

Undergraduates as researchers in humanities and social sciences courses: articulating assessment by means of micro and macro cooperative and integrated tasks

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Abstract

The proposal presents an experience of formative-summative and research-based assessment method developed for Humanities and Social Sciences undergraduates. Such assessment experience is organized in micro-tasks that guide the students towards the development of an original and cooperative piece of research, or macro-task. Students are invited to conduct a study with first-hand data and think about the transferability of its results to society and a potential professional future. Here, we describe each assessment procedure and task as well as the tools developed to support the students in the learning process. We also provide examples of the macro-tasks developed by the students, and draw conclusions as regards the effectiveness of such assessment experience. Following a socioconstructivist approach to the teaching-learning process, the method aims at fostering meaningful and contextualized learning and assessment at university, as well as undergraduates' individual autonomy and cooperative skills.

Keywords: *Competences; continuous assessment; cooperative learning; research-based assessment; task-based learning.*

1. Introduction

In the context of today's globalized societies, students are required to acquire multiple competences and skills that allow them to function in the professional world. For that purpose, we designed an assessment experience for Humanities and Social Science students that requires conducting a piece of research with first-hand data and thinking about the transferability of its findings to society. The result has been formative-summative and research-based assessment organized in micro-tasks guiding students towards the development of an original piece of research, i.e. the macro-task. The experience has undergone continuous revision year after year since 2018-2019.

2. A research-based assessment experience

The experience is the result of two teaching innovation projects implemented during academic years 2018-2019 (36 PlaCLIK 2018-2019 2) and 2022-2023 (PlaCLIK, E2022014355) and funded by Universitat Pompeu Fabra. The objective was the design of a research-based assessment method that would foster meaningful learning. Our aim was to give students the opportunity to put into practice what they learn by developing an original research project of their choice and linking its results to a professional area of their interest.

2.1. Pedagogical approach

The proposed evaluation method is based on a socio-constructivist approach to the teaching-learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). As such, the presentation of contents and the demonstration of methods and analyses by the instructor are combined with the leadership and autonomy of the student both inside and outside the classroom. The idea behind our assessment method is that students become self-directed learners, getting involved in the learning process and developing more general skills and competencies than those strictly related to the learning of contents, such as time management, goal setting, self- and peer-assessment, data collection, and resource use, among others (Grow, 1991). A formative-summative type of evaluation and a task-based approach highlight the role of the learner (Skehan 1998; Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2006). In addition, the eminently practical and collaborative approach to the tasks means that, in this context, the role of the instructor acquires the value of a guide and an adviser in learning. The main aim of such an approach is that students develop those competences that make them autonomous in the analysis of – in our case– intercultural spaces and discourses from a critical, interdisciplinary perspective and, thus, become capable of conducting their own applied research.

2.2. Context and participants

The experience has been implemented in two English-Medium Instruction undergraduate courses – *Discourse Analysis* and *Intercultural Spaces, Languages and Identities* – offered by the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, during several consecutive academic years.

Discourse Analysis is a course shared by third- and fourth-year students from the BA degrees in Humanities, Global Studies, and Political and Administration Sciences. It is conceived as an introduction to concepts and methods for the analysis of oral and written discourses in a variety of disciplines and professional areas such as politics, history, literary criticism, journalism, and advertising, among others. The course aims at the development of students' autonomy in the use of discourse analysis to investigate the relationship between language, author's intention, and social context with a critical perspective.

Intercultural Spaces, Languages and Identities is a course shared by third- and fourth-year students from the BA degrees in Humanities and Global Studies. The objective is to understand socialization spaces that are shared by interlocutors from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, by exploring such intercultural spaces from a transdisciplinary perspective that includes concepts and methods from critical discourse analysis, educational sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, linguistic anthropology, and social psychology.

Since they are offered in English-Medium Instruction, both courses usually receive a high percentage of international students on either short-term or long-term mobility.

