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Assessment Design in Online Russian Language Courses: Lessons from COVID-19

YULIANA GUNN

1. Introduction: Online language instruction

After the rapid spread of COVID-19 in early 2020, universities were permitted to initiate individual pandemic response plans by the Department of Education, and by the end of March hundreds had transitioned from in-person to online course delivery platforms (Cevasco et al. 2020, 5). The abrupt switch to online teaching necessitated teaching in various modalities such as synchronous, asynchronous, hybrid, and hyflex. The sudden nature of the transition to online instruction left educators with little time to acquire the technical skills needed for effective online teaching, to adjust course material for online delivery, or to support and accommodate student needs during this crisis. While the move to online instruction may be temporary, it has become clear that the pandemic has permanently altered approaches to online language teaching and pedagogy.

Since the shift to online learning, instructors have had time to reflect on online teaching practices, and certain limitations of online instructional tools and methods, specifically in the area of language assessment, have become abundantly apparent. Although Learning Management Systems (LMSs) can effectively deliver certain course content to students (facilitating written and oral discussions, grading, reporting), the assessment tools and features of LMSs are limited and may not provide an accurate reflection of student language gains.

The pandemic has encouraged language instructors to reconsider existing assessment and testing practices. One potential drawback to written online testing lies in the easy online access to translators, digital course materials, and textbooks, which can pose a challenge for instructors designing written online language assessments. On the other hand, the online environment, especially video communication platforms, has removed certain obstacles to assessing oral language proficiency gains. For example, individual and group student presentations and spontaneous speech production can be recorded and available to the instructor to assess at a later time.

This article discusses ways traditional assessments can be retooled for online implementation and administered in communicative and interactive activities, always in the context of ACTFL's three modes of communication. It ends with initial student responses to this new online assessment method.

Both formative and summative online assessments can be used to measure language production across the three modes of communication (interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational) as defined by ACTFL. In the interpretive mode, language learners must understand, interpret, and analyze authentic information, such as audio that they hear, written excerpts that they read, or a video that they watch (NSFLEP 2015, 3). In the interpersonal mode, learners participate in an "active negotiation of meaning" among peers and target language speakers and conversations are non-rehearsed and spontaneous (Cutshall 2012, 35). In the presentational mode, language learners present information, share their ideas and opinions, and discuss and narrate on a variety of topics in the target language (NSFLEP 2015, 3).

2. The hunt for the perfect assessment

In discussing assessment types, an important distinction must be made between performance-based and proficiency-based assessments. Performance-based assessments consider information learned and practiced language in inauthentic contexts and test "students' ability to acquire, store, and recall knowledge in a test situation" (Nemtchinova 2020, 340). Traditional classroom tests and quizzes usually fall under this category, as they evaluate student performance in grammar, vocabulary, and orthography (Chirimbu 2013, 92).

Proficiency-based assessments, on the other hand, measure students' communicative competence in the form of spontaneous and non-rehearsed language production across the three modes of communication. Communicative competence can be measured by alternative assessments, which can include thematic short- and long-term projects, portfolios, student dialogs, roleplay scenarios, interviews, and peer and self-assessments. While grammatical accuracy continues to play an important role in proficiency-based assessments, such assessments are not limited to solely testing linguistic production (Nemtchinova 2020, 341). In addition, proficiency-based assessments take into consideration "the learning of each student, as well as each student's cultural background and level of knowledge" (Chirimbu 2013, 92).

The assessments described in this article are a hybrid of traditional (performance-based) and alternative (proficiency-based) assessments, which are delivered in an online format. These assessments evaluate vocabulary usage and grammatical accuracy, as in traditional assessments, but are embedded in communicative and interactive activities.

2.1. Context for assessment: Classroom transparency and assessment rebranding
Specialists agree that transparency in online courses is essential. As was suggested by Sadler, "...the criteria for evaluating any learning achievements must be made transparent to students to enable them to have a clear overview both of the aims of their work and of what it means to complete it successfully" (quoted in Black and William 2012, 18). The instructor must make a deliberate effort to describe learning goals in the syllabus, continuously revisit learning outcomes, discuss all assessment expectations and to encourage students to make connections between content covered in class and the assessment.

Instructors should emphasize the purpose of each assessment; for example, the purpose of an assessment could be to provide students the opportunity to show mastery of lexical and grammatical content. Instructors must describe the grading criteria; for example, the assessment grade is based on specific categories such as: (1) addressing all aspects of a prompt, (2) sentence organization, (3) usage of vocabulary covered in the unit (vocabulary counts), (4) practiced grammar and mechanics from the unit. Other questions should be addressed, such as whether online translators are allowed. Some instructors may choose to deduct points for the use of unfamiliar vocabulary and grammatical constructions, which may discourage students from relying on online translation tools and emphasize recalling familiar, practiced class material.

To reduce student stress, instructors could consider describing online assessments with more neutral terms, for two reasons: (1) neutral terms may reduce student stress levels, and (2) neutral terms for assessments provide the instructor with flexibility to use authentic content in various assessment formats. For example, when drafting the course syllabus to reflect new assessment changes, the author renamed formative assessments as language checks, and summative assessments as language tasks. The English terms may not carry a negative connotation for many students. Another option is to use Russian equivalents such as *proverochnaia rabota* for formative assessments, and *kontrol'naia rabota* for summative assessments, as it encourages students to use Russian without code-switching and prepares them for studying abroad in Russian-speaking countries.

