasha Soliman, provided me with the curriculum that we were going to cover for the whole year. I was impressed by the sequence of lessons as it was so different from what I had seen in the past. From my previous experience as a teacher of Arabic and English (and before that as a student of French and English), I was used to the initial lessons starting by introducing letters and numbers, *before* progressing on to vocabulary and grammar. Instead, Dr Soliman divides the letters into different groups and each group is taught alongside some vocabulary which helps the students benefit by memorising the letters in the context of vocabulary. I found this approach of teaching the Arabic alphabet in a meaningful context to be beneficial, since students had enough time to memorise the vocabulary *and* to practise the group of four letters each time before moving on to a new group. The focus on meaningful contexts and tasks was also observed in

a particular lesson that I really enjoyed which aimed to teach complex grammar in a meaningful context was the lesson about 'hollow verbs'. This was taught in towards the middle of semester 2 at Level 1. In Arabic, learning how to use the hollow verbs is typically one of the most boring grammar lessons that students usually find very hard to grasp. On the contrary, this lesson plan was different from any grammar lesson that I had previously attended or delivered. It involved a short story comprised mostly of hollow verbs. Students were given the task of rewriting the story in the past, and the present, all while practicing the conjugation of the hollow verbs without a prior explicit instruction of the grammar rules – they really enjoyed it! This task-based teaching approach is in fact of major importance in the foreign language classroom because it 'reveals to learners systematic interrelationships between form, meaning and use' (Nunan, 2004, p. 22).

THE USE OF L1 AS THE LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION

Generally, I have always held the conviction that native language plays an important role in facilitating the learning of a target language. This was confirmed through this experience. The early stages of the course were taught in English and then gradually reduced as the students' vocabulary in Arabic expanded. This use of English, as the native language of most of the learners, played an integral role in their progress in Arabic. Unfortunately, in most of foreign language classes across the world, there is a conviction that the native language should not be used. However, in my experience, the use of the native language as the language of instruction really did improve many other students' progress. Understanding almost nothing in the lessons, in addition to learning many abstract grammar rules, reduce students' motivation and make them reluctant to communicate in the target language. Research has empirically proved that the native language can be the student's 'strongest ally and can be systematically used to a great effect' (Butzkamm & Caldwell, 2009, p. 24). In contrast, understanding every single word they learn in class helps to increase the students' self-confidence as well as their motivation to communicate in the target language.

THE USE OF SEMIOTIC MATERIALS

In the course of the year, I learned several techniques which provide good examples of how to motivate students' learning. Most of the lessons began with a group of street signs, taking the language out of its abstract system. The students were provided with images of street signs or instructional signs used in the airport for example and were asked to guess the meanings. Seeing how the language is used in context is a very simple way to motivate student's learning and make it relevant to their learning needs. This, I think, is a very useful initiative because it enables students to

use the vocabulary and benefit from it according to real life situations rather than being stuck to the content of a textbook only (Erton, 2006).

FOCUS ON THE ARABIC ROOT AND PATTERN SYSTEM

Another strategy that I really liked involved having students guess the meaning of the words by extracting the roots of the word, which accelerated their understanding of new and unfamiliar words. This strategy is of particular relevance to Arabic language as well as other Semitic languages which are based on a morpho-semantic system of roots and patterns. Once the students learnt about this system, they have been encouraged to always infer the meaning of new vocabulary by relying on familiar roots of three consonants.

RAISING AWARENESS OF ARABIC DIALECTAL VARIATION

When teaching Arabic language, a major reflection should be on the role of the different Arabic dialects in the classroom. I witnessed this at Leeds for the first time and it was really one of the best initiatives that I think should be encouraged in all Arabic classes across the world (I imagine it would be really useful for other languages as well). In Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is taught in schools but is only used in formal situations, and rarely employed in daily conversations. Therefore, the aforementioned cohort had the exciting opportunity to be exposed to how native Arabic speakers of different dialects communicate in daily conversations. In most lectures, students were informed about the phonological, lexical and grammatical variations among the main urban Arabic dialects. Although, this may sound like too much, the students and I realised that there are far more linguistic similarities than differences between the Arabic dialects and MSA. After this enriching experience, I would suggest the five groups of Arabic dialects (Versteegh, 2014, p. 189) to be taught in the Arabic language classroom. It would really be beneficial if these groups of Arabic dialects could be provided with equal importance in the teaching of Arabic as a second/foreign language. This would be of great benefit not only to learners of Arabic as a foreign language but also to those who learn Arabic as a first language, since this would enable them to understand and communicate in Arabic in all Arab countries. This initiative would help other teachers who aim to teach Arabic in a comprehensive way giving their students a more realistic picture of Arabic being 'one' language with some variations rather than perceived distinct forms.

Overall, teaching Arabic as a foreign language at the University of Leeds was one of the most fulfilling experiences that I have ever had. Of course, it was a challenge to juggle my commitments to my doctoral research, and to progress in my PhD as a final year student, while being a successful

teacher in such respectful University. This year, I have discovered that I am passionate about teaching a foreign language especially after learning the art of teaching and gaining pedagogical experience with the support of a well-experienced teacher and mentor.

