

Designing authentic assessments for foreign language learning environments

Mariolina Pais Marden ¹

Jan Herrington ²

ABSTRACT

Integrating authentic and meaningful assessment practices into the teaching and learning of foreign languages has been recognised in the second language acquisition and pedagogy literature as critical to foreign language development. This paper describes research that investigated the benefits of integrating authentic assessment tasks into a mixed level university foreign language course delivered in hybrid (blended) learning mode. Intermediate and advanced level students of Italian at an Australian university collaborated with each other and selected native speaker e-mentors to complete two tasks that reflected the critical elements of authentic tasks. Data were collected and analysed through multi-data sources including students' assessment tasks and reflective portfolios, individual and focus group interviews with students and e-mentors and messages contributed to online group discussion forums. Findings suggest that, despite initial challenges, there were significant benefits in integrating authentic assessment tasks into this course. The paper concludes with specific recommendations to guide the successful integration of authentic tasks into the teaching and learning of hybrid foreign language learning environments.

Keywords: authentic assessment, foreign language learning, design principles

¹ Honorary Fellow, Faculty of the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Wollongong, Australia - mpm@uow.edu.au

² Emeritus Professor, School of Education, Murdoch University, Western Australia - j.herrington@murdoch.edu.au

1 INTRODUCTION

In higher education, participation in authentic assessment practices has been linked to increased student motivation for learning (Dorneyei & Uschioda, 2021). Integrating authentic meaning-focused assessment tasks that have real world relevance and reflect real life-assessment and evaluation processes has been found to have a positive impact on student learning (Villarroel et al., 2024) and on the process of meaningful student engagement (Quinlan et al., 2024). In foreign language teaching and learning, authentic assessment helps students' learning experiences to be intrinsically more rewarding (Pinner, 2019).

These considerations provided the rationale for the development and integration of authentic assessment tasks into the teaching and learning of an Italian as a foreign language university course. This paper describes the context of the study, the research methodology adopted and the benefits and challenges of the intervention. The paper concludes with design principles for integrating authentic assessment tasks in hybrid foreign language learning environments. The following section presents the theoretical context of the research by examining the situated and authentic learning research literature relevant to the study.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of authentic learning is grounded in the situated learning framework and in the 'cognitive apprenticeship' model proposed by Brown et al. (1989) and Collins et al. (1991). These authors maintained that meaningful learning is best achieved when abstract tasks are situated into authentic contexts and when learners are provided the opportunity to actively use their knowledge and skills by participating in hands-on collaborative authentic practices with other learners and experts in real-world contexts.

Based on the situated learning framework and on the cognitive apprenticeship model, Herrington & Oliver (2000) developed a framework for technology-based learning environments that comprised nine critical design elements that they later refined to focus more specifically on the pedagogy and design of authentic tasks as critical components of authenticity in online learning environments. They suggested 10 defining characteristics of authentic tasks and provided practical recommendations on how each element can be applied to design effective e-learning courses within authentic contexts. According to Herrington et al. (2010), authentic tasks are integrated with assessment to reflect real-life evaluation processes rather than separate artificial assessment removed from the nature of the tasks.

Integrating authentic assessment practices into different educational contexts has been linked to student development of higher-order cognitive skills (Akbari et al., 2022, Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014) and the development of abilities required in the workplace, such as problem-solving skills, communication and collaboration skills, self-regulation and metacognition (Karunanayaka et al., 2021; Sokhanvar et al., 2021, Villarroel et al., 2024). Authentic assessment has also been linked to meaningful student engagement (Quinlan et al., 2024), increased commitment and motivation for learning (James & Casidy, 2018), increased student creativity and satisfaction (Jopp, 2020; van Rensburg et al., 2022), and increased educational integrity enforcement (Ellis et al., 2024; Openo, 2024).

In the specific context of foreign language learning and teaching, developing authentic learning environments and assessment tasks that are grounded in the real-world has been identified as key to successful foreign language development (Ellis et al., 2020; Pinner, 2019) and to increasing student motivation for learning (Dorneyei & Uschioda, 2021).