2.3. The structure: Micro- and macro- tasks

As mentioned, course assessment is organized around a macro-task, that is, an applied research project the results of which have to be related to a professional field of students' interest such as public administration, journalism, education, social mediation, advertising, and cultural institutions, among others. To encourage collaborative work, projects have to be carried out in pairs. Students choose their own project partners but choosing a partner from a different cultural and linguistic background is recommended as we wish to promote meaningful intercultural interactions and the integration of international students.

In order to develop this piece of research, students are required to carry out several micro-tasks – both in class and out of class – that will guide them towards the completion of the Final Project Report (i.e. the macro-task). Also, in line with cooperative learning principles, micro-tasks may be done either individually or in small groups, fostering negotiation and co-construction of meanings. Specifically, students are required to do the following micro-tasks:

1. **MODULE ACTIVITIES:** These are tasks done by the students in-class individually, in pairs or in small groups. They include practice tasks related to the theoretical concepts studied in class and linked to each course module, for instance, analyzing interview excerpts in order to detect language ideologies, or thinking about

examples of everyday linguistic profiling. After the activity, results are shared with the group and the instructor, and discussed. When the task cannot be finished in class, students have the possibility to complete it shortly after the session. The Module Activities are compulsory for formative assessment, yet no specific grade is assigned; only the number of completed activities contribute to the final summative grade, accounting for continuous participation. The aim is that students familiarize themselves with terms and concepts specific to the field and learn how to apply them. For instance, two examples of Module Activities are:

- a. Students individually complete a questionnaire taken from the literature and used to collect research data on intercultural sensitivity; then, they critically discuss the clarity and appropriateness of questionnaire items with classmates.
 - b. In small groups, students explore the university's linguistic landscape by taking photos from signs and posters on-site and surrounding areas; then, they share the images in a collaborative online space (i.e. UPF's Aula Global), and conduct a semiotic and discourse analysis that is shared with the whole group.
2. **PROJECT PROPOSAL:** In pairs, students develop a proposal of the research project they wish to carry out. They choose the topic, the research questions and objectives, the kind of data they plan to collect, and the concepts they will use for the analysis. In the proposal they have to include at least one of the course compulsory readings and one of the optional ones as useful theoretical or methodological references for the project. They also have to include, at least, a new reference as a result of an initial documentary research on the topic of choice. The aim is that students develop strategies to plan tasks and to work autonomously with academic rigor. The proposal does not receive a specific grade, but it must be approved by the instructor before the start of the project.
 3. **PEER REVIEWS:** Each student individually has to conduct a critical review of the Project Proposal of another group. Peer Reviews include several related tasks: (a) during a one-hour Seminar session, each student discusses the proposal with its authors and, as a peer reviewer, provides oral feedback; the feedback is reciprocal since this activity is done in groups of two pairs each; (b) peer reviewers prepare individually a one-page-long written peer review of the assigned proposal upon the basis of what has been discussed in class; and (c) reviewers provide oral feedback during the Oral Presentations. The aims of this task are that students become more aware of the elements of a research project, put into practice their critical skills in a typically academic activity, and engage in peer collaboration. Peer Reviews are evaluated by the instructor, but they are made available to the proposal's authors so that they may also be used to improve the project.

4. **ORAL PRESENTATION:** Students in pairs present their project in an advanced state of completion in a conference format and with visual support (i.e. PowerPoint and other materials like audios, videos or images, if necessary). Usually, Oral Presentations are done in-class at the end of the course; however, depending on the number of students enrolled, students may also be asked to record a video of their presentation and share it in the virtual classroom to receive feedback. The aim is that students, in pairs, practice those academic and professional competences linked to public speaking such as, for instance, time management and information synthesis and selection. Students are given suggestions by their classmates, especially by those assigned as peer reviewers. They also receive feedback from the instructor who, afterwards, evaluates them formally.

