

Seven case studies on assessment from teachers in Cyprus

In November 2021 an ECML-EC training workshop on relating language curricula, tests and examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference ([RELANG](#)) was held in Cyprus. The experts involved, José Noijons (the Netherlands) and Evelyne Bérard (France), invited participants to submit brief case studies on their experiences of assessment during the Covid emergency. Seven case studies were submitted by teachers of English from a range of educational sectors. Their case studies paint a vivid picture of the assessment and testing challenges encountered, the inventive measures adopted to address these challenges and the implications for the future of language education and teachers' professional learning.

Therapoula Constantinou:

- A. *Please write briefly about a memorable language assessment experience, either particularly challenging or especially successful, as an example of your practice during the pandemic:*

What is the national context? What kind of institution? Who were the language learners?

A memorable language assessment took place last year during the second Covid-19 lockdown. There were about 20 Greek-Cypriot students at a Gymnasium (lower secondary school) in Nicosia. All of them were 14 years old.

What was the status of the assessment?

I created a quiz in Microsoft Teams to assess students' learning and understanding of a particular subject. I set a start and end date and shuffled the questions to avoid cheating. The results were not shown automatically because I wanted to receive the results, review them, and make comments and then allow students to access their results and feedback.

Please write a brief description – the 'story' - of what you did/what happened that made this an especially memorable experience:

Although I prepared my quiz very carefully, I was a bit worried about my students' reactions since that was something totally new, full of new challenges and unexpected problems that could arise. What made that experience an especially memorable one was my students' professionalism and their willingness to face the new challenge. Everything went as planned and I was more than happy about that.

What lessons might there be in your experience for language teaching in general beyond the pandemic?

This kind of quiz can be used not only during the pandemic, when online learning is the only way of delivering lessons but in conventional classes as well, since it is a very useful and interactive tool which can offer a lot. In my opinion, technology interventions should be part of our daily lessons.

- B. *In your context, how have teachers and other colleagues coped with modified assessment practices during the pandemic?*

A few teachers found it hard to cope with modified assessment practices at the beginning of the pandemic as many procedures were new and demanded special technical skills. The majority, however, managed to successfully face all the new challenges since they were well-trained.

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- C. *The pandemic has now lasted almost two years and is not over yet. How is it affecting your professional practice at present?*

Unfortunately, the pandemic is not over yet. It is affecting my professional practice at present as there is the fear of a new lockdown which causes feelings of anxiety and insecurity. Moreover, some teaching practices like pair work and group work, which help students develop special communication skills, cannot be used as students need to maintain social distance to protect themselves.

Elena Lambrianou:

- A. *Please write briefly about a memorable language assessment experience, either particularly challenging or especially successful, as an example of your practice during the pandemic:*

What is the national context? What kind of institution? Who were the language learners?

As a state high school teacher I used the Microsoft Teams to conduct my lessons on a daily basis.

What was the status of the assessment?

Particularly challenging was assessing students' oral skills. As a means of assessing students' oral performance prior to the pandemic I held open discussions in class on topics which had been studied in advance and after relevant vocabulary had been taught. However, it was extremely difficult to hold an open discussion online because of frequent bad internet connections and students being distracted by various factors as they were in different settings.

Please write a brief description – the 'story' - of what you did/what happened that made this an especially memorable experience:

While a student was expressing her thoughts on a particular topic her baby brother started crying and the other students online started laughing and lost focus. As her mum was not at home, I advised her to take the baby in her arms to calm him down, which is what happened. Then we continued the discussion with the baby in the picture.

What lessons might there be in your experience for language teaching in general beyond the pandemic?

it is important to encourage self-learning from an early age through various sources with the teacher having an advisory role, offering suggestions so that students become more responsible for their own learning.

- B. *In your context, how have teachers and other colleagues coped with modified assessment practices during the pandemic?*

Teachers had to prepare various projects, mainly writing ones, on the basis of which students would be assessed, because tests based on textbook material could not be conducted in a fully controlled environment.

- C. *The pandemic has now lasted almost two years and is not over yet. How is it affecting your professional practice at present?*

At the moment in Cyprus, with a very high rate of vaccination, very few students or staff have caught the virus. Schools therefore operate as they used to before the pandemic. In the event

that some students are unable to attend due to the virus they link up on Teams and watch the lesson

Vasiliki Hadjinikola:

- A. *Please write briefly about a memorable language assessment experience, either particularly challenging or especially successful, as an example of your practice during the pandemic:*

What is the national context? What kind of institution? Who were the language learners?

A secondary school in Cyprus. A class of 15 16-year-old students who studied English for 6 periods a week (B2). They were being assessed during the term and they were also going to take an exam at the end of the term.

What was the status of the assessment?

A reading comprehension test – part of the term's assessment.

