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TRANSFORMING ASSESSMENT IN SECOND-LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: INTEGRATING DESIGN PEDAGOGY APPROACHES

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Abstract

Second language acquisition pedagogies and assessments come in very different forms, from the use of quizzes and exams that zeros on grammatical literacy, to communicative approaches where the focus might not be on accuracy but communication/transmitting information. Language courses often include elements of all these different types of assessment in order to evaluate the four main skills of language acquisition (writing, speaking, reading, and listening), however, there is often a limited focus on the process and learning experience, with the priority being the end result: how have these skills improved.

This paper is concerned with how design pedagogy can be applied to second-language acquisition assessment to enhance learning. Specifically, it discusses the adaptation of a design-based assessment strategy, where focus is placed on the process of artefact creation rather than solely the final deliverable, and its integration within Spanish-language assessment, providing a richer learning and development experience to students. Through a pilot study with 38 university-level students in a high intermediate (or fourth semester course), findings reveal that students positively welcomed the change in assessment approach, with emphasis placed on the development processes reducing anxiety and pressure often associated with high-stakes summative assessment. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate how assessment approaches in design pedagogy can be successfully applied to seemingly disparate disciplines.

Keywords: Pedagogy, assessment, effective learning, higher education.

1 INTRODUCTION

Second language acquisition is a complex process encompassing various pedagogical approaches and assessment methods. From traditional grammar-focused quizzes to communicative tasks emphasising real-world language use, pedagogies and assessments span a wide spectrum. Understanding assessment as the deliberate and planned collection of tools that help instructors understand the students' knowledge, skills and abilities (including strengths and weaknesses) [1], language courses often integrate different assessment types to evaluate the four main skills of language acquisition - reading, writing, speaking, and listening. However, in general, there tends to be a prevailing emphasis on outcome-oriented assessment (see [2-3]). When it comes to language learning, this usually means measuring how much learners' language skills have improved. This approach typically involves tests and exams that concentrate on grammatical accuracy and vocabulary retention, aiming to gauge learners' proficiency levels. While such assessments are valuable for evaluating linguistic competence, they may overlook the holistic learning experience and the development of communicative abilities.

Consequently, there is a growing interest in exploring assessment strategies that bring focus to the language learning process rather than solely on the final outcome. In this sense, emphasis is given to promoting active-learning and/or student-centred pedagogies [4-5] that look at reforming how we teach and learn, focusing these strategies on shifting from pedagogies based on mechanical forms of learning and memorization of facts, structures, and conjugations, to instructional practices that promote students' active learning, critical thinking, and problem solving [6-8]. Although, originally, formal assessment such as quizzes and tests were introduced to ensure fairness, many question the integrity or reliability of examinations in general or, at the very least, of using just exam-like assessment as the only method of evaluation [9-10]. Examinations usually focus almost entirely and exclusively on "a narrow range of the cognitive skills of students, leaving many other important areas of achievement, attitudes, and other non-cognitive attributes unaccounted for" [1, p. 8]. Moreover, examinations and tests focus the learning activity in memorisation and retention of knowledge, without demonstration of reasoning, application, or thinking skills.

One example of an active learning and student-centred pedagogy is an approach that stems from design pedagogy, where emphasis is placed on the process of creating artefacts, fostering creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, and reflective skills [11-12]. This approach encourages students to engage actively with the material, fostering a deeper understanding of concepts and promoting higher-order thinking skills. In other words, it combines theoretical and practical knowledge acquisition, skill demonstration, and hands-on, practical, learning-by-doing activities. With this approach, instructors move away from knowledge acquisition towards knowledge application, incorporating more formative assessments, and emphasising the students' learning trajectory, feedback, and observation of skills. This type of assessment, highlighting multiple discrete assessments that use a variety of methods and offers a continuous performance evaluation, is preferred by contemporary students over a single, high-stakes summative assessment [13-14]. This approach can also be viewed as being more holistic; aiming to prepare and equip students with not only subject-specific skills and knowledge, but with broader transferable skills in learning and reflection through providing clear distinction between formative and summative assessment [15]. In addition, it is recognised that when students feel a personal connection to their work they are more emotionally invested, which can result in improvements in their learning [16]. Therefore, it is important to investigate how these approaches can be adapted and applied to enhance the learning experience and promote deeper engagement with second-language acquisition.