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An interview with Adrian Holliday

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In October 2018, a symposium entitled 'Interculturality in a Precarious Future: Multiple Contexts, Multiple Voices' was held at the University of Leeds to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the MA in Professional Languages and Intercultural Studies (MAPLIS) and raise awareness of intercultural studies as a new subject area in the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies (LCS). As well as considering how individual speakers make use of the concept of interculturality in their work, the symposium encouraged discussion about the sustainability of the concept and its continuing relevance, particularly as the concept is frequently co-opted to serve a range of ideologies such as neoliberalism and state multiculturalism. The symposium also critiqued the possibility of a 'post-intercultural' or 'post-cultural' world, reflected on how and when the notion of difference is important or immaterial and considered whether alternative concepts such as critical cosmopolitanism offer greater epistemological perspectives for understanding social interaction. The symposium also included a keynote presentation by Professor Adrian Holliday whose work needs no introduction to most people working in the field of intercultural communication, intercultural studies and language education. Professor Holliday was interviewed after the symposium about his work by Ramzi Merabet (a postgraduate researcher) and Daniela Nicolaescu (a MAPLIS student).

Keywords: Interculturality, Ideology, Essentialism, Identity, Education

Transcript Code

[???] = word(s) not clear

… = indicates a pause or switch of thought mid-sentence

Word with (?) = indicates best guess at word

[IA] = sentence(s) inaudible or indecipherable

Participants

MI =   Ramzi Merabet

DN -   Daniela Nicolaescu

AH =   Adrian Holliday

RM: Thank you for the presentation today. We have some more questions that may be related to today and other ones that may be related to your career. The first one is personal – I've read many of your books and articles and they made me question essentialism in my daily practices. Although people can develop a kind of critical cultural awareness, can they totally get free of essentialism?

AH: No.

RM: Why can't they totally get rid of essentialism?

A: Because it's the way that we are brought up. It's the nature of being a human being - we're naturally tribal. Whenever we live in small groups, to survive, we have to pitch ourselves against other groups because resources are scarce. I guess sometimes, if we're lucky enough to live in plentiful environments, we don't have to worry so much about that but it is part of our human nature. It's a survival instinct.   I think that when we live in larger groups and we think about civilisation, we have to find ways of moving away from this. So this is our natural way of thinking but that doesn't justify it.

MI: So we should always resist this way of thinking?

AH: If we want to be civilised, yes. I guess civilised means that you become part of a civility rather than being part of a small competitive group fighting to survive. Perhaps that's what civilisation means. So I think we are naturally racist. This is our nature, to be racist.

RM: It's so difficult to agree on this one because I'm still questioning whether we are naturally racist or not.

DN: We spoke a lot about this and, as I said, we are all racists by nature and this phrase makes me think a lot about the idea of belonging, because people tend to belong all the time or to belong to an ideology, to belong to a group or to some ideas and, as I said before, it is this desire together because if we're not together, we are not gathering, we don't have like… we feel a sort of anxiety because we are floating. We don't have like a territory, we don't have something that makes us secure.

So what I thought about it's that we are always… even if we are choosing not to belong, not to be rooted, no territory, if I make this choice, it's my decision, it's not a decision of other. It's not an identity that is imposed by the other. I choose not to belong but if I choose this, I will select… like even if I choose to belong to a group, I select. It's like this process of selectivity and if I select, I will select something in detrimental of another group. I don't know, I think I made that very confusing.

AH: Well, if you're interested in what I think, my earliest memories are of being entirely alone and then my parents told me I had to mix with other children, which I didn't want to, and then I had to go to school, which I didn't want to. When I was at school, I didn't understand what it was. So for me the pressure was to join, not not to join. I felt more comfortable being an isolated person.

DN: Do you think that this pressure alienates you, like changes your identity, because it's imposed, it's a pressure?

AH: Well, it depends on who you are. I think it depends entirely on who you are. Perhaps I was very antisocial. So for me the pressure is to join, not not to join and perhaps that's what helps me to be a researcher. Is that a question or is it a statement that you're making?

DN: It was a question. I was very interested in how… if it's a choice, if this process of selection…

AH: Well, it might not be a choice.

RM: Yes, it could be imposed.

AH: I didn't have a choice. I had to join. I had to go to school. I was told I had to go to school because that's the way that society is structured.

DN: We are conditioned to think in a certain way.

AH: Well, I'm not sure it's… no, it's not conditioning I don't think, I think it's political. The way your society is structured requires that you behave in a certain way and that you join certain groups. That's my view.

RM: And to react against this at a younger age is so difficult because when we observe this situation when we are grown-ups and able to do kind of change, we say that we have the ability maybe to resist that social structure.

AH: Because we know more about it.

RM: Yes, because we know more about it, but when we are at a younger age, I think that the only way of resistance is by isolating ourselves and that's what you have done.

AH: This is extremely personal…

RM: Yes, exactly.

AH: … and my memory is that I was trying to find out how the structure of the group that I had to join was organised so that I could manage it. So my first research was to find out how this group worked so that I could manage my membership of it and then as you get older, you begin to understand.

        I didn't learn anything at school about groups, except that I didn't say anything in the classroom. I never answered any questions, I never took part in any discussion, and then I discovered that this gave me a bad reputation, so I learned that participation was valued. Then I went and did a degree in sociology and then I began to learn how the politics and the ideology of this works and that gave me the knowledge to work out how to behave. But that's personal, that's got nothing to do with my research, it's purely personal.