Over the last few decades, the practice of Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT), with its origins in experiential ‘learning-by-doing’ principles advocated by Bruner (1971) and its focus on the design of a task-based syllabus (Ellis, 2021), has provided a methodology for designing and implementing authentic meaning-focused pedagogical tasks to support foreign language development and performance and enhance student motivation for learning (Bryfonski & McKay, 2019; Jackson, 2022). According to TBLT proponents, these types of tasks need to expose students to authentic and meaningful target language use (Bygate et al., 2021; Ellis et al., 2020), should be relevant to students’ communicative needs (Long, 2015) and sequenced according to increasing levels of complexity (Robinson, 2022).

In recent years, proponents of the TBLT approach have examined how the practice of TBLT has been adapted to technology-mediated learning environments (Chong et al., 2020; Ellis, 2021). These researchers have discussed the benefits of integrating various types of technology in task-based language learning environments to support foreign language development and enhance learners’ motivation and sustained participation in the learning process (Gonzales-Lloret & Ziegler, 2021; Smith & Gonzales-Lloret, 2020).

In the context of this study, the TBLT framework has been integrated with the situated and authentic learning model to guide the design and development of authentic and interaction-based assessment tasks that provide opportunities for collaborative social interaction with other target language speakers, supporting foreign language practice and development in a technology-mediated, hybrid learning environment. The authentic assessment tasks designed in this study were guided by the 10 elements of authentic learning elaborated by Herrington et al. (2010) and were instantiated through the use of a combination of asynchronous and synchronous communication tools and resources within the learning management system (LMS) that supported the course (Pais Marden & Herrington, 2022). The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the challenges and benefits of integrating authentic assessment tasks into the teaching and learning of an Italian as a foreign language university course delivered in hybrid (blended) learning mode?
2. What recommendations for practice for designing authentic assessment tasks in a foreign language university course could be derived?

The following section describes the four-phased design-based research (DBR) methodology of the study.

3 METHODOLOGY

This research study adopted a design-based research (DBR) method (Reeves, 2006) which involves iterative cycles of prototyping, testing, and refinement. Because of the nature of such an approach, qualitative research methods, such as interviews, observations, and ethnographic studies, facilitate this iterative process by providing ongoing feedback and allowing researchers to adapt their designs based on emerging insights.

The study comprised four phases and was conducted in two successive iterative implementations. Each implementation lasted for six weeks over the course of one academic semester of Italian language studies at an Australian university.

Phase 1 of the first cycle involved an investigation into the specific problems related to teaching and learning foreign languages at university. During this phase, an in-depth review of relevant second language acquisition literature was conducted, and the views of 10 teacher-practitioners (university lecturers and tutors) were sought to gain insights into their views about the nature and extent of the problem area in practice, and to identify possible solutions informed by their reflections and teaching practice. Teacher practitioner consultations revealed that one of the main issues of learning a foreign language in formal university classroom settings in Australia related to the use of decontextualised non-authentic textbook-based tasks and situations that focus primarily on the development of grammatical competence as a resource for communicative practice. According to the practitioners consulted, pedagogy restricted to grammar-based tasks and the decontextualised acquisition of grammar structures, does not automatically translate into students' ability to use the target language for communicative purposes and needs to be balanced by a focus on meaning and on purposeful and real-life language use.

A second area of concern related to the fact that, despite the variety of innovative and effective assessment techniques available to language instructors, it is often easier and more time-efficient to rely on traditional, non-authentic and decontextualised methods of assessment, such as grammar tests and quizzes, to evaluate students' level of linguistic and cultural competence. The practitioners agreed that, although these types of decontextualised assessments tasks can be efficient and convenient for the language instructor who needs to quickly test students' linguistic proficiency, their narrow focus on the production of correct linguistic form does not reflect students' ability to use of the language in meaningful, authentic contexts and limits even further students' opportunities to be exposed to the types of language that is typical of real-world communication.