1.1 Documenting the learning process

Reflective journals are frequently used for assessment in a range of courses; they help students engage with the practice of reflecting on their professional decisions and experiences. Biggs and Tang [17] have previously recommended that students submit only key extracts of their journals for assessment, while keeping the majority of the journal as a personal learning record. However, this approach may provide only a vague understanding of the development and learning process. In design pedagogy, placing emphasis on the documentation of the development process allows students to revisit ideas and reflect on their decisions, whilst enabling academics to gain a comprehensive appreciation of the process and consequences [11-12].

In addition, visual diaries are a fundamental tool in design pedagogy, offering students a dynamic way to explore and develop their ideas [18-22]. These diaries serve as personal repositories for visual inspiration, sketches, notes, as well as reflections, throughout the learning process. By regularly documenting their thoughts and visual experiments, students gain a deeper understanding of their own development and decision-making processes. Visual diaries encourage experimentation, allowing students to try out new techniques and ideas without the pressure of immediate assessment. They also foster self-reflection, enabling students to critically analyse their work and identify areas for improvement [19]. Furthermore, visual diaries provide a tangible record of progress, allowing students to see their development over time, increase self-confidence, become more articulate, and have a higher level of understanding [19, 22]. However, there appears to be little research into the use of visual diaries within other disciplines, specifically second-language acquisition teaching practice, and this warrants further exploration.

2 THE LANGUAGE PROJECT

Research was conducted during the Spring 2024 semester, in a university high intermediate Spanish language course (also known as fourth semester Spanish) in the United States. The course met twice a week for an hour and fifteen minutes each session, and it consisted of two different sections, one with 17 students, and the other one with 21. Although results from this research project come from a small sample, they follow a sample size and methodology similar to other pedagogical studies (see [23-26] amongst others).

Taking the pedagogical methodology of Green [11], the assessment on oral proficiency and public speaking was altered to integrate a visual diary component. Each semester students must produce an 8 to 10 minute presentation (including a PowerPoint) on a topic related to the contemporary cultures of the Spanish-speaking world, this way bringing culture and language learning under one clear semester-long exercise. While in the past themes have sometimes been set up by the professor (such as historical moments, famous musicians, historical figures) the theme during this particular semester was left open for students to research and present on any topic that was particularly of interest to them. The decision to allow students to choose their own research area was partly influenced by Flowerday, Schraw and Stevens' [27] discussion on the role of choice and interest. Although they found that choice does not have a big effect on engagement, they proved that situational interest does promote engagement and learning. In this particular case, the option of free choice meant that students could explore either topic

interest (ie, something personal or with pre-existing knowledge) or situational interest (ie, content-dependent, novel or that produced curiosity due to the student's lack of knowledge of that area). As such, this project allowed for choice to be the initial determining factor for interest, and therefore both of these factors (choice and interest) influenced the learning process of the students. However, in this project, it would be challenging to ascertain how one (choice or interest) could influence engagement and learning more than the other, as they were intrinsically intertwined from the beginning of the project.

Students were required to document their topic and learning process in their visual diaries and to help facilitate this several tasks for inclusion were set. These tasks included: providing two to three general ideas of topic areas they would like to explore and encompassing initial research and visual exploration; providing two to three specific examples of the one chosen idea they wish to pursue further, with accompanying visuals, analysis and reflection; a clear discussion of what they envisage their final project looking like; and, a final reflection on the project outcome, own learning, and skills development. Whilst students were required to include these tasks in their visual diary, they were also encouraged to include any materials which contributed to their learning and the selected topic even if not directly related to a task. On top of these entries, students had to produce a 'dictionary' section in their visual diary, adding any and all new words they had learnt during the process (Figure 1). They were also invited to create a personal object or artefact related to their chosen research topic, to be presented during the three-day presentations in the last two weeks of classes. The required 6 to 8 minute presentation of their projects took place before the visual diary was due for submission, allowing them to reflect on the whole process and feedback obtained. Presentations were shortened from previous years due to the higher involvement required throughout the semester with the visual diaries, and as a means to highlight the importance of the process and not just the final product (ie, the assessment would come not from the presentation alone, but from the tasks gathered throughout the semester). The presentation, which was devised as a 'show and tell'-style talk instead of an academic one, also served as a platform for students to share any physical artefacts they had gathered or worked on as part of their visual diary process. The inclusion of the visual diary also acted as a replacement to mid-semester professor-student meetings, allowing for on-going project guidance, discussion, and reflection throughout the semester.

