



**Ryszard Kalamarz**

## **Assessment in VLE Supported Foreign Language Learning**

### **Abstract**

The paper focuses on the role of Virtual Learning Environments in the scope of different types of assessment in foreign language learning and teaching promoting learner autonomy and developing such key competences as learning to learn. Effective language education calls for a more learner-oriented approach to assessment and Learning Management Systems such as Moodle seem to respond to such needs in the computer assisted teaching/learning process.

**Key words:** foreign language learning, assessment, Moodle, virtual learning environment

### **Introduction**

Assessment may not be at the heart of teaching but certainly plays a crucial role in the educational process. From the teacher's as well as the learner's perspective it is generally accepted that what is taught should be assessed. Also, teachers always say that they should test what they teach trying to do justice to students' efforts as much as they can.

In the document *Effective Assessment in a Digital Age* the Joint Information Systems Committee defines effective assessment and feedback as “practice that equips learners to study and perform to their best advantage in the complex disciplinary fields of their choice, and to progress with confidence and skill as life-long learners, without adding to the assessment burden on academic staff”

(Jisc, 2010, p. 10). In recent years, however, education has become overburdened with assessment, evaluation, and control. The apparent virtue of ensuring an objective, standardized measurement of the learner's achievements allowed to find the complacency in all sorts of figures, percentages, and calculations leading the teachers to be product-oriented in their assessment of students' work with less concern about the learner (Gajek, 2011, p. 296).

## Approaches to Assessment

### Towards Learner-Oriented Assessment

Within the framework of the basic distinction between diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment there are some theoretical approaches emphasizing the student and the learning process.

**Democratic approach.** Democratic assessment emphasizes respecting the student's individual preferences, hearing his or her voice and taking into consideration his or her point of view. Rather than seeking uniformed teaching solutions more time should be spent discussing learning objectives, negotiating ways of achieving them and working out methods of assessment. Assessors need to respect various ethical issues connected with possible consequences of assessment resulting for example from specific teaching contexts (e.g., multicultural groups, social differences, shared and collaborative learning) and seriously respond call for a recognition of test-takers rights (Shohamy, 1989).

**Dynamic approach.** In dynamic approach to assessment the student is assessed regularly while working on a task, solving a problem, preparing a presentation or studying to produce a given result. All these steps taken by the student within the zone of proximal development need to be supported by the teacher whose role as an assessor is "to influence performance and hence reveal students' 'potential for change'" (Campione, 1989, p. 151). The teacher's assessment leads to intervention, and this is effective when the student's responsiveness to such interventions is higher. Thus, this kind of assessment is of a formative character as it helps shape the student's abilities.

**Assessment for learning.** The other postulate, Assessment for Learning, is a widely recognized general approach to assessment very often contrasted with assessment of learning or assessment as learning. The Assessment Reform Group defines Assessment for Learning as "the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there" (ARG, 2012, pp. 2–3).

In a review of at least 20 studies on classroom assessment, Black and Wiliam (2010, p. 83) found that the formative assessment experiments after 2.5 years of

implementation result in effect sizes of between 0.4 and 0.7, confirming that such significant learning gains call for more systematic focus on formative assessment practice. Summarizing the recent theoretical and empirical work Wiliam suggests that “integrating assessment with instruction may well have unprecedented power to increase student engagement and to improve learning outcomes” (Wiliam, 2011, p. 14). A number of classroom strategies have been identified as effective in realizing Assessment for Learning principles, including:

- questioning as a pedagogical tool and method of finding out about students’ prior knowledge and level of abilities;
- effective teacher feedback for emphasizing students’ achievements, areas to improve and specific suggestions on improvement;
- peer feedback for recognizing other students’ achievements and offering ideas for improvement on the basis of established success criteria;
- student self-assessment for building up learner’s independence and responsibility for what they learn;
- use of summative assessment for formative purposes both before and after the assessment event.