Phase 2 involved developing theoretically based solutions to the problems described in the first phase. During this phase, two assessment tasks, which incorporated characteristics of authentic tasks, were designed and integrated into the assessment component of a mixed level university Italian language course delivered in hybrid learning mode. A web-based LMS was implemented to enable learners' asynchronous and synchronous interaction and collaboration with each other. Seven native speaker e-mentors were selected and coached prior to the start of the semester to support and assist learners complete the two assessment tasks.

In Phase 3, two iterative cycles of testing and refinement of the solutions proposed in Phase 2 were implemented in two six-week iterative cycles. The participants were 16 students, seven e-mentors and the class teacher. Data were collected through multi-data sources that included students' collaborative assessable project and individual learning portfolio, students' contributions to online group discussions, focus group interviews with groups of participating students and the researcher's notes and observations. Design-based research aims to produce actionable knowledge that can inform practice and guide the iterative design process. Changes and adjustments to the design of the learning environment and assessment tasks were made between the first and second iterations.

Phase 4 of this study involved developing a set of design principles to guide the development of authentic task-based assessments in similar hybrid foreign language learning environments.

The assessment tasks developed for this study are described in more detail in the following section.

4 TASK DESCRIPTION

The assessment tasks developed for this study were designed according to the defining elements of authentic tasks (Herrington et al., 2010) and were based on a scenario where the whole class oversaw the planning and organisation of trips to Australia and Italy. For the first task, students were required to develop a comprehensive four-week itinerary and travel guide for a group of Italian exchange students visiting Australia. For the second task, students were to develop a four-week itinerary and travel guide for an exchange trip to Italy.

Each task had to be carried out entirely in the target language over the course of a six-week iteration and required students to access and interpret current geographic and tourist information gathered from different websites, (such as transport timetables, prices and accommodation descriptions, menus and weather), plan and organise the various aspects of travel with a limited budget, solve practical problems and deal with unexpected difficulties and changes of plans.

As part of the tasks, students developed a final product that could take the form of a genuinely useful product, such as a website, video, guidebook or brochure, depending on their preferences and skills. Students designed these products in a way that could be presented to the rest of the class at the conclusion of each iteration.

In order to complete the tasks, students organised themselves into small collaborative groups and each of the groups was assigned to one native speaker e-mentor to support the collaborative process and provide a forum for authentic interaction and continuous target language practice. Communication and collaboration took place in hybrid mode through the online asynchronous and synchronous resources provided in the course website (including email, discussion forums, chat spaces) and face-to-face.

The two assessment tasks were designed to promote the development of target language skills and cultural awareness in meaning-focussed authentic contexts that reflect the use of skills and knowledge in real-life situations (Ozverir, et al, 2016; Reinders et al., 2022). Unlike traditional language-based assessment tasks (which are usually designed as separate assessments), these tasks required students to use the target language and a variety of authentic resources and materials to develop a tangible product to be shared with other community members. Rather than being tested on the specific linguistic or cultural knowledge acquired through those tasks, students were assessed on a wide range of abilities and skills developed while working collaboratively, which included research skills, organisational skills, teamwork skills, problem-solving skills, geographical, historical, and cultural awareness, and linguistic competence. The section that follows present the data collection and the data analysis techniques adopted in this research.

5 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data were collected through multi-data sources which included students' collaborative assessable project and individual learning portfolio, students' contributions to online group discussions and the researcher's notes and observations.

In order to corroborate the data gathered from an analysis of students' assessment tasks and from students' learning portfolios, and to consolidate the information gained from the researcher's notes and observation, four focus group interviews of 50–60 minutes were conducted with each collaborative group of students at the conclusion of the first iteration. After the second iteration, individual interviews of 45–60 minutes each were also conducted with the participating students

and the native speaker e-mentors. The interview technique adopted used Patton's (2014) standardised open-ended interview category, to allow the researcher to ask follow-up questions to clarify participant responses in relation to the challenges and benefits of integrating authentic assessment tasks into the teaching and learning of this course.

Data were analysed using techniques of qualitative analysis recommended by Miles et al. (2018) and Patton (2014), which involved the identification of dominant themes and coding into categories, as well as analysis of students' assessable projects and content analysis of participants' interviews.

