

Language testing in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic 2020

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The Covid-19 pandemic leading to the lockdown of all educational institutions in the Czech Republic in spring 2020 had profound implications for the run of the semester, communication with students, teaching methods, as well as the examination period and the format of examining students' performance.

In this text we would like to describe the emergency examination format developed virtually overnight by the team of English language teachers of the Language Centre at Masaryk University, the Faculty of Economics and Administration.

The transition of the lessons from their traditional classroom-based form into the fully fledged online form took the team less than a week from the closure, which, in hindsight, was a success, and represented almost no interruption to the semester. This was mainly facilitated by the Information System of Masaryk University, which offers a wide range of proven tools, effective for online and blended learning, used extensively by all members of the language unit team and students themselves as recipients. Another aspect that allowed the transition to be effective and almost painless was the software platform Zoom whereby teachers communicated with students and scheduled virtual lessons. We find Zoom particularly convenient for language learning, especially thanks to the feature of breakout rooms allowing tutors to assign learners to pairs, groups, or small teams to cooperate and work on tasks separately.

With the progression of the semester and the global health situation deteriorating rather than improving, the team understood that the likelihood of the situation to be restored to its usual was very low and the examination period would continue in the virtual space, too.

The team prides themselves on adoption of good assessment practices, mainly reliability and validity of the testing items they create. Under the given circumstances, however, there was a high risk of non-compliance with these basic principles of assessment and evaluation, the administration format, and the content matter to be tested. Therefore, ideas were brainstormed as to how to handle the situation and ensure that the final examination was transparent, fair, valid, and reliable.

The original examination format is rather extensive and encompasses five proportionately represented areas, i.e. listening, reading, grammar and vocabulary, writing, and speaking. It was decided early on that the receptive skills of listening,

reading, and use of language (grammar, and vocabulary) would not feature in the online format of the exam. There were two practicality reasons guiding our reasoning. Firstly, it would be beyond our capabilities to ensure that all students work independently of any outside help, and secondly, this would mean that by sharing the test battery in virtual space with students we would have had to abandon it and would need to develop a brand new test battery in the following academic year.

In the end, it was decided that students would be assessed on three areas only. The first one was their continuous online work throughout the semester, the second would be the written part of the exam consisting of writing an argumentative essay (1st year students), or a problem-solution essay (2nd year students), and the last one would be the speaking part of the exam consisting of three parts: a monologue on a given topic, answers to related questions, and a discussion between two students. The exams would be carried out online using Zoom as the main platform for both the written and spoken part.

Writing Exam Format

In a standard situation, students write their exam essays in the faculty computer rooms, using the Information System tools. However, as these cannot be monitored remotely and cheating could not be eliminated, a solution was adopted to make use of shared Google documents that students have access to via the MU Information System. Before the exam, each student received a link to their document, shared by the invigilating teacher, where they wrote their essay at the time of the exam. In this way, the teachers exercised at least some supervision over the student's work (they could watch the student's development of ideas or see any suspicious sudden appearance of a large chunk of text, presumably copied from an outside source). Simultaneously, students joined a Zoom meeting, whereby they could be monitored visually. For the students, this format was in fact not that different from the usual exam. The possibility of cheating, of course, could not be ruled out completely. Looking for expressions in online dictionaries, for example, which is not allowed in the standard exam, cannot be proven by the invigilator unless some serious privacy breaches were set up, which was against the university's policy. Nevertheless, the nature of the exam – writing an essay – enabled a relatively objective assessment of students' language use, since in their texts they needed to react to specific assignments and express their own ideas.

Speaking Exam Format

The standard oral examination format is two teachers (interlocutor and assessor) examining two students, who each do the monologue part individually and the dialogue part together. Topics for both are drawn by the students who are then

provided with specific instructions on paper. This format was adapted to the on-line environment by transferring the printed instructions to electronic form and creating a random topic generator in MS Excel, which was shared with students via the Zoom screen sharing tool. A stopwatch was included in the Excel sheet, for the students and the teachers to easily see the preparation and production times. It was decided to keep the two-teacher format, as we believe that this ensures higher objectivity of the assessment. In order not to distract the examinees, the assessing teacher turned off their audio and video during the exam. The need to physically send the other student out of the classroom for the time of the other student's monologue was simplified by putting them in the Zoom waiting room and then readmitting them for their turn, thus effectively saving time.

Outcome

We found the substitute online exam format to be a reliable and valid, though not perfect, replacement of the standard format. With the numbers of students that had to be tested being high – about 800 students in total in all subjects with exams – it was necessary for the team to be very well organised and coordinated. However, despite the extra effort involved, this format meant substantial time savings for both teachers and students.

The dependence on technology, of course, meant that not all exams ran smoothly. This was particularly true for the oral exams, in which students sometimes could not understand each other or the teacher due to low quality of the internet connection, which might have had a negative impact on their performance as it increased the stress factor. These situations, however, were rare, and the examiners made allowances for such unwelcome interferences.

In conclusion, it was thanks to the teachers' hard work, technical prowess, flexibility, and willingness to learn new procedures virtually overnight that testing proved to be much less problematic than it had seemed at the beginning of the lockdown. Both the teachers and the students acquitted themselves very well in these trying times, managing to acquire skills and tools they would not have imagined to be so effective in the virtual language classroom.

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