Wiliam notes that the strategies must be viewed within the formative assessment framework of three main processes (identifying where learners are in their learning, where they are going, how to get there) exercised by three categories of actors (teacher, learner, peers) (Wiliam, 2011, p. 13).

### **Favoring Learner Autonomy**

These three learner-oriented approaches to assessment allow to empower the student and emphasize his or her potential, variety of skills and competences, ability to learn, responsibility, and rights (Gajek, 2011, p. 300). Assessment can thus support learner autonomy understood as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning, that is, to have and to hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, including determining objectives, defining the contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition [...] evaluating of what has been acquired” (Holec, 1981, p. 3). What renders the student an autonomous learner making responsible decisions about his learning is his or her volition and choice (Little, 2011), which the teacher may support selecting a proper learning environment where assessment can play a special role. This role needs to be redefined bearing in mind that traditional assessment with grades can dishearten students, ruin their motivation, and provoke pedagogically unwanted rivalry between learners (Komorowska, 2007, p. 155).

### **Key Competences in the Background**

Today’s learners look for more than a scope of knowledge and skills transmitted and measured according to some prearranged standards. The 21st-century school

is where students learn to become competent in various authentic real life situations and in different roles they are to play in society, possibly throughout their lives. In this sense, today's learner assessed for his or her progress might assess someone else's progress at a point in his or her career. Understanding the process of assessment, assessing others, discussing assessment outcomes as part of the educational process can help build up the learner's key competences for lifelong learning, such as learning to learn, interpersonal, intercultural, and social competences as well as digital competence. Teaching practice shows good effects of applying competence-oriented approach to foreign language instruction (see i.a. Kalamarz, 2014).

## **Assessment and Learning in VLE**

### **ICT in Learner-Oriented Assessment**

Experts in modern education agree that there is a need for alternative assessment approaches designed on new understandings of the impact of ICT on learning, assessment, and society. The ongoing debates have led to outline three aspects of assessment critical for 21st century:

- student involvement in assessment;
- digitally-enhanced assessment;
- assessment of the application of ICT skills acquired in formal and informal learning environments (Webb, Gibson, & Forkosh-Baruch, 2013, p. 451).

The generally agreed recommendation experts have made was that there should be a shift in assessment from the dominant high-stakes, test-based evaluation model to a balance of models.

### **Assessment in VLE**

As a very effective and commonly used virtual learning environment the Moodle learning management system offers various affordances that enable implementing the learner-centred approaches to assessment, which in the case of foreign language learning appears to be particularly effective as this educational process needs time, consequence, and involvement. Survey research shows that most student teachers of foreign languages are aware of the effectiveness of e-learning assessment. As many as 75% of the survey respondents pointed to such arguments as immediate feedback (36%), the teacher's job being facilitated (24%), motivating learners (16%), and letting learners work at their own tempo, at the most convenient time and in the setting of their choice (12%). Other advantages included the fact that administering assessment takes less time, students can develop their ICT and online skills and the beneficial opportunity to include multimedia and online resources

(Marczak & Krajka, 2014, pp. 272–273). Virtual learning environment assistance offers the teacher various possibilities in the scope of monitoring students' course and activity progress and motivating students to achieve their goals. There are plenty of different assessment instruments in Moodle activities and functionalities that the teacher may consider employing in teaching (Smyrnova-Trybulska, 2012), the following examples highlight only a few.

### Assessment Tools in Moodle

The teacher makes the most of Moodle functionalities in respect of checking students' grades and their progress in the course by monitoring activities completed (Gradebook), looking at individual student's grades in particular activities or looking at the results of a particular activity up and down the student list (Scrolling facility), viewing the grade history of students (Grade history), analyzing one single activity result with grades and feedbacks displayed or one single student with all his or her grades and feedbacks on screen (Single View). In addition, much information about students' activities online can be obtained by viewing highly detailed logs (Logs). Another useful functionality that lends itself to the student tracking their progress is Activity completion. Meeting certain criteria (viewing, receiving a certain score or marking as complete) makes it possible to have finished activities automatically ticked and displayed in appropriate boxes next to each task in a section. Worth noticing is the multi-purpose Moodle component that allows the teacher to record and grade students' attendance as well as note any important information related to the student's active participation (Attendance). This lends itself to the teacher's role of an assessor supporting the student's effort on a class-to-class basis (Figure 1).