Specifically, data were coded and analysed using the template organising approach (Miles et al., 2018), and the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). The template organising approach allowed the researchers to identify and code different sections of text present in the data according to 10 *a priori* categories based on the design guidelines for developing authentic tasks identified from the literature, specifically: real-world relevance, ill-defined nature, complexity and sustained effort, multiple perspectives and resources, collaboration, reflection, integration and application across different subject areas, integration with assessment and development of polished products, competing solutions and diversity of outcomes. After developing the template, the constant comparative method was adopted to identify new emerging sub-categories and themes within the authentic assessment tasks code. After existing sub-categories were refined, and new codes and themes were identified, data was organised into displays. Observations of the meaning of the data were then made, and conclusions were drawn. The process of coding the data is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Process of coding the data

Transcribing	Interview and observation data were transcribed for analysis.
Coding	Individual comments were coded according to <i>a priori</i> categories determined by the 10 defining characteristics of authentic tasks. Each category comprised a node.
Sub-coding	Each <i>a priori</i> category was investigated in more detail to reveal the themes and issues that emerged from the data. Sub-categories were determined and nominated as new nodes.
Ordering and displaying	Patterns and themes were determined within each category and sub-category, and observations were made. Data was organised into displays when appropriate.
Conclusion drawing	Conclusions about the meaning of data were made and written up
Verifying	Conclusions were verified and reviewed by reference back to original data, the participants' focus group and individual interviews and the researcher's notes and observations.

Analysis of the data shed light on the challenges and benefits of engaging with authentic assessment tasks as part of students' language learning experience and on how this process provided opportunities for student learning in the hybrid learning environment of this study.

In order to verify coding reliability and ensure that the representation of the data relating to the authentic assessable tasks that students completed was accurate, samples of students' interview transcripts and assessable projects were check-coded by two of the native speaker e-mentors. The coders completed two rounds of independent and collaborative coding. As the coding consistency between the researcher and the two coders was higher than 90%, the coding process was deemed to be sufficiently reliable.

To protect the rights of participants and ensure that the research was conducted in a fair and equitable manner, strict ethical guidelines laid down by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University were followed and addressed. The following section presents a summary of the findings of the research.

6 FINDINGS

The main outcome of a design-based research study is the development of design principles and recommendations to guide theory and practice in specific educational contexts.

From an analysis of the transcripts of students' online and class discussions, students' reflective portfolios and the teacher's class observations and interviews, the following challenges and benefits of integrating authentic assessment tasks into the teaching and learning of an Italian as a foreign language university class were identified and described.

6.1 Challenges

When asked to comment on the requirement to complete the two authentic assessment tasks, several students commented that they initially found it "unusual" not to be required to complete traditional assessment tasks such as tests or quizzes. These students noted that this type of assessment did not reflect their expectations and pointed out that it would have been "more straightforward" to sit traditional tests or quizzes. This was reflected in the following comment by one of the students:

It wasn't exactly the type of assessment you normally have in a language course...it certainly wasn't what I expected...it would have been much more straightforward to sit tests and quizzes the usual way. (Interview with Caroline)

Another student made a similar comment and spoke about the reassuring aspect of traditional assessment tasks:

Normally it's like, there's a test next week and you need to know such and such. You kind of know what to expect and you know what you need to learn to get a good mark... (Interview with Elise)

The preoccupation of not being able to achieve satisfactory results seemed to be driving students' initial perception of the assessment task:

I was worried I would not get a good result because it wasn't just about getting a 100% score in the grammar tests...there were many more things that were part of the tasks and part of the assessment. (Interview with Lara)

Several students also expressed their frustration at the open-endedness of the tasks and admitted that they initially found it difficult not to be provided with specific, well-defined guidelines on how to complete them:

I found it very annoying ... being left with all the decisions...the fact that there was no right or wrong answer and that we could have done it in a million different ways. (Interview with Nicholas)

Some students found it challenging to have to work on a large-scale project that had to be planned and developed over a significant period of time:

