Chapter 2
Engendering Interaction, Collaboration, and Reflection in the Design of Online Assessment in Language Learning: A Reflection from the Course Designers

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ABSTRACT
As suggested by its title, this chapter situates online assessment in language learning in complete online mode as opposed to blended learning (i.e., campus-based learning supported by online components), or traditional distance language learning with no online components. Online language learning discussed in this study has its own inherent characteristics. Typically, this type of learning features the physical separation of learners from one another and from their education providers. Consequently, without the support of sophisticated online educational technologies, the provision of interaction, collaboration, and reflection, the fundamental elements in modern education would be problematic. This chapter discusses the framework developed for the design of online assessment that engenders interaction, collaboration, and reflection, by taking advantage of advanced online educational technologies. Examples of online assessment design drawn from the assessments implemented in an online Chinese program at Griffith University, Australia, are evaluated to establish the validity of the proposed design framework. These discussions also lead to recommendations for online assessment design for online language learning.

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INTRODUCTION

The prediction made more than 10 years ago by scholars of the convergence of campus-based and distance learning towards an online education has largely become a reality today (see Hall, 1998; Cunningham, et al., 1998; Wang & Sun, 2001). Such a reality constantly urges us to rethink assessments in accordance with students’ needs and with the new capabilities of the technology to meet these needs. This is especially true with distance education today as learning relies essentially on technology. It is also true that the cohort of distance language learners today is hugely different from that in the 1980s, particularly in terms of learning needs and environments. Today’s distance language learners are composed of both “Digital Natives” and “Digital Immigrants.” Coined by Prensky (2001), these two terms accurately define the role that technology plays in our lives, that is, technology, like language, is an essential tool that we use and rely on in everyday life. The new generation who has grown up with digital technologies is “all ‘native speakers’ of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet” (Prensky, 2001, p. 1), while “Digital Immigrants” who did not grow up using digital technologies, have to “learn to adapt to their environment,” and “always retain, to some degree, their ‘accent,’” that is, “their foot in the past” (Prensky, 2001, p. 2). Neither Digital Natives nor Digital Immigrants would be satisfied with self-learning in an isolated low-tech environment as the distance learners were 30 years ago. Instead, they need more dynamic interaction and collaboration with their teachers and peers. Such a need has been increasingly recognized in the distance education literature in the 21st century (see Dreyer, et al., 2005; Kennedy & Duff, 2004; Miwa & Wang, 2011; Chen & Wang, 2008) but has not been adequately met.

To provide interaction and collaboration in assessments in online language learning presents particular challenges to online language course designers and teachers. We use the term “online language learning” to denote the learning of a language in both a distance and a complete online mode, in which learners and education providers are physically separated from each other, and learning is essentially supported by online educational technologies. The online assessments to be discussed in this chapter are situated in such a learning environment.

This chapter will explore a framework for online assessment design by recounting and reflecting on what we have achieved in meeting the needs of online language learners for interaction, collaboration, and reflection in online assessments. To be more specific, we will first discuss the framework developed for designing the online assessments in the online Chinese program offered at Griffith University, Australia, and then illustrate this framework with the assessments we designed for the program. We will demonstrate the ways in which we have designed our online assessments, reflect on the pros and cons of our assessment design, and suggest recommendations for future assessment design and research.

BACKGROUND: A FRAMEWORK OF ONLINE ASSESSMENT FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

Assessment for Learning

Our basic approach to assessment in general distinguishes assessment for learning from assessment of learning. In brief, assessment of learning is often summative, focusing on the end product of learning with a judgment on the outcomes of learning (Banks, 2005; McMillan, 2004). However, assessment for learning places more emphasis on the process of learning and regards assessment as a dynamic part of the learning process and as an opportunity to promote deeper learning (Harlen, 2007). Different from the commonly held understanding of assessment for learning,