Research Article

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The Discussion Boards Assessment in the advanced business Russian course at Regent's University London as an integral part of the constructive alignment

Introduction

This article will expound the use of Discussion Boards as a formative assessment to determine the extent to which the Advanced Business Russian learners at the Regent's University London achieve the Intended Learning Outcomes of their course. We will also attempt to demonstrate that the underlining principle of this assessment is the so–called Constructive Alignment in which course design, learning activities, learning outcomes and assessment are aligned and correlated. According to Biggs & Tang,[1] 'Assessment practices must send the right signals to students about what they should be learning and how they should be learning it'. Thus the aim of this article is to explain how the Discussion Boards Assessment is constructively aligned with the teaching and learning activities and the intended learning outcomes and how the course design reflects this objective.

The rationale behind the The Discussion Boards Assessment

The rationale behind the Discussion Boards Assessment is based on the principle of learner–centeredness. It means that student learning should be characterised not 'as a simple acquisition process based on teacher transmission but as a process whereby students actively construct their own knowledge and skills' (Barr & Tagg). So how does the Discussion Boards Assessment encourage active participation of a learner in the learning process? According to research, it happens if it provides:

a. problem–based, learner–centred and collaborative learning;
b. previous – experience based learning;
c. cognitive skills based learning;
d. cognitive tools facilitated learning

Here is how The Discussion Boards Assessment meets these criteria:

a. problem–based, learner–centred and collaborative learning
b. previous – experience based learning

The Discussion Boards tasks are formulated in such a way as to present a problem, in other words, they are always problem – based. (Later we will speak about the Discussion Boards Assessment in more detail and will provide the concrete examples of the Discussion Boards tasks). Students work collaboratively commenting on the teacher's statements and on one another's entries, so collaborative learning is taking place. The Discussion Boards Assessment Tasks are also based on the learners' previous experience as the topics of the online discussion are directly connected with to the curriculum of the course.

a. cognitive skills based learning
b. cognitive tools facilitated learning

The Discussion Boards Assessment engages students cognitively and support strong cognitive presence by:

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a. presenting a problem which needs their understanding and comments
b. creating a community of inquiry
c. encouraging constructiveness
d. encouraging analysis and evaluation of models and concepts within international business
e. Encouraging 'problem solving, making judgements, evaluation and reflection to name a few', (Alford et al.).

We also encourage students to use various cognitive tools that are 'both mental and computational devices that 'support, guide, and extend the thinking processes of their users'.[2] These cognitive tools are:

a. Search engines such as Google, Bing, Yahoo, Alta–Vista, Yandex, Rambler etc.
b. participation in a class discussion after the completion of the Discussion Boards Assessment where students read and discuss their entries and report on what materials they have used to prepare for the Discussion Boards Assessment
c. Participation in two questionnaires on usefulness of the Discussion Boards Assessment completed by students at the beginning and the end of the Semester.

We can argue, therefore, that by being 'the instruments that are designed for supporting cognitive processes and thereby extending the limits of the human cognitive capacities',[3] cognitive tools constitute an important element of the constructive learning and assessment process.

Our approach to designing The Discussion Boards Assessment

It is important to have a constructive alignment of all the elements of the teaching and learning process – the intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities and assessment because, 'these components support each other so the learner is enveloped within a supportive learning system'.[1] Our approach to designing the Discussion Boards Assessment is based on four underlying principles:

The Discussion Boards Assessment in the advanced business Russian course at Regent's University London as an integral part of the constructive alignment

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quality assurance and enhancement, constructive alignment, authenticity of the assessment and the concepts of The Structure of the Observed Learning Outcomes[4] (SOLO) Taxonomy developed by Biggs & Collis[5] in 1982.

Quality assurance and enhancement

Quality assurance and quality enhancement are the most important underlying principles of any assessment. When devising the Discussion Boards Assessment we ensure that it is informed by benchmarking and is reviewed by ourselves and colleagues. We also adhere to the principle of learner–centeredness in that it ensures that learners construct their own knowledge in order to complete the task instead of being taught the pre–existing one. The Discussion Boards Assessment is a formative assessment in that it helps to identify areas for improvement and at the same time contributes to the process of collaboration and the exchange of good practice. In other words, the Discussion Boards Assessment facilitates ongoing quality enhancements because we use the information gained from the assessment to improve the programme. For example, the information gained as a result of using the Discussion Boards Assessment demonstrated that the Advanced Russian Business learners' cognitive skills didn't meet the course ILO in this area, which prompted us to introduce a new element (case–study group work) into the programme to consolidate these particular skills. In this way when designing the Discussion Boards Assessment we take into account the implications of quality assurance and quality enhancement for academic and professional practices with a particular focus on teaching.

Authenticity of the assessment

We believe that in undertaking the Discussion Boards Assessment students should use the skills, knowledge, imagination, flexibility etc. in the same way as these skills would be used in real life situations. In this respect the Discussion Boards Assessment should not be an end to itself but a means to enhance learning. By offering our students the Discussion Boards Assessment we acknowledge the wider context in which higher education operates and recognise the implications for learners' future professional practice.

The Discussion Boards Assessment as an integral part of the constructive alignment

We ensure that the Discussion Boards Assessment methodology correlates with the principle of the Constructive Alignment where the learning outcomes, learning activities and assessment are aligned to form 'a continuous system of supportive learning'[1] and that the course design allows to achieve this objective.