RM: In a world where new essentialism is still prevalent, based on what I have read until now, when new essentialism is still prevalent, how could we make the voice of the decentred heard?

AH: I think you have to read Stuart Hall.

RM: I read some of Stuart Hall.

AH: This is not my business to… I'm not in a position to say because I'm not struggling for my identity in the way that you're talking about so it's not my business to speak for others.

RM: But it may be our business as researchers to study the other.

AH: Well, this is for you to sort out. I did basic sociology at university and I would recommend that for anybody, or you might even get this if you study literature because you study how ideas and stories are formulated. This is your education and… I guess the question is how to preserve enough openness in education so that people can work out what their choices are. But it's interesting because some people say that the more rigid and the more totalitarian your education is, the more you will resist and the more you will rebel. So the nice education system that encourages you to explore might seduce you into not thinking for yourself. That sounds a bit radical.

RM: No, I totally believe in this.

DN: I thought about the Communist period, especially in Romania, for example, when a lot of writers emerged in that period. Paradoxically in that period, they opposed, they…

AH: Yes, exactly, and interestingly this generation, which I sort of belong to, which has tried to make education more open, was educated at a time when it was more closed. I think Basil Bernstein talks about this but I'm not sure where. Did you come from Romania?

DN: Yes.

AH: Because I've got no idea who you are.

DN: The first question people ask me here is, where are you from? Sometimes I feel a little irritated or anxious because I feel that they are not interested in my person because this is the first question. Maybe it's just an innocent curiosity or maybe it's like a veiled question trying to put me in a category.

AH: Well, I wasn't going to ask it until you mentioned Romania and I sensed that you mentioned it from a position of knowledge. That was my sense so that was an opening for me to… because I know where Ramzi comes from because we met before.

DN: I spoke about my experience about this question; it made me think about this question is harassing me.

AH: Yes, but this morning I started talking about where I came from.

RM: Yes, actually we talk a lot about this and she is struggling with this question of where are you from? A lot of people start by asking this question and why this question exactly – do you have a kind of image that you want to impose on that person by asking them?

AH: I've thought about this quite a lot because it's a very normal question to ask, very normal. The problem might be what the agenda behind the question is and I don't know if you can tell what the agenda is in the way that somebody asks it and that's what makes people anxious. I'm not sure if it is the expression on the face or something like that. I think it's probably one of the most common first questions that anybody asks anybody.

DN: Yes, I noticed.

AH: And it might have nothing to do with a foreign country, just you've got an interesting accent, where do you come from? I come from Leeds.

DN: I actually invent a country because I cannot identify with that country so I invent one.

RM: Exactly, so the answer here again like maybe the person who asks the question expects to hear a name of a country, why the other person has another expression regarding what coming from means.

AH: Yes, and I think during my long life, I will have answered it in different ways at different periods because I've had different views about my identity at different times, so at the moment I'm very attached to Yorkshire but I probably wasn't ten years ago.

DN: To what extent do you think that the identity can be negotiated, because I assumed that the context, religious, cultural or linguistic in which we live, plays a role in the way we perceive our identity, so should we assume that our identity will inevitably change when you move in a place, to a new place we are not familiar with? Is our identity something changeable?

AH: Well, this is a huge discussion, everybody's talking about this and I have no idea. Personally I've always felt… I think it's a personal thing. I don't think academically it's a question that can be

answered. I don't see why we have to pin down and define identity. I think it means different things to different people. I know that if you're studying identity, there are different theories about what it is, but I'm not interested in the theories of identity particularly, it's not my field , so I can only speaking personally, so personally I've just always been who I am and that's it.

DN: Yes, but I think that the otherness could affect our identity by promoting a false image, a distorted image of ourselves, and sometimes this image is internalised by us; this can change our identity.

AH: Well, I don't know why I keep going back to when I was at school, I guess because that was the period in my life when I felt under the most pressure, and also from my parents – I felt I was being pushed to be something that I didn't necessarily want to be and as soon as I was old enough to be independent, I was suddenly liberated and I could be whatever I wanted. I was lucky because I was young at a time in Britain when there were opportunities, I would automatically be earning more money than my parents, there was easy employment and university education was free; I was brought up at a time when I believed I could do anything I wanted.

RM: How about now, like what if that scenario was now?

AH: So perhaps this is what you mean by identity - we have that so we still feel free. We can do what we like as long as we have the economic ability. Yes, I don't particularly feel constrained by religion or culture; it's a matter of having the economic ability to do what you want.

RM: So economy plays a role here?

AH: Of course you have to have… freedom comes from affluence in this particular society.

RM: So if you don't have affluence, you may sometimes be obliged to accept something that is imposed on you?

DN: It could be this sort of behaviour, this approach, the context influences us very much in the way we perceive our identity or in the way we construct our identity in a certain moment.

AH: Well, there's another factor. I don't think I would be alive - I was very ill when I was a baby and had it not been for particular resources, I wouldn't be here, so this is to do with an affluent society which has the resources.

RM: I kind of asked you this question last year but I will repeat it again – sometimes people start to believe the images constructed about them. For instance, I usually hear the expression back home of 'this country will never develop,' like a lot of people living there saying this country will never develop, and I believe that that's an image imposed on those people and they started to believe it. They are in the process of self-othering themselves or accepting this stereotype. I believe this is so dangerous as it may turn an ideological discourse into a regime of truth, as Michel Foucault says. What do you think about that and how should people resist such stereotypes?