It was challenging because it was a long-term project ... we had to plan and develop the whole thing over a long period of time (Focus group interview with Chloe)

Similarly, several students pointed out that it took them a considerable amount of time to understand what needed to be done and to make decisions about the steps to take in order to complete the tasks. This was reflected in the following comment:

It took us a while to understand what it was and work out what we had to do, and it took us time to make decisions and define the whole thing and then put it all together, it was quite demanding...we couldn't have done it in a couple of weeks. (Interview with Elise)

Nevertheless, despite acknowledging the initial difficulties and challenges of completing a non-traditional authentic assessment task, when asked to comment about how they felt about this aspect of the tasks later in the semester, several students also recognised its value:

It took a bit of a shift in perspective because the assessment was different from what we were used to...as I got more into the tasks and I understood what was required, I appreciated why we were assessed in that way...it kind of made sense. (Interview with Diana)

The specific benefits of completing non-traditional assessment tasks are described in the following section.

6.2 Benefits

6.2.1 Developing linguistic proficiency

In discussing the specific benefits of integrating authentic assessment tasks into the present study, several students acknowledged that the opportunity afforded by the tasks to regularly interact and communicate with native speakers enabled them to be exposed to the target language as it is used in real-life social situations and gain an understanding of the authentic expressions that are typical of everyday communication. This was reflected in the following comment:

It was good that we got to look at how real people communicate...the kinds of expressions and colloquialisms that people use every day when they talk ... (Interview with Chloe)

Another benefit of integrating authentic assessment in this study was that it provided students with the opportunity to apply and use the target language structures and expressions that they had learned in class to communicate with others in a variety of communicative contexts, in a way that would not have been possible within the limited context of classroom communication.

The fact that we had to use the language in different real-life situations was definitely a plus because when you go to Italy you have to talk to the people there, you have to use the structures that you've learned in class to have a conversation. (Interview with Marie)

The importance of promoting authentic language learning experiences by providing learners with the opportunity to be exposed to the target language and use it in the type of authentic communicative situations that are likely to be encountered outside of the context of the language classroom has been highlighted by researchers and theorists who have applied Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to second language acquisition (Lantolf et al., 2020; Poehner et al., 2024). These researchers have claimed that second language development cannot occur in isolation but needs to be embedded in the social and cultural context in which real target language communication naturally occurs. According to these researchers, participating in authentic social interaction and meaningful and goal-oriented communicative activities with other members of a speaking community supports second language development because it encourages learners to establish a connection between the formal, structurally driven learning that takes place in class and the more authentic social and cultural context in which the target language is used. Participating in authentic goal-oriented tasks also motivates learners to apply their knowledge in different, open-ended communicative situations that reflect the variety and spontaneity of real communication and that have real-life communicative purposes.

The opportunity afforded by the authentic assessment tasks to access and use a variety of authentic written target language resources in the form of print and web-based material and also documents and messages from the native speakers enabled learners to further develop their target language reading comprehension skills. Several students noted that their reading comprehension skills improved dramatically over the course of the semester as they continued to read a variety of target language resources and material and regularly accessed Italian language websites that did not provide an English translation of their content.

The majority of the websites I found were in Italian, and there was no little thing to turn it into English...and all of the emails and postings in the forum were written in Italian, so I had to read and understand a lot of information in Italian...it was a bit of a struggle at the beginning but as I kept reading and reading I came to understand more and more of the content...I think my comprehension skills improved a lot just by spending time reading and trying to figure out the information. (Interview with Elise)

As well as supporting learners' development of their target language reading comprehension skills, interacting with different written resources also enabled learners to encounter a variety of written linguistic registers in the target language and to experience the different types of language that are used in specific situations and with different interlocutors. This was well illustrated in the following comment by one of the native speaker e-mentors, who noted the importance for language students to develop an understanding of different registers and learn to use them and express themselves depending on the specific linguistic context and on their interlocutors:

The variety of authentic resources that students encountered while working on the tasks gave them the chance to be exposed to different linguistic registers and experience the different types of language that people use in particular situations or when they are communicating with a particular set of people. This is valuable because it encourages students to draw on different registers in their own language use. (Interview with Linda, native speaker e-mentor)

This contextual and sociolinguistic knowledge, together with the implicit and explicit knowledge of the structures and functions of language, is an essential component of second language development (Halliday, 1978; Hymes, 1972; Lightbown & Spada, 2021).