2.2. The framework of communicative modes

There are two types of assessments, formative and summative, that are integral in measuring student language gains. Formative assessments (such as traditional quizzes), which the author called language checks, are generally given throughout the course of a language unit and are designed to assess a specific grammar or discrete set of vocabulary. Summative assessments (such as traditional chapter tests, midterms, and final exams), which the author renamed language tasks, are cumulative and generally given at the end of a unit or semester. Summative assessments also typically include end-of-the-unit projects, presentations, or tasks that can be integrated into end-of-semester student portfolios, allowing the student to present their best polished work (Sandrock 2010, 18).

2.3. Online formative assessments

The online environment can enable the more purposeful design of interactive and engaging assessments utilizing authentic material. Formative assessments can include authentic production of written or spoken responses, brief listening comprehension checks, and authentic dialogic conversations, in which the information requested is new and the information students share is personalized and new (Meskill and Anthony 2015, 16).

Low-stakes formative assessments are “integrated throughout the unit and happen when the teacher determines that the learners are ready to demonstrate what they know and are able to do” (Clementi and Terrill 2013, ch. 2). In online delivery formats, formative assessments can be conducted frequently and be integrated into lessons and become an essential part of class activities. Since formative assessments can be situated in the three modes of communication, they can be differentiated to accommodate diverse learning preferences and reflect unit content in real-world scenarios.

While vocabulary usage is essential in providing students the ability to speak freely on a topic (Brown and Bown 2015, 74), specific grammatical structures are needed to convey the message (Sandrock 2010, 39). However, vocabulary is generally assigned from a list, and students are assessed primarily in their ability to recall terms from that list without applying it in any meaningful context, and therefore it is not surprising that retention drops significantly over time (Clementi and Terrill, 2013, ch. 2). Formative assessments should not only assess commonly used vocabulary and grammatical structures from the unit, but also provide students the

ability to apply them in authentic contexts. In designing such assessments instructors must consider their applicability to real-life situations, so that “the activities become ‘minds-on’ rather than merely ‘hands-on’ (Clementi and Terrill, 2013, ch. 3).

In the interpretive mode, formative assessments can include written responses to a thematically relevant image, such as an Instagram picture, graphic, or a GIF. For example, students can be asked to provide a hashtag for an image to check vocabulary or write an Instagram or Facebook post in which they share a reaction, opinion, or emotion evoked by the image, which constitutes both a vocabulary and grammar check.

In the interpersonal mode, students can record conversations in Zoom Breakout Rooms in pairs, which can either be peer-assessed or graded by the instructor using a rubric. The numerous benefits of recording interpersonal tasks are discussed by Meskill and Anthony (2015, 14). In addition, students can conduct timed interviews in Breakout Rooms, record mock phone conversations, or communicate with peers on a given topic in written form by using chat applications such as the Zoom chat feature, or other messaging application. Working in small groups, students can read part of a story and be tasked with creating an interesting ending.

In the presentational mode, formative assessments can include in-class activities where students are asked to present information about themselves, their lives and experiences, opinions, etc. in either written or oral formats. Formative tasks in this mode can include rough drafts of compositions, essays, outlines, resumes, and written correspondence such as letters and emails (Sandrock 2010, 18). These can be graded according to rubrics that emphasize accuracy and conveyance of a message.

2.4. Online summative assessments

Summative assessments are intended to “present students with a new application of the skills previously assessed at the formative level” (Clementi and Terrill 2013, ch. 2). As summative assessments are cumulative and therefore usually longer in length than formative assessments, the author used an approach inspired by Miller’s cognitive strategy of “content chunking,” as opposed to the common approach of devoting an entire class period to summative assessment (Miller 1994, 349). For example, if a typical class unit is a fifty-minute block of time, the summative assessment tasks can be broken up over the course of two days and administered as a part of the class period, where students, for example, complete an interpersonal section one day as a class, and interpretive and presentational sections the next.

There are several advantages to “chunking” a summative assessment. Spreading out an assessment reduces student stress and allows the instructor to differentiate assessment tasks to accommodate varying student learner preferences by providing student options in content choice for class discussions, which can be accomplished by creating composition prompts in which students can share personalized information and opinions.

In the interpretive mode, instructors can design summative assessments by embedding authentic, level-appropriate video or audio into LMS quizzes. For example, students can answer multiple-choice questions based on the content, summarize the main points of a video, or write a short reaction in the form of tweets or social media posts, or online forum responses. Assessment can be modeled after the Writing Proficiency Test, in which students read a paragraph of authentic text in a timed environment, summarize the content in their own words, and provide an appropriate title for the text in the target language (Clementi and Terrill 2013, chap. 2).