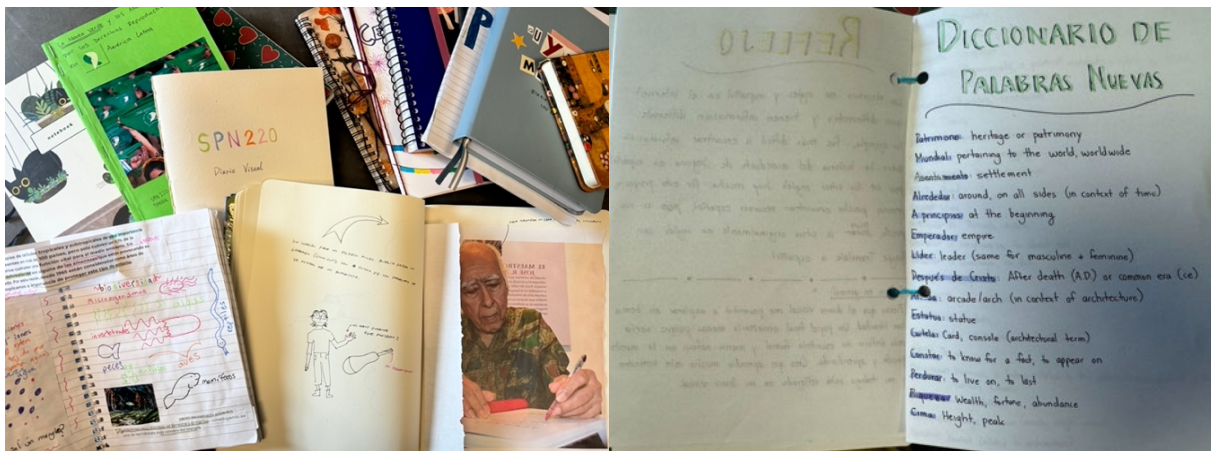


Figure 1. Students' visual diaries (left) and an example of the 'dictionary' section (right).

Assessment criteria was purposefully kept broad so as to not guide students along a set path, instead focusing on the visual diary and the required tasks alongside broader reflection and creative development in the context of the project selected. Successful learning was evidenced through students being able to demonstrate an ability to document and communicate their ideas and project development, whilst critically reflecting on their decisions.

Student feedback was obtained via an anonymous online survey using Google Forms. The survey included a combination of 5-point Likert scales and open-ended questions designed to ascertain students' perceptions of the assignment approach and their learning experience. The survey remained open for a period of 5 days and students were emailed twice during this period to encourage completion. Following the closure of the survey, Likert data was analysed to identify the most frequent responses and a thematic analysis [28] of open-ended responses was also conducted.

3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The online survey obtained a response rate of 94.7% (n=36). Of these, 63.9% (n=23) or more of students indicated agreement (agree or strongly agree) in all statement areas, see Figure 2.