AH: If we start off with the premise that people are naturally intelligent and people are naturally aware of the forces of persuasion, so, for example, I think most people are *aware* of the politics behind advertising. We know that we are being bombarded with images. But sometimes there are other pressures, for example peer pressure. It must be very difficult if you're a very young person, or even a much older person, and you're surrounded by people who are constantly bombarding you with images of how things ought to be. People say this about Facebook, and I don't have this experience because I'm not somebody with a thousand Facebook friends who are all my age group and my social group, so I'm not seeing hundreds of posts every day that are trying to persuade me that I should do certain types of things in order to be accepted, but I know that sort of pressure does exist.

If you are put under pressure, either because of a lack of resources or because of the power of your peers, or, I guess, if you live in a country where the… I mean we have the image of *1984* with the totalitarian society and how far your independent, intelligent way of thinking can continue to survive if you're bombarded all the time with propaganda. These are the sorts of pressures and I think again this depends on the circumstances in which you are unlucky or lucky to be living in, and if people want to be accepted by others, then it's very easy to be taken in. So I guess a very clever governmental organisation would create a media which was so seductive that people would be taken in, and then you wouldn't have to have political prisoners and secret police because you're just feeding people with something they really like.

I was thinking about… people get a huge amount of pleasure out of window shopping, so you've got just enough money to be able to buy something sometimes and so this feeds your hope and so you spend your time looking in shops and walking around. It totally absorbs you and takes away your independence, so you know temptation. I don't know if this is answering your question or not.

RM: Yes, it does.

AH: There are all sorts of different ways in which people are influenced against their better judgement. Because what your question implies is that there is an idea requiring a conformity which is against peoples' better judgement, so it depends how clever the people who create these ideas are. It's true isn't it? I mean you are young people, you must feel awfully pressured to look in a certain way, like certain types of things, behave in a certain way. You know you are the age group that all of this stuff is aimed at.

RM: I always question the fact of shopping itself and ask myself questions, am I really doing something freely or am I shopping because it's an image imposed on me and it's so seductive that I cannot resist.

AH: How can you work that out?

DN: The problem is that we cannot draw the line, I cannot draw the line between what is false and what is true now because everything is like… I don't know if it's the way I'm is influenced or it's something genuine.

AH: Well, this might be to do with your generation. You see I was brought up at a time when these forces were much less sophisticated. I remember a time when television was non-existent and then it was just a little grey thing like that; you walked in the streets and the advertising was much less. The biggest peer pressure that I had was my mother wanting me to look in a certain way because *she* wanted to have a certain status in terms of class, so she was forcing me to dress in a particular way because this was her image. And her generation, this was the beginning of a very intense modernity drive.

She was the age group where suddenly you had a nuclear family with a house and a kitchen and a washing machine, these appliances, and you were watching your neighbours to see what they

looked like and you wanted your children to go to a better school. We had this expression 'keeping up with the Joneses', and I don't know if people still use that but it was very primitive in those days.

There is a very famous writer who was born in Leeds, I think, Alan Bennett and he writes very satirical, very funny accounts of growing up in Yorkshire. Ten years older than me but I can identify with that - going to the right department store because you want to be seen there. And this was my interpretation of religion because the vicar had the big house and had a wealthy family and it increased your status if you were associated with the church. I couldn't take it seriously at all. It was all to do with wearing clothes and wearing hats. It was all to do with appearance.

RM: Yes, what people look like.

DN: It's very important this process of association all the time when you create your identity as to being associated, and sometimes this association can be done in a very essentialist way because, as you said, it's an association of the language with the culture, or association between Western cultures and English, or between… this association can create stereotypes maybe.

AH: Well, I didn't know anything about anything of this nature until I became older, because until I travelled, I wasn't even aware that there were such things as stereotypes and national identity and culture and so on. I had no idea about these things. I was very conscious of my mother wanting to be a certain class that was the thing. So to me, in those days, class was the issue. I mean not that I particularly cared but it was forced upon me, how you eat, how you dress, what sort of manners you have, how you speak.

RM: Did you conform to their social class?

AH: Well, I lost my Yorkshire accent because to climb in social class, you had to have a standard accent. It was things like this, how you dress, how you speak. Well-spoken – if you're well-spoken, it means you speak like the Royal Family, this was the image.

RM: But the idea of social classes was there, like in Britain?

AH: Oh absolutely, completely.

RM: So we can say, as you say in your writings, about the universal culture processes that help us institute this kind of threat, here are universal grand narratives or something like that?

AH: Yes, I think so. I mean whether you call it class or you call it something else, there is a stratification in society. So regardless of how you position yourself in the world, in your own society there is a stratification. In your school classroom there is stratification; in your family there is stratification. There is always going to be a structure which you have to negotiate and it's to do with power and prestige and class.

RM: So there will always be a superior and an inferior I think.

AH: I think that's unavoidable unless you have something like an utopian, but that would have to be run by a totalitarian regime, so it would look like it but it wouldn't be real.

RM: There is no hope then.

AH: Probably not. We do the best we can. Walking around this library and seeing all these different types of people, well dressed, affluent, with their laptops doing their studies, buying food, eating what they want, this is a wonderful image. Discussing things, no microphones, listening to what they're saying to each other, we can say whatever we like. This is almost like a utopia for a particular group of people. The beautiful buildings, the trees and the sunlight, a university campus is like a paradise.