The screenshot shows the Moodle Attendance tool interface. At the top, there are navigation buttons: Sesje, Dodaj, Raport, Eksport, and Ustawienia. Below that, there are filters for 'Osobne grupy' (Group nr 10 sb/nd) and a date range '28.09 - 4.10'. The main table has columns for 'Attendance record', 'Grade', and 'Notes'. The 'Attendance record' column contains letters O, S, U, N. The 'Grade' column contains numerical values like 2/2, 1/2, 0/2. The 'Notes' column contains text like 'Active participation', 'Extra homework', and 'L4'. There are also checkboxes for each row.

Nazwisko / Imię	Attendance record	Grade	Notes
Zuzanna	O	2 / 2	Active participation
ek Joanna	O	2 / 2	Extra homework
ly Adam	S	1 / 2	
owska Anna	N	0 / 2	
ewnek Monika	U	1 / 2	L4

*Figure 1. Moodle Attendance: grading and assessing the student's participation or effort.*

Source: The author's own work.

**Motivating students.** The significance of assessment does not consist in mere control and evaluation. It also covers important functions such as raising awareness, motivating, and encouraging students to fulfil their aims. At the teacher's disposal are various useful solutions. Students may be awarded badges for their achievements (Badges). It is possible to display ranked results from any graded activity in order to encourage improvement (Activity results block). Supportive in students' efforts prove to be restricted access to course sections or activities depending on fulfilling certain conditions (Restrict access). Support can be communicated by means of Notes (confidential notes seen by selected users including students), Comments block (information edited on the course page), Messages (exchange of private messages), Latest news block (notices and instructions to students), News feeds (an external news feed for instant access by students), Feedback or Questionnaire (obtaining reflective information from students). Additionally, Calendar enables to keep students up to date by entering events).

**Ongoing assessment within activities.** The teacher's monitoring role can be performed within particular activities, especially those involving production, interaction, and collaboration. It is possible to comment and check the history of wiki edits in order to assess students' contributions (Wiki). In a lesson the level of prior knowledge can be checked by analyzing students' answers (Lesson). How students grasped a problem or portion of knowledge can be judged on the basis of the analysis of the results. On the other hand, the learning content can be improved when a feedback form is analyzed (Quiz). Ungraded activities, like Blog can also involve the teacher's support in the form of comment on a blog entry made by a student (Blog).

**Assessment potential of assignment.** The Moodle activity that seems to be particularly tailored to the needs of language learning assessment is assignment. Assignment is a powerful Moodle activity as it opens up possibility for various didactic applications. Basically, the teacher may design oral or written production with some aspects of interaction. The student can submit an online text or in the form of a file or files. The student's submission(s) may also be oral (Audio recording) or can take an unconventional form the teacher can think of (Offline submission), including the possibility of collaborative work ("Group submission") or simulation or role plays ("Locally assigned roles"). Assessment starts even at an early stage when both the teacher and the student may leave a submission comment. Then the teacher may choose to write a feedback comment (editing it online or uploading it as a file or files), edit it within the text (feedback comment inline) or annotate critical parts of the submitted pdf text with useful annotation tools. Another possibility is that grades and feedback can be edited offline (offline grading worksheet). Feedback can also be oral (files). Both grade and feedback comments may be adapted at any time as the student corrects or improves his or her work. At the teacher's disposal are other instruments supporting the process of learning shaped by assessment: the word limit on an online text assignment which