All students and e-mentors acknowledged that the sustained communicative practice allowed by their participation in the authentic tasks supported the development of students' oral and written target language communicative skills. This was reflected in the following comment by one of the students:

My language skills improved a lot just because I practised talking and writing in Italian as much as I could. I was actually quite surprised that by the end of the session I was feeling a lot more comfortable communicating in Italian. At the beginning to try and formulate three sentences that would hang together and would make sense was quite a struggle...I think the collaboration and constant interaction with everyone really helped me develop my ability to communicate more clearly. (Interview with Nicholas)

This type of linguistic improvement was also noted by the native speaker e-mentors:

I noticed a definite improvement in students' linguistic proficiency both in their written and oral production as they learned to integrate more sophisticated and authentic forms and expressions and to communicate with a higher level of fluency and grammatical correctness. (Interview with Simon, native speaker e-mentor)

An analysis of the transcripts of students' written contributions to the discussion threads throughout the course of the semester and of students' oral presentations at the end of the two iterations, confirmed that there was a considerable improvement in students' receptive and productive oral and

written abilities. These findings are supported by research into the role of meaningful and authentic interaction on the development of learners' target language communicative skills. According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory applied to second language acquisition, language learning occurs through meaningful social interaction and active participation in socially mediated activities with other members of a speaking community (Lantolf et al., 2020; Poehner, 2022). In the context of this study, the regular communicative practice and interpersonal interaction allowed by learners' participation in the authentic assessment tasks greatly contributed to the development of both their written and oral communicative skills.

6.2.2 Developing cultural knowledge and awareness

The authentic nature of the assessment tasks also enabled students to learn about the geographical features and the natural environment of Australia and Italy, and about historical, artistic and cultural aspects of the specific areas researched during their work on the project.

Comments such as: "I learned a lot about the geography of Australia and Italy", "I got a much better idea of some aspects of the landscape" and "we became more familiar with things like locations and distances" were typical examples of the types of statements made by the students about the value of engaging with authentic assessment tasks.

Marie, an exchange student living and studying in Australia for one semester, commented about the opportunity to learn about certain aspects of Australian history and culture:

I found it very interesting and relevant to learn about some aspects of Australian history and culture ... I had the opportunity to deepen my knowledge about Aboriginal rock art and Indigenous music, which are unique. (Interview with Marie)

Similarly, another student noted that, as she planned her itinerary in Umbria, she learned about the historical, cultural and religious significance of various sites and monuments in the region and about a variety of major contemporary artistic and historical events:

I got to learn a lot of interesting things about some of the most important sites and monuments in Umbria...their historical and cultural value and their religious meaning. I also learned about Umbria's famous festivals...which celebrate different medieval rituals and traditions. (Interview with Chloe)

6.2.3 Developing transferable skills

As well as facilitating the development of target language proficiency and historical and cultural awareness, the authentic assessment tasks supported the development of practical, transferable skills that could be applied to the current task and to a range of situations that students are likely to encounter in the future.

We got to learn some more practical skills ... like finding information about how to get around, where to stay ... I think all these skills can be pretty useful if some of us go and study or work in Italy next year... because we're going to have to know how to do these sorts of things. (Interview with Elise)

The fact that the students were able to relate to the activities they were required to complete and appreciate and value the practical applications of their work, provided them with the type of purpose and motivation that is crucial for promoting meaningful learning experiences.

As well as recognising the value of learning practical skills, students also appreciated the opportunity to demonstrate a range of different abilities and be assessed on multiple skills. This was reflected in the following comment:

I realised that this type of assessment was much more holistic...it was good to be assessed on different skills because we could express ourselves in more than one way and show our strengths in different areas. (Interview with Chloe)

This holistic and integrated aspect of authentic assessment is in line with tenets of situated learning theory and the idea that authentic tasks can be applied across different disciplines and lead beyond domain-specific outcomes, (such as, in areas other than foreign language learning) (Herrington et al., 2010).