Unless you are a very young person and you are worried how you compare yourself to the other students in terms of how you dress, how much money you have, what you can spend, what you buy, that's where the pressure comes. So all these people you see sitting around, when they go out into the street, are they looking at each other and thinking, my god, I wish I had enough money to buy something like what she has. So that is always going to be there, I guess.

RM: Can't we go beyond this image, this definition of affluence and redefine affluence in other ways?

AH: Oh sure.

RM: Define affluence not necessarily in material things?

AH: I'm sure but we don't know. We have imaginations of… yes, I mean there was something on television about Polynesian society before the Europeans arrived and it was some sort of paradise where everybody had the food that they… but do you believe that?

RM: Actually not.

AH: So it's an image.

DN: Of paradise.

AH: Yes, it's an image.

DN: Romanticised.

AH: This morning I mentioned patriarchy. Well, it could be matriarchy but it would be some sort of 'archy' and that would be that everybody has to fall into, yes.

RM: There is always something that.

AH: Yes, it's to do with power.

RM: Here when we assume that there is difference, this patriarchy or hierarchy or anything, it's always there?

AH: Somehow we don't seem to be able to survive without it.

RM: What is the future? What will be the future of intercultural communication then?

AH: This sounds awful to say but the future has to do with affluence. There is enough for everybody to have what they need so people don't have to start competing in difficult ways. But of course there is also… it's very hard to work out. There are revolutions and civil wars and there are leaders who want to take all the money and put it in their own personal bank accounts, they

want to get a cut out of every single industrial thing that's going on and we call it corruption. Now why is that? What I don't understand is why do some political… well, it seems to me that most political leaders in the world want to stash money away in their bank accounts and they all know this isn't going to end well, because nearly all of them end up either assassinated or exiled or whatever, but there is something that makes people need to…

RM: Seducing.

AH: Yes, and I don't know why. I just don't know why. Is it because they are living in countries which are not sufficiently affluent that there isn't enough for everybody so some people have to take from others. I don't know.

RM: But don't you think that the world can live peacefully and all people can get what…

AH: I don't know.

DN: Maybe that question is about this desire to acquire power is instinctual, something that people just do it because they feel they need it. If it's something that is so imposed by the society, by the image, or it's something that is instinctual.

AH: Well, it might be a matter of tradition, so if you take a patriarchal… so marriage, who decides who can marry who? This seems to be a big question. I was lucky enough, nobody cared and I could marry whoever I liked. At that particular moment, there were no pressures at all. But it seems to be one of the big things so everybody has to get involved and who owns who, what families do they belong to?

People claim religion but I don't think it's got anything to do with religion; it's a much more basic thing than that. There is something instinctual to do with ownership of gender, which seems to be very deep in our psychological make-up. I don't know, perhaps in very basic more animalistic communities, you couldn't afford to allow anybody in the group to run off whenever they wanted, you had to keep together in order to make things work. Perhaps that's where it all came from. I don't know but it seems to be a major thing, who marries who, where do people belong, what is their definition, how do they fit into the group?

The issue with gender, this problematizes the way that we define each other, so if you've got a big society with lots of affluence, it doesn't matter because people can go off and do what they want, but in another sort of society, it doesn't work, everybody has got to be in their place.

RM: You reminded me of one of your blogs I read before and you, I think, ended with one of the questions saying can we construct people just as people. Do you remember?

AH: No.

RM: You asked this question saying, can we construct people just as people? Do you think you can answer this question right now?

Ah: I guess I'm saying that we probably can't because of all these pressures we're… perhaps it is instinctual. There is no way we can just think of people simply as people, everywhere you look, images come into your head. You've got to keep putting them down but they arrive.

DN: It's a struggle maybe, it's like we struggle with ourselves.

AH: Yes. As I walk around here, there are people from all over the world and everyone I look at, an image rises up, a traditional image, which I have to push down again.

RM: So we can push them down?

AH: Yes, I think we should.

RM: Can we get rid of them?

AH: I don't think we can, but we don't know where they come from, they're ancient. Everything we have we got from other people.

RM: For instance, you mentioned in your books and articles making the familiar strange…

AH: You've got to try and think your way out of these things. That's your only hope.

RM: Like these things will just reduce the appearance of those images in our minds?

AH: Yes, enough for you to try and understand something else.

RM: So there won't come a time when we can go beyond?

AH: We're getting into some very deep and complicated areas.

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Portfolio assessment in language learning

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Key words: student-centred assessments, reflections and evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

Is Portfolio Assessment in Language Learning worthwhile?

In other words is there enough of a positive effect on students and the learning outcomes, considering the energy required from both sides, students and tutor, for portfolio introduction, production and assessment?

Languages for All (LfA)

LfA is one of ten Strands in the Discovery Themes offered to all UG students at the University of Leeds. We teach four Roman script and three non-Roman script languages, with all languages covering Beginners and Elementary level. Intermediate and Advanced levels are offered in most languages. All modules are credit bearing and most are taught in a two hour weekly seminar over one or two semesters. In this article we focus mainly on Beginners and Elementary levels to reflect on developments in LfA assessments.
We teach the following languages and levels:

Languages for All
Languages, Cultures & Societies — UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Which languages?