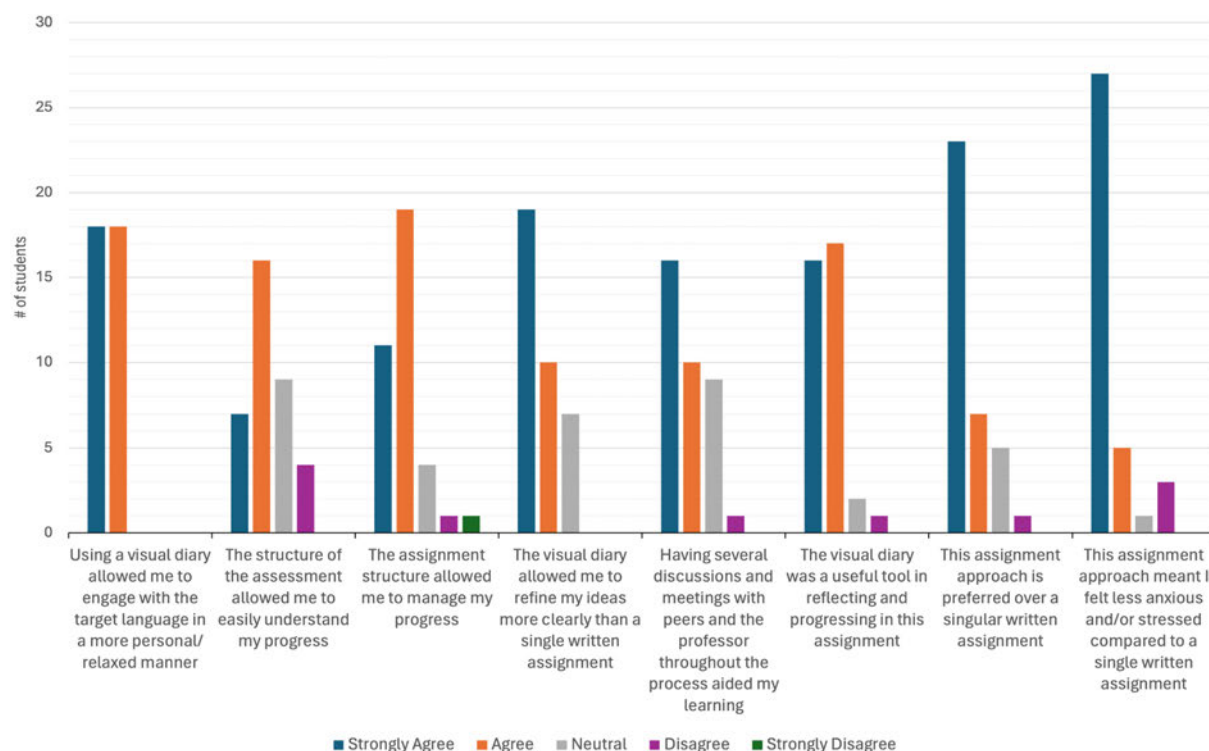


Figure 2. Students' level of agreement with Likert statements.

All students agreed that the use of a visual diary allowed them to engage with the target language in a more personal or relaxed manner, with 80.6% (n=29) further indicating that the visual diary was a useful tool in refining ideas compared to a single written assignment. In addition, 91.7% (n=33) of students indicated agreement that the visual diary was a useful tool for reflection, with 5.6% (n=2) expressing a neutral rather than negative view. In their open-ended responses, the student who disagreed indicated difficulties in recording their learning and that their choice of project area could have been better grounded. Therefore, additional guidance, particularly in the early stages, may be required for students who are not familiar with this pedagogical approach.

"I was able to step away from the assignment for a day or two and revise it with a pair of fresh eyes. It felt like a reflection of different moments throughout the semester as opposed to a final that only reflects where I am at the end" (ID#10)

Views pertaining to the structure of the assessment allowing students to easily understand their progress showed greater variation. Whilst 63.9% (n=23) still expressed a positive view (agree or strongly agree), 36.1% (n=13) expressed a neutral or negative (disagree or strongly disagree) view. Interestingly, ten of those with a neutral or negative view responded positively to the statement that the structure allowed them to manage their progress. Examining open-ended responses suggests that whilst these students were able to *manage* their progress effectively, they couldn't easily *understand* their progress due to assessment criteria not being clear enough or desired further guidance throughout the process to guide their progress.

Additionally, 72.2% (n=26) of students expressed agreement that discussions and meetings with peers and the professor throughout the process aiding learning, with a quarter (n=9) expressing a neutral view. Students commented that it would be helpful to be assigned to small groups whom they could meet throughout the semester to share ideas with.

"I do wish there had been a little bit more guidance or involvement in class [. . .] like a timeline" (ID#30)

Such an approach could also help to support students in planning and managing their projects over the duration of the semester. The student who disagreed indicated that they felt more time could have been dedicated to the project in class.

The assignment approach adopted was well received by students, with 83.3% (n=30) indicating a positive preference for it over a single written assignment.

“One submission creates a very limited view of your learning progress, while an entry every week establishes an accurate representation” (ID#36)

Of those who expressed a neutral (13.9%, n=5) or negative (2.8%, n=1) view, comments indicate that whilst these students did, on the whole, enjoy the assessment approach, particularly as it allowed them to work on the project incrementally, there is a desire for greater feedback provision throughout the semester. This could be addressed through the inclusion of formative check-in dates where work-in-progress is reviewed and feedback provided. This could also help students to better understand their progress.

Importantly, 88.9% (n=32) of students agreed (27 of which strongly agreed), that the approach adopted resulted in a reduction in anxiety and/or feelings of stress when compared to a single written assignment.

“I really enjoyed the assignment and felt it to be less anxiety inducing and much more enjoyable” (ID#22)

Open-ended responses from those who expressed a neutral (n=1) or negative (n=3) view, indicated that whilst the visual diary itself aided focus, the creative element became a source of stress when formal writing is seen as a personal strength. This demonstrates that whilst a majority enjoyed the creative nature of the learning experience, having the option to do a written assignment or a visual diary may be preferred; however, learning outcomes would need to be considered to ensure the varied approaches could be assessed with parity.