6.2.4 Engagement with context

Several students spoke positively about the fact that the authentic nature of the tasks and of the various activities involved in completing them encouraged them to engage fully with the context of the scenarios that were presented to them:

The whole idea of planning the details of travel was so close to reality...I really got into it as if I was a real traveller planning a real trip. (Interview with Diana)

Other students described the feeling of becoming so involved in the task of developing the itineraries that it almost did not occur to them that no-one would actually participate in the trips that their groups had so carefully planned:

We planned every single aspect of the trips so carefully, always thinking that someone would have followed our itineraries...it didn't even occur to us that it was a pretend thing and that there would be no one doing it. (Interview with Elise)

This type of deep engagement with the scenarios was possible because students entered into a process that has been described as “willing suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge, as described in Herrington et al., 2003). Students willingly accepted the authentic learning context that had been created for them and became totally immersed in the scenarios as if they were real. In the particular context of this study, the fact that the tasks required students to carry out authentic activities similar to those that are likely to be encountered in real-life situations encouraged them to identify with the scenarios and motivated them to engage fully with the learning context that was presented to them. According to psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihalyi (2020), engagement is an essential condition of learning, and only when learners immerse themselves fully in the process of an activity, meaningful learning can occur. Csikszentmihalyi describes this type of total engagement and full involvement with an activity as *flow* (or completely focused absorption and motivation).

6.2.5 Connection to prior experiences

Another benefit of the authentic tasks related to the fact that they were relevant to students' life experiences because they involved researching areas where they had lived and travelled in the past. In several instances, students were able to connect the tasks to their prior experiences and apply their previously acquired knowledge about particular geographical areas to the new tasks. This is consistent with the situated learning notion that knowledge is contextually situated and that this new knowledge is meaningful because it is influenced by the context and culture in which it is developed and used (Brown et al., 1989) and is grounded and integrated in students' own life experiences (Collins, 2006).

The fact that the tasks were close to the life experiences of some of the students in the class also had the positive effect of motivating the other participating students to learn about some of the areas explored with the tasks. For example, one student appreciated the fact that one of her group

members had lived and travelled in Sicily for six months and acknowledged that this student's prior experience had a positive impact on her own motivation to carry out the task:

I liked that one of the students had lived in Sicily for a while and [had] visited so many places, because she was able to share her experience with us and give us suggestions and then motivate us as well to explore as much as possible about the places she'd seen. It was a great experience for her...and it was a big motivation for me... (Interview with Diana)

This comment about the motivating influence of another participant's experiences on this learner's engagement in the task is consistent with research which explores the effect that the sociocultural context in which students learn has on their motivation to engage fully in a particular learning activity (Nolen, 2020; Renninger & Hidi, 2017). According to this research, context is a major element affecting motivation because individuals working together mutually influence and motivate one another.

As highlighted in studies which explore the link between motivation and cognitive processes, motivation is an essential aspect of learning because it affects the level of learners' involvement and cognitive engagement in the learning process (Schunk & DiBenedetto 2020; Wentzel, 2020). In the context of this project, the other participants' prior travel experiences affected students' motivation to explore and develop a particular aspect of the tasks, which, in turn, deeply affected learners' level of involvement and engagement in the learning process.