Please write a brief description – the 'story' - of what you did/what happened that made this an especially memorable experience:

The test was uploaded before the lesson and students had 45 minutes to read three texts. For the first text they had to write answers to comprehension questions; they had to do a multiple-choice activity for the second text and write a guided summary for the third. They had to write the answers in their notebooks, take a photo and send the photos immediately after the end of the lesson. It was a memorable experience as it was the first time that I had tried that, and I was not certain whether all students would follow the instructions. What is more, I could not know whether they would answer the questions on their own. However, all students sent their answers on time and the results were consistent with tests students had taken in the classroom earlier that year.

What lessons might there be in your experience for language teaching in general beyond the pandemic?

Teachers need to be flexible and always willing to try new methods of teaching (and assessing). Teachers should be trained on new methods and tools and how these can be used.

- B. *In your context, how have teachers and other colleagues coped with modified assessment practices during the pandemic?*

At the beginning it was quite hard as most teachers were not trained to cope with online classes. Students were assessed based on their participation and the homework they sent. Later, some teachers started using online tools or they uploaded tests a few minutes before the lesson and students were asked to answer the questions and send them back to the teacher before the end of the lesson.

- C. *The pandemic has now lasted almost two years and is not over yet. How is it affecting your professional practice at present?*

At present, most students come to school. However, as there are students who are quarantined, either because they are sick or they are contacts, we have hybrid classes.

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Louiza Loizou:

- A. *Please write briefly about a memorable language assessment experience, either particularly challenging or especially successful, as an example of your practice during the pandemic:*

What is the national context? What kind of institution? Who were the language learners?

State school – upper secondary level (16-year-old students). Online lesson/assessment during the pandemic/lockdown

What was the status of the assessment?

Project/presentation (guidelines, deadline and marking criteria provided and clarified beforehand)

Please write a brief description – the ‘story’ - of what you did/what happened that made this an especially memorable experience:

On the basis of a specific thematic unit on the environment, students had to design and present an Environmental Awareness poster, illustrating and discussing a current environmental issue affecting our planet. Overall, it was a positive and rewarding experience. Students were also encouraged to assess the work of their peers. However, there were students who did not have access to a laptop or PC, and it was difficult for them to present their projects via their mobile phones. Surprisingly, most students were not reluctant to participate, in contrast to having to present their projects in class.

What lessons might there be in your experience for language teaching in general beyond the pandemic?

- a) flexibility/training is necessary especially in assessment practices
- b) difficulty in identifying or helping individual learning difficulties (distance learning)
- c) disadvantaged students should be supported (i.e. learning difficulties, economic issues, many siblings/no electronic equipment available etc.)
- d) students need to be better trained and prepared to work remotely – develop digital literacy skills
- e) develop autonomy in learning
- f) teachers need to be supported and trained to work remotely (computer literacy)

- B. *In your context, how have teachers and other colleagues coped with modified assessment practices during the pandemic?*

I believe that in language education it is easier to adapt and make lessons even more interactive. Some teachers used learning platforms such as Kahoot! creating quizzes and games. Others used project-based assessment, yet could not check if cheating took place (e.g. parents helped complete work). Without a doubt, assessment is an on-going process, inside or outside the classroom environment. Therefore, emphasis was placed on formative assessment, without depending so much on the summative aspect. The difficulty some teachers faced was the inability to use cameras because of personal data privacy restrictions which are applicable here in Cyprus. This created an additional barrier between teacher and learners in language acquisition.

- C. *The pandemic has now lasted almost two years and is not over yet. How is it affecting your professional practice at present?*

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The most negative aspect I would say is the difficulty in arranging any sort of groupwork with my students. Activities or tasks have to be adapted in such a way that there is no physical contact or at least some distance is created (social distancing). Materials and resources have to be adapted and modified. In addition, students continue to miss lessons due to positive Covid cases or due to restrictive measures for close contacts. Lack of motivation is also an issue affecting students. Teachers seem to be under pressure to cover the curriculum and carry out assessment types in case there is another lockdown in the near future, thus overloading students with school work and tests.

Antonios Themistocleous:

- A. *Please write briefly about a memorable language assessment experience, either particularly challenging or especially successful, as an example of your practice during the pandemic:*

What is the national context? What kind of institution? Who were the language learners?

The context was within the public secondary education system in Cyprus, more specifically in the Lyceum (upper secondary), with students of B1+ Level, in their majority L1 Greek speakers.

What was the status of the assessment?

The students were to give a presentation on the topic of the thematic unit which we were working on: water as a necessity for life.

Please write a brief description – the ‘story’ - of what you did/what happened that made this an especially memorable experience:

Students were divided into groups through Teams, and each group was given the necessary guidelines as I shifted between groups to facilitate and oversee teamwork, before coming together and presenting via a spokesperson. This was memorable for the students because they all had their say either during the preparation phase or by being the spokesperson of the group, as well as through the experience of working in groups, albeit in an isolated environment.

What lessons might there be in your experience for language teaching in general beyond the pandemic?