In total, three themes were identified from the open-ended responses: learning environment; personalised learning and engagement; and language skills. Concerning the learning environment, students felt that the semester-long project structure was important in facilitating progress and meaningful learning, although comments do highlight that greater scaffolding throughout the learning process would be beneficial. However, students do indicate that they feel working on the project over an extended period has allowed them to retain information more effectively and develop further skills. By avoiding cramming through writing an essay in the final weeks or days, learning became more meaningful. The visual diary was notably perceived to be less stressful than a single written assessment. By breaking down the assessment into smaller areas of focus, students indicated that it became more manageable and reduced pressure. This approach allowed students to gain a more thorough understanding of the material through provisioning them ample time to explore concepts and ideas in greater depth.

“I think this method of learning, especially for foreign language learning, is effective as it takes away some of the stress of an academic subject and allows students to make use of and appreciate what they are learning” (ID#26)

“I liked how it was broken up into smaller steps, making it easier to spread learning over a longer period of time” (ID#6)

Within the theme of personalised learning and engagement, students appreciated the freedom to choose topics they were genuinely interested in, leading to increased engagement in the project and made learning more enjoyable. This engages with the work of Flowerday, Schraw and Stevens' [27], demonstrating that the decision to allow students to select their own area of enquiry positively influenced engagement and learning. The approach motivated students to delve deeper into vocabulary, grammar, and the topic itself, driven by their personal interests. Moreover, the project allowed for creative expression, further enhancing engagement and understanding. The visual diary format was particularly appreciated for its encouragement of creativity and different styles of learning. This is further underpinned by several students opting to make their own diaries as opposed to purchasing one, thus making the diary itself, and not just the content, part of the learning experience. Students valued the opportunity to express themselves creatively while learning and found that engagement with various media in Spanish, such as articles and videos, enriched their learning experience which they could apply in other subject areas.

“Being able to choose a topic that I was interested in allowed me to learn more vocabulary and grammar structures as I actually wanted to read about it!” (ID#1)

“This assessment approach allowed me to explore a topic I am genuinely interested in and felt very engaged with.” (ID#10)

“I was able to learn about something I'm interested [in] while also developing my language skills [. . .] I was able to have fun with my learning” (ID#12)

"It encouraged me to have a visual diary of sorts in future Spanish (and non-language) classes, it feels like a low-stakes, personalised way of taking notes and I think that's very helpful" (ID#32)

Finally, with regards to language skills, students found the project beneficial in enhancing their language skills, spanning vocabulary, grammar, speaking, reading, and writing in Spanish. The 'dictionary' task was noted as being a useful tool not just for the project at hand but also in the future. Due to the language focus of the class, the visual diaries concentrated primarily on writing more than visuals but this is not seen negatively from a pedagogical perspective; the expression of thoughts, ideas, and summaries, resulted in on-going practice of the target language with many students writing at length in their diaries, more so than a single essay. It encouraged students to communicate effectively and express their thoughts. Moreover, students indicated that they felt the project provided diverse opportunities for language practice, including conversation, presentation, and written expression, thus fostering a well-rounded development of their language abilities.

"I feel like I learnt a lot about communicating through Spanish [. . .] I learnt about putting my thoughts eloquently into Spanish" (ID#7)

"I liked the dictionary part because I could include words related to my project and words that would be useful later on but I didn't know" (ID#25)

"I learnt new words based on my own interest and I practised grammar by writing about it in my diary" (ID#13)

4 CONCLUSIONS

The integration of design pedagogy into second-language assessment offers several potential benefits. Firstly, it provides students with opportunities to apply their language skills in meaningful and creative ways, enhancing their linguistic competence and communicative abilities. Secondly, it encourages a shift from passive to active learning, with students taking ownership of their learning process; and finally, the results demonstrate that it can reduce anxiety and pressure often associated with high-stakes summative assessments, allowing for a more relaxed and enjoyable learning experience.

However, the results demonstrate that such an approach requires a clear structure throughout the semester, with assessment criteria which is fully understood by all students. In addition, the provision of set formative feedback points would aid in the understanding of progress; whilst the inclusion of small group learning sets could assist students further outside of the classroom, particularly where cohorts may not be familiar with the practice of documenting the process of creation or struggle with idea development.

Through adapting and applying design-based assessment strategies, educators can enhance the learning and assessment experience within second-language acquisition. Furthermore, this study demonstrates the potential for such approaches to be applied in other seemingly disparate disciplines where outcomes are traditionally less visual and reflective in nature. Future research could investigate the potential for wider scale utilisation of design pedagogy approaches, specifically visual diaries, in non-design disciplines. In addition, a larger scale implementation of visual diary based assessment in second-language acquisition, combined with longitudinal data, warrants further exploration given the positive indicators identified through this pilot research study.

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