6.2.6 Multiple interpretations and the development of finished products

Although some of the students acknowledged the challenging aspect of working on tasks which could be interpreted and developed in many different ways, the majority of the respondents appreciated the fact that the two tasks were open to a wide range of interpretations and solutions rather than a single correct response. This was reflected in the following comment:

It was good in that there wasn't just one right way to do it...in fact we could have done it in a hundred different ways... (Interview with Dylan)

Several other students welcomed the opportunity to be creative and "think outside the box" in order to arrive at a particular outcome:

I loved having the opportunity to think outside the box and be creative...I liked the fact that the whole project was open for a bit of creativity and that we could develop our product the way we wanted. (Interview with Chloe)

As well as appreciating the opportunity to interpret and develop the tasks in different ways and express themselves creatively, students also spoke positively about the value of having to produce a finished product that was tangible and complete in its own right. This was reflected in the following comment about the motivating aspect of developing an itinerary that students could use to travel to the areas explored through their research:

I liked the fact that we got to create a full itinerary...it kept me motivated because I knew that ... I could use [it] in the future if I wanted to go and travel to those places. (Interview with Lara)

The fact that students were required to produce a tangible product that was shared and available to their group members stimulated them to engage fully with the activities and impacted positively on their motivation to complete the tasks (Pais Marden & Herrington, 2020).

The analysis of data and reflection on the findings have been summarised into recommendations to guide the development and integration of authentic tasks in hybrid foreign language learning environments. These are presented in the next section.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE (DESIGN PRINCIPLES)

As a result of these findings, the following design principles for designing authentic assessment tasks were derived.

When designing authentic and meaningful assessment tasks:

- seamlessly integrate authentic assessment of learning within the tasks rather than through discrete tests
- assess students on a range of abilities and skills developed while completing the tasks (including linguistic proficiency, cultural awareness, and transferable skills such as research, organisational, teamwork, problem-solving, and oral presentation skills).
- encourage learners to immerse themselves and engage fully with the context of the scenarios.
- relate to students' prior knowledge and life experiences and require learners to transfer previously acquired competencies and knowledge to the tasks.
- be open to a wide range of interpretations and solutions and require students to develop a tangible product that is shared and available to their group members.

8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Although the findings of the two iterative cycles are substantial, a possible limitation of the study was that, due to the timeframe of the research, it was possible only to test and refine the learning environment in two successive implementations. A third, and ideally a fourth implementation would have enabled the researchers to refine the learning environment further and delve more deeply into the benefits of integrating authentic assessment tasks into this course. Nevertheless, the findings of the two iterations are substantial, and future studies and implementations can confidently build on the outcomes of this research.

A second limitation relates to the fact that in a study such as this, qualitative data gathering including interviews can lead to consolidation of knowledge through reflection and articulation of understanding. The specific interview questions may have facilitated students' reflection on specific aspects of their learning and may have encouraged students to understand and appreciate the value of each element in a way that would have not normally occurred. This effect may have been amplified by the fact that student reflection was encouraged through a portfolio writing task.

9 CONCLUSIONS

This study has investigated the benefits and challenges of integrating authentic assessment tasks into a mixed level university foreign language course delivered in hybrid learning mode. Despite acknowledging some of the initial difficulties and challenges related to completing non-traditional assessment tasks, students deeply valued the integrated and authentic nature of the assessment and observed several benefits.

The authentic assessment tasks provided learners with the opportunity to be exposed to different types of linguistic registers and use the target language in a variety of real-life communicative situations that reflect the diversity and spontaneity of everyday communication. They enabled learners to further develop their target language reading comprehension skills and develop specific contextual and sociolinguistic knowledge as well as the implicit and explicit knowledge of the

structures and functions of language. The sustained communicative practice allowed by students' participation in the assessment tasks supported the development of students' oral and written communicative skills in the target language. It was noted that, over the course of the semester, the language produced by the students showed an increasingly higher level of grammatical organisation and accuracy, stronger cohesion, clarity, and fluency of expression as well as a wider lexical range.

The authentic nature of the assessment tasks also encouraged the development of cultural awareness and a range of skills and abilities that connected and transferred to the world beyond the formal context of the classroom. The tasks effectively encouraged students to engage fully with the context of the scenarios that were presented to them and to relate them to prior life experiences. Finally, students welcomed the opportunity to interpret the tasks in multiple ways, learn from the ideas and interpretations of others and to be able to develop their ideas creatively and create their own unique product.

The authentic assessment tasks described in this study, and the design principles which emerged from these two iterative implementations, effectively support other language educators in the process of designing and developing authentic and meaningful language learning tasks within their own educational context.

10 DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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