The pandemic offered a challenge which brought to surface severe issues such as lack of education regarding the increasingly digitalized world on the teachers' side as we were all caught by surprise, and several found it especially hard to adapt – let alone adapt quickly – and continue their teaching using the digital platforms offered. This meant that the most important lesson of all is that a teacher, similar to a doctor, should never cease learning, always trying to keep up with the developments around them, embracing them as opportunities to learn, grow and adapt, keeping them at the top of their game for as long as they are in it.

- B. *In your context, how have teachers and other colleagues coped with modified assessment practices during the pandemic?*

Not very well, as it was not easy to shift from the traditional pen and paper style assessment, with the teacher invigilating the students in the classroom, to alternative methods of assessment. This was mainly because students were able to use parallel digital means to find answers, even complete essays, rather than writing or responding based on their own

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knowledge. So especially because there was no precedent from which to exemplify, it did take a while before teachers could safely say that their online assessment practices were adequate.

- C. *The pandemic has now lasted almost two years and is not over yet. How is it affecting your professional practice at present?*

I believe that most teachers have now had the time to come up with ideas to help them adapt, as well as having the ability to research what other teachers have been practising via the internet, adopting and adapting ideas for their own context and conditions. The one thing that I still don't enjoy is the distance between my students and myself, as well as between them, as practices such as groupwork or tossing the ball as part of the lesson in, for example, an answering session, are no longer feasible, taking a bit of the enjoyment out of the learning process.

Mariangela Pishili:

- A. *Please write briefly about a memorable language assessment experience, either particularly challenging or especially successful, as an example of your practice during the pandemic:*

What is the national context? What kind of institution? Who were the language learners?

I teach English in a technical and vocational school in Cyprus. There are three levels: A2, B1 and B1+.

What was the status of the assessment?

This type of assessment was done regularly both as formative and summative assessment.

Please write a brief description – the 'story' - of what you did/what happened that made this an especially memorable experience:

What I found particularly challenging was assessing the students' written work. Even though there are numerous ways for the students to submit their written work and for the teacher to give feedback, most students did not know how to do it. They were not very familiar with technology. As a result, I had to find other ways to do it, i.e. students sending a photo of the work and me commenting on specific areas, or printing the photo, correcting it and writing feedback and resending it as a photo.

What lessons might there be in your experience for language teaching in general beyond the pandemic?

Students need to become more computer literate. Also, me, as a teacher, need to learn and practise more online, interactive methods of assessment.

- B. *In your context, how have teachers and other colleagues coped with modified assessment practices during the pandemic?*

Some co-workers used online platforms to assess their students, e.g. Google forms

- C. *The pandemic has now lasted almost two years and is not over yet. How is it affecting your professional practice at present?*

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I am trying to learn how to use more online platforms, eg. Kahoot, Google forms, Fipgrit. Also, I attend seminars especially on distance learning to learn as much as possible, and be better prepared if we find ourselves in the same situation.

Androula Athanasiou:

- A. *Please write briefly about a memorable language assessment experience, either particularly challenging or especially successful, as an example of your practice during the pandemic:*

What is the national context? What kind of institution? Who were the language learners?

Higher education public institution, in Cyprus. Undergraduate students studying a variety of disciplines. All 1st year undergraduate students and also some 2nd and 4th year students (not from all disciplines).

What was the status of the assessment?

Mid-term and final exams

Please write a brief description – the ‘story’ - of what you did/what happened that made this an especially memorable experience:

Initially, we were concerned about the online nature of the exams, and about students being able to cheat. Some instructors created their exams in Moodle quiz, in which a variety of materials (e.g., reading passages, videos, listening, images) could be included and activities could be carried out (e.g., multiple choice questions, matching, gap filling, short answers and longer answers) and in which items can be shuffled and different items can be assigned to certain groups of students. However, in my case, I preferred including open ended questions, in the form of a Word document, which required taking a critical stance, on reading passages and on topics covered in class. Moreover, I included longer pieces of writing, through which I could assess students' ability in the language in many areas, such as content, structure, vocabulary, grammar. I then also started using Moodle quiz, which was easier in terms of marking, but not creating the exam. After two years of experimenting, I can say that a combination of the two types could be used as long as we can ensure that students do not receive any help during the exams.

What lessons might there be in your experience for language teaching in general beyond the pandemic?

I must admit that the online mode could be useful, after all as long as we use it to serve our purpose and as long as we assess what we want to assess.

- B. *In your context, how have teachers and other colleagues coped with modified assessment practices during the pandemic?*

Initially, there existed great confusion as to what and how to assess. After much experimentation though, each colleague has chosen the mode of assessment that serves their teaching purpose best.

- C. *The pandemic has now lasted almost two years and is not over yet. How is it affecting your professional practice at present?*

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After two years, we are still experimenting with a variety of teaching models (fully online, hybrid and/or blended) and we are still trying to figure out what works best. There still some confusion as to how and what to assess and this is affecting teaching and learning of course. I believe that we still need more time before we decide which practice is best. Although we must admit that technology has come to stay and perhaps we should adapt our teaching accordingly.