Consequently, all the assessment activities are interrelated and contribute to the final summative grade that students receive. As such, each micro-task works as a milestone, being functional and essential to reaching the final goal (see Figure 1). Indeed, each assessment milestone, as well as the critical feedback provided by the instructor and the classmates, guide the student towards the development of the final macro-task, that is, the FINAL PROJECT REPORT. For this research-based task, students in pairs have to investigate a real intercultural space of their choice and interest with a focus on language, and collect their own data. The analysis may include such methods and instruments as interviews, focus groups, (participant) observation, questionnaires, discourse analysis of relevant documents, and visual data on linguistic landscape. In doing so, it is compulsory to use theoretical concepts studied in class, as well as those included in the recommended readings for each module.

The research is not to be conducted from an academic point of view but putting oneself in the shoes of a professional such as a journalist, publicist, NGO employee, cultural mediator, or instructor. This professional role is chosen by the students themselves. The project will result in a final written report that, in the future, students may include in a portfolio for potential employers. For this purpose, the report has to include a recommendations section, in which students provide suggestions for those stakeholders that may be interested in their results. Students hand in the Final Project Report after the course is finished in order to have the opportunity to integrate the feedback and suggestions received by the instructor and the peer reviewer(s), as well as all the relevant theoretical concepts tackled during the course.

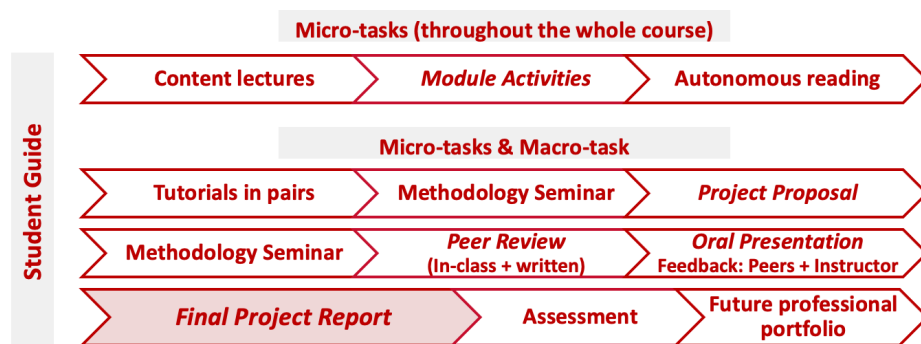


Figure 1. Design of the assessment method. Source: Own elaboration.

2.4. Guiding the students: Student Guide, seminars, and rubrics

In order to guide students towards the successful completion of each assessment task, we developed a comprehensive Student Guide, providing detailed instructions and recommendations on the content and form of each activity. Such Guide may be found in the virtual classroom since day one, along with a detailed calendar of the sessions and deadlines, and examples of studies conducted in intercultural spaces that support the students in becoming acquainted with both useful theoretical concepts and research methods.

Also, two one-hour Seminar sessions are explicitly devoted to the development of the micro-tasks (i.e. Methodology Seminar in Figure 1), providing examples and guidelines for the elaboration of the Project Proposal, Peer Reviews, and Oral Presentation. During these sessions, students have the opportunity to ask questions and clarifications, as well as share their research topic with their classmates. Anyhow, after each task, the instructor provides individualized feedback to the students, either in class or in individual or pair tutorials.

Furthermore, the Final Project Report is evaluated following an assessment rubric that is shared with the students before the submission of the final product, and that may serve as a self-assessment tool. Indeed, in our model, self-assessment functions as a counterpart to formative and summative instructor assessment and an essential activity of the learning process. Similarly, the course includes a rubric for the oral presentation that both the instructor and the peer reviewers use for assessment and peer feedback.