There are also different methods of grading chosen between Simple direct grading (Grades and Scales) and Advanced grading (Marking guide or Rubric) (Figures 2, 3). The other two methods of grading need some preparation but once the grading method is designed the act of assessing students' work is easier. These advanced forms of grading differ slightly in that the Rubric contains particular boxes representing one level of criteria and a specific grade attached to it. The teacher only has to click on the box – the total grade is automatically aggregated – and, optionally edit a comment next to the criteria band. The Marking guide method of grading contains pre-defined elements of criteria leaving the teacher room for commenting and selecting the suitable grade for each element. Pre-edited frequently used comments can be selected by clicking. Both methods are supplemented by general feedback comment edited online or uploaded as files.

Ocena: Kryteria oceny. Ile punktów i za co? **Method of grading: Marking guide**

Criteria	Feedback	wynik	Grade
<b>Content</b> Does it match the instruction and purpose? Is the content OK?	Correct	3	3
<b>Form</b> Is the form appropriate in all respects (structure, style, register, punctuation, precision)? Is the form fully acceptable?	Well done, almost. Mind the spelling of -ing forms.	4	4
<b>Grammar</b> Is the work grammatically correct? Difficult to understand? Largely correct but with mistakes? Correct with minor mistakes? Almost correct?	Some minor mistakes, but largely OK	4	4
<b>Lexis</b> Does the work present a wide range of lexis, expression? Difficult to understand? Poor vocabulary, wide lexical scope with mistakes or almost none?	Fairly good, acceptable	4	4
<b>General effect</b> Would the work match the general purpose in real life? Effective or not?	Quite effective	1	1

**Często używane komentarze**

- + Well done
- + Contains mistakes
- + Some minor mistakes, but largely OK
- + Fairly good, acceptable
- + Mistakes impair communication, partly difficult to understand
- + Correct

**Frequently used comments: pre-edited, clickable**

Pokaż oceniamuemu dodatkowy opis (uwagi)  Ukryj dla oceniamującego dodatkowy opis (uwagi)  
 Pokaż studentom dodatkowy opis (uwagi)  Ukryj dla studenta dodatkowy opis (uwagi)

Figure 3. Moodle Assignment advanced method of grading: Marking guide.

Source: The author's own work.

The teacher can control each student's performance as the grading table displays the student's status, grade, teacher's modifications, submission comments, feedback comments inline, feedback files.



**Multifaceted assessment in Workshop.** Another Moodle activity module which best exploits a plethora of assessment for learning possibilities is Workshop. It enables, apart from teacher's assessment, both self- and peer-assessment. This activity is complex, yet flexible. There are four phases: set-up, submission, assessment, and grading evaluation. There is a clear-cut table presenting the activity structure and the phases with a useful indication of the current stage. Workshop is the only activity module that allows for breaking down the grade into grades for particular criteria. The grade can take the form of a number, letter, or description.

## Violation of Conventional Rights

### Zrecenzowana przykładowa praca

#### Example opinion

This expert opinion serves as an example, see attachment



Example  
work to be  
peer-  
assessed

### Peer-assessment guide

#### Instrukcja recenzowania ▼

Pay attention to: 1. Structure (3 points), 2. Content (3 points), 3. Form (3 points)

Would it pose an effective expert opinion in real life?

#### Przykładowa recenzja

Jeszcze nie ocenione

*Figure 4.* Moodle Workshop peer-assessment practice: sample peer-assessment and peer-assessment guide.

Source: The author's own work.

In fact, the student gets two grades, one for the value of his or her own work, and the other for the quality of his or her peer assessment. It means that these two different results requiring different competences can be assessed within one task. Each grade is calculated on the basis of an adopted method, for example, weighted mean.

There is enough room for the teacher to support the student's effort. If the teacher chooses to offer the student more peer-assessment practice the student is given a sample to be peer-assessed supported with the teacher's detailed instruction, tips. This test-dry is also aided by a sample assessment as a useful reference. Further support is included in the feedback notes.