	Beginner	Elementary	Lower Intermediate	Upper Intermediate	Advanced
French	•	•	•	•	•
German	•	•	•	•	•
Italian	•	•	•		
Japanese	•	•	•		
Korean	•	•	•		
Mandarin	•	•	•	•	
Spanish	•	•	•	•	•

Figure 1: All modules are assessed via continuous assessments and a final speaking exam during the exam period(s).

Until recently one of the continuous assessment was a summative portfolio. We have now come to a point where we can take stock and evaluate our eight-year journey. The question raised is becoming particularly relevant for our subject area at this stage, as we are in the process of further streamlining and reducing

assessments to avoid over-assessing (University of Leeds, 2016). At the beginning of our journey we did not consider data collation nor comparison of pre and post portfolio assessment results in students' achievements, as all our efforts were focused on portfolio design and acting on student feedback. We also did not anticipate the complexity that emerged from developing and introducing this new type of assessment.

In this article we intend to outline the background that led us to introduce summative portfolios. The various formats we developed over a number of years and our underlying rationale and reflections that lead to subsequent changes will be explained. We will attempt to answer the posed question and also invite the readers to share their own experience in relation to assessments and challenges in language learning. It is very likely that colleagues in the School and further afield have their own experience in using Portfolio assessment. We hope to encourage a dialogue and discussion on this aspect of teaching and learning, which has been the focus of 'Transforming Assessment in HE' to further develop good practice in students' assessment (Council of Europe, 2001). We would like to point out that this article represents our personal perspective on developments in LfA and some colleagues may have differing opinions.

BACKGROUND

In 2010-11 a process of standardising our assessment structure and formats began, starting at Beginners and Elementary levels followed by the higher levels in subsequent years. We felt that this would facilitate students' engagement in the assessment process and open a dialogue within our language community about independent and lifelong learning. This process of standardisation allowed us to share an understanding of assessment principles by focusing on a common approach to assessment, benefitting our whole teaching team.

Our common assessment practice, up till this point, was continuous assessment in the form of in-class tests at all levels. It entailed two assessments in semester one: reading/writing/listening mid-semester (15%) and listening/speaking at the end of the semester (15%). A third continuous assessment: reading/writing (20%) took place just before Easter, followed by the final listening and speaking exam (20% each). The remaining 10% was given for homework, attendance and participation in a holistic form.

Although this structure allowed students to gauge their progress at regular intervals, drawbacks to this tutor-centred approach were evident. Tutors had to design many assessment components and the mid-semester 1 assessment was found to be rather too early in the students' learning. It also created undue pressure on tutors to complete topics in time for the assessment. The need to reduce assessments and more

importantly to unify the diversity of formats that had been used till that point became ever clearer. Furthermore, some external examiners felt that the 10% holistic homework element was unreliable since it could be viewed as subjective, therefore it was abandoned even though many tutors believed that this element encouraged and motivated students. At this stage the Foreign Language Teaching Unit (FLTU) Director initiated the standardisation process which lead to the introduction of portfolio assessment.

PORTFOLIO

Upsurge in Portfolios

Within our teaching unit only one tutor was using portfolio assessment in her higher level modules, following the European Language Portfolio guidelines (launched in 2001 in parallel with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). Her positive experience was encouraging and informed the start of LfA standardisation by focusing our attention on portfolios as a new form of assessment: a collection of students' work in the target language, accompanied by reflections and action plan for improving the language further.

The variety and many formats and uses of portfolio assessment was showcased in numerous Conferences and Language Fora which was inspirational. This encouraged us to opt for a Portfolio approach which was to be innovative since it was based on principles of reflective learning, learner autonomy and aspects of self-assessment (Mhlauli and Kgosidialwa, 2016).

The term Portfolio in language learning was for most LfA tutors, at that time, a new concept. In order for our team to understand the potential of such a learning and assessment tool a focus group was formed in the **summer 2010**. We explore its application as a form of summative assessment and decided to replace the 'traditional' in-class assessments for our Beginners and Elementary modules. The task involved numerous staff workshops during which different options were considered and the following was agreed on: Two portfolios, one per semester. Each would contain five tasks of directed learning that tutors devised and that students would hand in for feedback at set intervals. Students were encouraged to make improvements based on feedback and re-submit the original task alongside the final amended version. In addition students could also include any type and amount of private study they chose to demonstrate their progress in the language.

Importantly a reflective element had to accompany these collections of tasks. To do so students were asked to keep a log of the set core homework and private study and to comment on their learning outcomes and future plans. Furthermore, students were required to self-evaluate the four skills and grammar developed at

the point of submission. In order to engage the students with the portfolio grading criteria, they had the option of giving a holistic impression mark of their portfolio. As most students were not well acquainted with portfolio assessment, they were guided throughout the semesters, supplemented by information in the student handbook.