In the interpersonal mode of communication, assessments can include recorded student conversations such as basic introductions, expression of agreement or disagreement based on an open-ended question, or role-playing scenarios. Similarly, students can conduct phone conversations, where the main goal is to negotiate meaning, and dialog sustainment exercises, where they must sustain a conversation for a certain duration of time (Clementi and Terrill 2013, chap. 2). Many of these assessment tasks can be completed and recorded in Breakout Rooms and can take the form of an “on demand task” that students complete on the spot, without prior preparation and provide insight into what students “... can do independently without feedback and editing” (Clementi and Terrill 2013, chap. 2).

In the presentational mode, learning tasks can vary depending on the structure of the course (asynchronous or synchronous). Presentational learning tasks can include the following: writing a detailed composition on a given unit topic with specific criteria included in the question; providing detailed answers to open-ended questions; drawing cultural comparisons on common topics, stances, and interpretations of current events or issues; or personal opinions on controversial issues.

Other possibilities for presentational mode assessment tasks are summative multimodal projects “whereby language learners combine written, visual and oral information into a public product” (Meskill and Anthony 2015, 218). These projects consist of several stages, where the initial planning, researching, and drafting stages serve as formative assessments,

and the completed, polished product is a summative assessment. Various class themes can be used in assignments that range from writing a formal letter or email to a Russian professor, an informal letter to a friend about culture shock, creating a Russian resume and/or cover letter, a dating profile, providing advice on a forum, to researching a city and planning an itinerary.

3. Student reception

The author piloted many of these online assessment suggestions in the 2020-2021 academic year. This section offers some preliminary findings largely based on student reflections, impressions, and testimonials.

In an anonymous feedback form consisting of twelve questions, second- and third-year students of Russian were asked to reflect on the online adaptation of formative and summative tasks. In this survey, students were asked to rate the new assessment types on a scale of one through five (one being least effective and five most effective) in terms of assessing unit content and providing the student with the ability to use Russian creatively and in a personalized way. In addition, students were asked whether they prefer traditional assessments over the newly piloted assessments. Students were asked to provide written feedback about what they liked and disliked about the new assessments.

The overwhelming majority of students surveyed favored keeping the new formative and summative assessments, as opposed to traditional assessments. Student responses are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Student reactions to new assessments.

Questions:	Student Responses (n=22):	
	Yes:	No:
1. Do you like the new format of language checks (quizzes)?	91.7%	8.3%
2. Would you prefer to go back to the traditional paper style quizzes?	8.3%	91.7%
3. Do you like the new format of the language tasks (exams)?	91.7%	8.3%
4. Would you prefer to go back to the traditional paper style exams?	4.2%	95.8%

The majority of students commented that the new online assessments provided them with the possibility to produce new personalized content in Russian, a task they found more enjoyable, relevant, and useful than traditional vocabulary and grammar-based assessments (see Table 2). Students found the new formative assessments less stressful. Overall, students noted that they preferred more frequent checks, appreciated that the assessments tested across the three modes of communication, and that the material they were asked to produce was related to real-life situations. For example, one student stated, “I like that they feel more focused on making sure we learn the language rather than taking a quiz just to take a quiz.” Similarly, another student noted, “I like that these quizzes feel more applicable to real life rather than just normal vocab quizzes. Having to actually apply the vocab helps with remembering and learning.” In addressing vocabulary recall in particular by moving away from assessing vocabulary acquisition in list form, one student noted, “Before I would memorize and forget.” Despite their overwhelmingly positive reactions to these new assessments, some students noted that grading rubrics or grading scales for formative assessments were unclear. Since this assessment approach is still a work in progress, amendments will have to be made in creating more cogent rubrics in the future. However, the same issue was not noted by any students on formative language task feedback.

Table 2. Student rating of effectiveness of new assessments.

Questions: (5 =most effective; 1 = least effective)	Student Responses (n=24):				
	5	4	3	2	1
1. Rate the new format of quizzes (language checks) in terms of providing you with the ability to produce a new, authentic product in Russian?	50%	41.7%	4.2%	0%	4.2%
2. Rate the new format of exams (language tasks) in terms of providing you with the ability to produce a new, authentic product in Russian?	70.8%	20.8%	8.3%	0%	0%

Several students emphasized that they enjoyed the creative aspect of the new summative experiences and the freedom to apply new vocabulary and grammatical structures in authentic contexts, as opposed to solely being graded on linguistic production. In a reflection on summative assessments, one student wrote, "I like the fact we are challenged to speak and write genuine compositions. It's all well and good defining and filling in blanks, but fluency comes from knowing how to speak well and I really like doing them." Another student commented, "Personally, I think the format as it is [sic] fantastic. I think with classes online, this setup makes the most sense." Students also appreciated the chunking of assessments; one noted, "I like that it's broken up because I feel like it's less like testing my memory. Giant end-of-unit tests can be difficult because there's always something that I forget to review."

4. Conclusion

Adjusting assessment is a natural step as more language instruction takes place online. Adjusting online assessments using the alternative assessment approach received support from students studying Russian online. Revisioning traditional assessment types can aid in reducing student anxiety, while providing instructors with more flexibility in creating varied formative and summative assessments in online classrooms. These revised online assessments can be used and adapted for in-person classes when the return to face-to-face instruction becomes more realistic.

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