3. Examples of students' research projects

In order to illustrate the variety of projects carried out by the students, we present here a selection of five of the most successful Final Project Reports. For each of them, we report the title, the professional role undertaken by the students, and their chosen stakeholders:

- *The exchange student experience at Universitat Pompeu Fabra*: Students assumed the role of Program Consultants expert in academic mobility and, after their research, provided suggestions for the Office of International Affairs at the university.
- *Attitudes and acceptance towards the South Korean community and 'Hallyu Wave' within Catalan media and multicultural society*: Students assumed the role of journalists and cultural consultants, and the recommendations were directed to South Korean entertainment companies, cultural entities interested in South Koreans' integration in Catalonia, and the Catalan media.
- *Linguistic identities: The use of Spanish in informal intercultural spaces in Barcelona*: Students acted as reporters and cultural mediators, and offered suggestions to universities and their language programs as well as the Barcelona's city council .
- *Students' language attitudes towards ordering at the UPF cafeteria*: Students acted as researchers specializing in interculturality, and recommendations were offered to the Mobility Office at that university, the administration, and the cafeteria staff.
- *Political discourse and linguistic landscape of graffiti in the city of Barcelona*: Students took the professional role of anthropologists at a government institution like the town hall. Stakeholders profiting from the outcome of the study would potentially be local authorities and politicians who can use the information "to apply measures that may improve the quality of life of the citizens or generate a positive social change".

4. Conclusion

The experience presented here is the outcome of four years of teaching to three different cohorts of students of *Discourse Analysis* and four of *Intercultural Spaces, Languages and Identities*. At the each term, the instructor modified their methodology and evaluated its impact, as regards the learning process and the students' workload¹. An in-depth analysis of this constant revision process and the degree of satisfaction of the instructor and the students –who assessed the instructor and the sessions every year– deserves another communication or article. However, although the experience has entailed a high degree of dedication and work by the instructor, we consider the proposal highly satisfactory for several reasons.

First, such research-based assessment method provides students with the opportunity to reflect on how the knowledge acquired in the university context and as a result of academic research can be useful in the real and professional world. Also, it allows them to put into practice theoretical concepts and developing skills and competences related to academic

¹ Though students' evaluations were always extremely positive in all survey items, the survey item "The workload required corresponds to the credits of the subject" always received a lower grade, i.e. 8.7 on a ten-point scale in 2019-20, 7.9 in 2021-22, and 8.9 in 2022-23.

research, such as time management, respecting deadlines, data collection and structuring and carrying out an autonomous research project.

Second, the method puts the students at the center of their autonomous learning process. Also in content lectures and methodological seminar sessions, students have a focal role, since they have to acknowledge the relevance of such content for successfully carrying out each task. As such, the process highly satisfies the students, as shown by the average degree of satisfaction expressed in their teaching evaluations².

Third, it encourages contact, interaction, and collaboration among students from different degrees and diverse academic and professional interests, by promoting co-construction of meaning and knowledge. Also, in the case of the *Intercultural Spaces, Languages and Identities* course, the assessment method allows for the interaction between students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and, thus, the development of plurilingual and pluricultural competences which, in turn, constitute part of the course contents.

Fourth, since the whole process requires more individualized instructor-student interactions in class and out-of-class tutorials for guidance, it allows for a better understanding of students' interests and needs. As a consequence, the instructor may develop content and activities responding better to those needs, while creating a relationship of mutual trust.

Finally, this assessment experience may be tailored to other teaching contexts, as demonstrated by the rapid adaptation to online teaching during the mandatory lockdown established due to the COVID19 pandemic between March and June 2020, fully coinciding with one of the courses and resulting in extremely positive evaluations by the students.

Lastly, we wish to conclude by quoting Claudia who, when evaluating the *Discourse Analysis* course, wrote: "Overall, I've appreciated the general organization, content and activities of the course. In particular, I found useful and engaging the peer-assessment system. I also found refreshing the clear and ordered presentation of the content seen in class, the assessment deadlines and the evaluation criteria."

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² In 2019-20, the mean grade given by the students was 9.23 for the survey item "In general terms I am satisfied with this subject"; in 2021-22, it was 9 and, when assessing the instructor, 9.62; in 2022-23, the mean grade for overall satisfaction was 9.6.

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