Stocktaking two years later (Summer 2012)

With the introduction of the portfolio assessment initially at Beginners and Elementary level we tried to address what could be seen as 'shortcomings' of in-class assessments as described above. Two summative end of semester portfolios meant fewer components overall, no re-designing of continuous summative assessments, relieving pressure to complete topics at particular points in the semester and freedom to be more creative in teaching.[1]

To help us evaluate our new assessment structure we conducted a short survey to gauge opinion from student and teaching staff as can be seen below:

Table 1: Students' view of Portfolio (Beginner and Elementary)

Positive points	Negative points
- Less stressful than assessments - Two third preferred it to assessment for various reasons (measures progress, regular work, can get high marks…) 90% said good - Creative - Able to concentrate on own weaknesses and independent learning	- Complicated/Prefer tests - Need a to do list/not clear what is expected - Too much freedom makes it harder - Hard to provide evidence for some skills - Too many tasks

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[1] Taken from FLTU Student Handbook level 0&1 2010-11

The portfolio is designed to encourage you to study regularly and consistently over the semester/year. It encourages you to focus on the **process** of learning as well as the **product** which will be assessed i.e. the portfolio. You are actively involved in planning your learning, monitoring you own progress and evaluating the learning outcomes. It gives you the opportunity to develop your independent learning skills by allowing you to take control over what **you** need to focus on, make your own choice of materials and employ your preferred learning style. Your tutor will of course provide guidance particularly at the beginning of the module.

As with any learning which has deadlines, you will need to manage your time effectively. Effective language learning requires regular consolidation and practice so you are encouraged to get into the habit of setting aside time each week for private study.

Table 2: Tutors' view of Portfolio

Positive points	Negative points
• Rewarding when students are very motivated • Greater range of tasks feed into assessment process than can be achieved with 3 tests • Independent learning, use of SAA (now Language Zone) and on-line materials • Increased student motivation, creativity • Greater insight into students' thinking	• Did not match expectations regarding teachers' marking and assessing time • Own lack of knowledge/understanding of portfolio • Students at loss what PS is, how long, how much in depth to go … • Assessing and giving feedback on individual pieces of work as well as the portfolio is time consuming, hard to manage • With one semester intensive modules it felt like 'teaching to the task'

Feedback gathered from both sides was vital in closing the gap between what was expected or hoped for and the reality of this new form of assessment. In addition to the above views, we as a team of staff had to also contemplate unexpected developments:

Students tended to favour quantity over quality of learning evidence and therefore in many cases portfolios were becoming very large.

Rationale and reflections were often superficial and/or done at the last minute rather than ongoing, as was desired. It became evident that, as Jennifer Moon (1999, p.3 and p.5) indicated, '*reflective capacity varies among individuals*' and the idea of the student '*taking an overview or sitting back from a situation to review it*' did not always occur.

A further development became clear. Considerable amount of time was required to explain to students the format and rationale of portfolio assessment, reducing valuable teaching time which, in fact, we had strongly hoped to increase by way of introducing student-centred assessments.
Also, the portfolio was not designed to be graded holistic as it became in later portfolios. It was the sum of individual tasks which was complex and the workload involved was felt to be extremely demanding, particularly for hourly paid staff.

Mindful of the feedback received, in a number of summer workshops, ways forward were sought to address the students' and tutors' response. We decided to use a portfolio in semester 2 only and to drop the need to include any private study. Furthermore, we re-introduced tutor-lead class tests in semester 1 to prepare students for the type of texts and listening material they could then choose in semester 2 for their portfolio.

These class tests were called 'Core Tasks' and covered the four skills. Our intention was to address the students' perceived difficulty of 'too much freedom' when choosing materials commensurate with the level and 'not clear what is expected' (see Table 1).

This new, semester 2 only portfolio format required one Private study piece per skill, including students' reflection and future plan (i.e. how a particular skill could be improved further) for each item of learning evidence. We also had developed detailed grading criteria for the productive skills as well as templates with detailed guidance for each skill item. Importantly, we had moved away from individually marked components to a holistic evaluation of the portfolio which required devising appropriate holistic grading criteria. Overall, these changes seemed to make the portfolio assessment easier to manage and addressed some of the concerns that students and tutors had mentioned in that tutors felt more comfortable with this hybrid of teacher-centred and student-centred assessment approach.

With refreshed confidence about portfolio assessment, we aimed to foster autonomous learning and encourage reflective learning strategies (Pilkington, 1997) now also at higher levels. A pilot portfolio was introduced 2013-14 in Italian and German, in Lower (exit B1) and Upper Intermediate (exit B2) level modules respectively. We kept to the tried and tested format of the lower levels. Templates for the Independent Tasks (at higher levels no longer called Private Study) as well as a comprehensive Assessment handbooks were produced to instruct and direct students and new tutors.

Despite improved detailed guidance on how to set out a rationale (i.e. 'In this task I intend to explore….) and reflect on tasks and samples of effective portfolios shown in class, many students at Beginners and Elementary levels still felt insecure in being the producer of their own assessment. Students found it particularly challenging to locate appropriate resources for the listening private study evidence. Also, some deemed writing a rationale and reflections confusing as they could not always link the task they had chosen with their rationale. For example a listening extract or a reading passage they had located in course books and other sources and on which they had to comment was at times seen as challenging or even irrelevant.