Przykładowa recenzja  
Jeszcze nie ocenione

### Peer-assessment form

Formularz recenzowania

Kryteria	Poziomy			
Structure	<input type="radio"/> Structure is inappropriate, chaotic	<input type="radio"/> Hardly structured	<input type="radio"/> Structured but imperfect	<input type="radio"/> Well structured
Content	<input type="radio"/> Completely irrelevant	<input type="radio"/> Partly relevant	<input type="radio"/> Well connected to the references	<input type="radio"/> Contains proper information,
Form	<input type="radio"/> Form inappropriate, impairing communication	<input type="radio"/> Form partly correct with many mistakes	<input type="radio"/> Form correct with minor mistakes	<input type="radio"/> Form correct
General effect	<input type="radio"/> Would not have an effect in real life		<input type="radio"/> Would have an effect in real life	

Overall feedback

Informacja zwrotna dla autora

Feedback comment to the author with files

Załącznik

Możesz przeciągnąć i upuścić pliki tutaj, aby je dodać.

Figure 5. Moodle Workshop peer-assessment practice: peer-assessment form (rubric in grid mode) and overall feedback.

Source: The author's own work.

The activity's possible methods of grading include assessment forms consisting of a set of criteria and using either of the following standard strategies: accumulative grading, comments, number of errors or rubric. The assessment form may be rendered either in list or grid mode. The latter is shown in Figure 5.

## Conclusion

New approaches to assessment, especially assessment for learning understood as “any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting students’ learning” (Black et al., 2004, p. 10) can be enhanced when assisted by or set in a virtual learning environment like Moodle, itself being an assessment powerhouse. VLE supported language learning enables a more learner-centered assessment, opens more possibilities for learner autonomy, and strengthens key competences.

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Ryszard Kalamarz

### **Ocena w nauczaniu języków obcych wspartym wirtualnym środowiskiem nauczania (VLE)**

#### **S t r e s z c z e n i e**

Artykuł koncentruje się na roli wirtualnych środowisk uczenia się w zakresie różnych rodzajów oceniania w nauczaniu języków obcych, które to środowiska sprzyjają wspieraniu autonomii uczącego się oraz rozwijaniu takich kompetencji kluczowych, jak umiejętność uczenia się. Efektywne kształcenie językowe wymaga podejścia do oceniania bardziej zorientowanego na uczącego się. Systemy LMS, takie jak Moodle pozytywnie odpowiadają na takie potrzeby w komputerowo wspartym procesie dydaktycznym.

**S ł o w a k l u c z o w e:** nauka języków obcych, ocena, Moodle, wirtualne środowisko nauczania

Рышард Каламаж

### **Оценка с использованием виртуальной среды преподавания обучения иностранному языку**

#### **Р е з ю м е**

В статье основное внимание уделяется роли виртуальной среды обучения в рамках различных типов оценивания в обучении иностранным языкам. Эта среда содействует автономии учащегося и развитию такой ключевой компетенции, как умение учиться. Системы дистанционного обучения, такие как Moodle, удовлетворяют потребность в эффективном лично-ориентированном подходе к оценке в обучении.

**Ключевые слова:** изучение иностранных языков, оценка, Moodle, виртуальная среда обучения

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### **Evaluación en EVA para el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera**

#### **R e s u m e n**

El artículo se centra en el papel de los Entornos Virtuales de Aprendizaje en el ámbito de los diferentes tipos de evaluación en el aprendizaje de las lenguas extranjeras y la enseñanza dirigida a promover la autonomía del alumnado y el desarrollo de dichas competencias clave, como aprender a aprender. Una enseñanza de idiomas eficaz demanda un enfoque más orientado al alumnado en la evaluación. Los Sistemas de Gestión del Aprendizaje como Moodle parecen responder a esas necesidades en el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje asistida por ordenador.

**Palabras clave:** aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras, evaluación, Moodle, entorno virtual de aprendizaje