Likewise tutors found the speaking skill difficult to grade since students had to upload a pre-recorded dialogue and were tempted to read from their script instead of producing mainly un-rehearsed speaking. Furthermore with the portfolio assessment having been rolled out to all levels, tutors felt strongly that the volume of marking had now increased radically since the Core Tasks and a Project assessment for higher levels had to be assessed and moderated also. To address some of these issues, at Beginners and Elementary levels, we reduced the portfolio components required to the reading and writing skill as shown below:

Table 3: Assessment details

2013-14 and 2014-15	Sem.1 Beginners and Elementary	Sem. 2 Beginners and Elementary	Sem. 1 Higher Levels	Sem. 2 Higher Levels
Assessment Handbook. Electronic submission of PF on VLE	3 Core Tasks (R/L//W in the penultimate class)	PF: 2 Reading Tasks 2 Writing Tasks + Rationale and reflections on each task + Optional Portfolio Self-evaluation	PF 4 Independent Tasks, one per skill (peer feedback, rationale and reflections and optional portfolio evaluation)	Project: R,S,W

Stocktaking 5 years later

In Higher Education many institutions experimented with different formats of assessment via Portfolio, as did we over the mentioned 5 years, with the aim of seeking the 'ideal model of assessment'. To share LfA's experience, we showcased our portfolio journey at the London Imperial College Conference in April 2015. Here we were keen to show the outcome of the most recent questionnaire i.e. our second stocktaking.

Table 4: Students response

Questions	Beginners and Elementary German and Italian answered: 'yes'	Lower Intermediate Italian and Advanced German answered 'yes'
The PF motivated me to learn the language	88%	100%
The PF is a good form of assessment	82%	93%
It would be good to replace the PF with a number of class-tests, e.g. reading, writing	51%	29%

We were pleased about the resulting figures and reasonably sure that relevant analysis and subsequent changes to the portfolio meant that students saw the portfolio overall as a positive tool to assess their skills

and motivate them to learn. It is clear to see that over 70% in the higher levels would rather have this form of assessment than in class testing. But the yes/no split for or against replacing the portfolio was extremely close in the lower levels.

Table 5: Tutors' response

Question	Answered 'yes'
The PF motivates students to learn the language	57%
The PF is a good form of assessment	71%
It would be good to replace the PF with class-tests, e.g. reading, writing	57%

Although two thirds of tutors regarded a portfolio to be a good form of assessment, a small majority favoured traditional class testing. Finding the right balance between not over assessing and still motivating students to learn 'with a focus' we continued to search for still better ways to accommodate students' and tutors' needs. In doing so, it became ever clearer that challenges we were dealing with were not merely to develop the 'best portfolio' option but that we had to factor in other impactful aspects - the nature of our cohorts is very complex, compounding the effect of a demanding assessment format such as the portfolio. In LfA classes, first, second and final year students study alongside each other, leading to a widely varying need for supporting students in their organisation and time management. Also, some students, i.e. with language learning experience can draw on previous language learning strategies, more than 'non-linguists'. Some found portfolio assessment and the requirement to reflect on their learning puzzling or even arduous since they had never encountered portfolio assessment before. Equally, students with good language learning strategies, who may intuitively understand and use language structures, may find it difficult to unbundle their internalised understanding of the (new) language and it can be cumbersome to explain their learning process. From many tutors prospective the volume of marking remained an issue but more so the challenge to mark a portfolio holistically with skill evidence and rationale and reflections.

Slimming down from 2015-16

In a radical move to address the concerns mentioned above, changes to our assessment were developed. A number of tutors across the higher level trialled the introduction of a group Speaking task at the end of semester one, replacing the portfolio entirely. A Writing task in class, in semester two, replacing the project. At lower levels we reduced the Core tasks of the first semester to one Reading and one Listening task only and focused in the second semester portfolio solely on the writing skill, i.e. two writing tasks, including rationale and reflections.

Further issues clouding the portfolio at Beginners and Elementary emerged nonetheless. Online learning and translation tools have become very sophisticated and although of great benefit for language learning in and outside the classroom, we ultimately did not succeed in guiding students as to when and when not to rely on such online aids in writing for their portfolio. Tutors were now faced with portfolios that often entailed language structures that went beyond what had been taught and was expected at beginners and elementary level. Complex sentences, passive voice, subjunctive forms etc. are demanding structures that, if used in their evidence, have to be explained in the rationale and reflections to demonstrate their origin. If there is insufficient evidence for this, grading a portfolio becomes extremely challenging resulting in disappointing marks.

What did we learn?

Over the past nine years we had the pleasure of reading wonderfully composed portfolios and it was clear that portfolios helped a great deal with students' engagement in the language learning process. It freed up some teaching time and helped avoid 'teaching to the task' when compared with previous continuous assessments. Digital uploading and text scrutiny via Turnitin was helpful.

Students' feedback as well as views from external examiners and the teachers involved was invaluable in on-going rigorous reflections on our part as to why, what and how we assess in portfolio. An enormous amount of energy was required by the team for analysis, proposals, amendments, changes and intensive workshops, mainly through the summer periods.

In the summer of 2018 we asked ourselves finally, if Portfolio Assessment in Language Learning is worthwhile. Perhaps this is not the right question to ask. Rather, we need to modify it: 'Is a portfolio worthwhile within the complexities of an assessed language discovery module?' The majority in our teaching team have come to the conclusion that a Portfolio, particularly at lower levels, does not lend itself well as a tool for summative assessment. Learner autonomy, creativity and meaningful reflection is too difficult to reconcile with the rigor and warranting of 'high-stakes assessment' (P. Knight, 2006). After all, portfolios by their nature should be a way to display a student's achievement in a variety of skills and abilities and should be a document that captures the students' reflective practice without it being graded. In our modular approach and with mixed students' cohorts in LfA an assessed portfolio has become counterproductive. We would, however, recommend a Portfolio for formative learning.

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