Biggs &Collis[5]' SOLO Taxonomy is a useful instrument to match the Advanced Business Russian course ILO with the actual level of learners' achievement and accordingly, with the assessment outcomes that measure the degree of learners' attainment of the course ILO. As Anderson[6] points out 'taxonomy levels help teachers to design appropriate assessment because it enables them to work out prototypical ways of assessing objectives that fall within the relative cells'. We argue then that Biggs and Collis' SOLO Taxonomy helps to achieve the following objectives:

a. to measure the Advanced Business Russian course ILO against the SOLO taxonomy levels;

b.   to define what sort of evaluation the Discussion Boards Assessment can provide according to Biggs and Collis' SOLO Taxonomy and

c. to organise assessment in such a way as to achieve its alignment to the course ILO (Figure 1).[5]

Let's now examine the Advanced Business Russian course ILO and see how they measure against Biggs and Collis' SOLO Taxonomy levels:

A. Knowledge and understanding:

At the end of the module, learners will be expected to:

A13: be able to demonstrate critical knowledge and understanding of the contemporary economic, socio–political, and cultural dynamics of the country or countries where the foreign language is spoken, and their relation to wider international developments

B. Cognitive skills:

At the end of the module, learners will be expected to:

B13: be able to critically analyse and evaluate models and concepts within international business

B15: be able to integrate and evaluate complex information and data from a variety of sources

C. Practical and professional skills:

At the end of the module, learners will be expected to:

C14: be able to use the target language(s) competently and effectively as a medium for understanding, expression and communication in professional and social situations

D. Key Transferable skills:

At the end of the module, learners will be expected to:

D13: be able to show evidence of learner autonomy, continuing professional development and commitment to lifelong learning in a self–reflective manner.
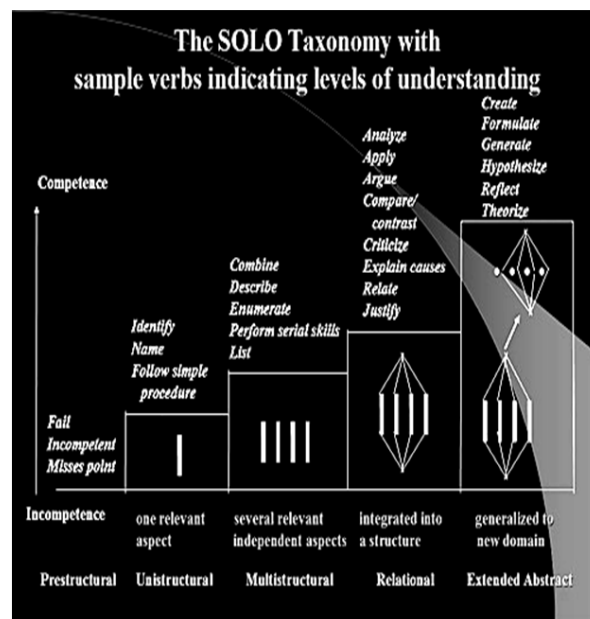

Figure 1 The SOLO Taxonomy with sample verbs indicating levels of understanding.

According to Anderson[6] 'the cognitive process dimension enables the tutor to identify an appropriate verb which should be used to express the learning outcomes'. If we look at the verbs used in the Advanced Business Russian course ILO: *demonstrate* critical knowledge*,* critically *analyse*, *integrate* and *evaluate*, *use* the target language competently and effectively*, show* evidence of learner autonomy etc. we will see that they are practically the same as those used at the Relational Level of Biggs and Collis' Taxonomy – (*analyse*, *apply*, *compare*, *contrast*, *criticize*, *explain* causes, *relate*, justify).So we can postulate that the Advanced Business Russian course ILO match the levels of understanding that correspond to the Relational Level of Biggs and Collis' SOLO Taxonomy. Biggs and

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Collis' SOLO Taxonomy also helps to define the type of evaluation the Discussion Boards Assessment can provide in that it describes the levels of understanding that the Discussion Boards Assessment should measure. As we will see below the Discussion Boards Assessment criteria help to define it as a problem–based, learner–centred, collaborative and cognitive skills based assessment which adheres to the principle of constructivism. The latter is especially important because 'using constructivist principles, a teacher may develop discussion topics that are open ended enough to allow the individual learner to incorporate individual experiences, interpretations, reactions, analysis and opinions into discussion responses.' (Carwile, 2007). If we apply the above to the Discussion Boards Assessment, we can see that it corresponds to the Relational Level of Biggs and Collis' SOLO Taxonomy and consequently, to the course ILO.

The Discussion Boards Assessment–its criteria, marking and its place in the course design

The Discussion Boards Assessment consisted of two forums – 'Small businesses in Russia and their problems' and 'Franchising in Russia'. Two teacher's statements were uploaded in the Discussion Board forums and the students were asked to comment on these statements and on each other's entries.

Here are the two forums statements:

a. Small business in Russia has many problems that interfere with its development. The main problem is bureaucracy and the corruption of the government officials. What, in your opinion, should the government of Russia do in order to encourage the growth of the small business in Russian?

b. Franchising can be successful only on the condition of complete trust between the partners– the franchisor and the franchisee. Both partners have their own rights and responsibilities and they should understand and be eager to fulfil them. Otherwise, franchising will not work and can face bankruptcy already in the first year of its existence. What, in your opinion, are the main rights and responsibilities of each partner?

The Discussion Boards Assessment criteria

In the Discussion Boards Assessment we use the so–called Threshold assessment criteria that define the standard of performance that a learner must attain in order to demonstrate the achievement of ILO. If the Threshold assessment criteria are reached each student

gets 5% for the participation in each forum, the total of 10%.

In defining the Threshold assessment criteria we followed the advice given by Jenny Moon, Learning and Teaching Advisor at Exeter University, who said, 'Assessment criteria should test, assess or relate to the learning that is mentioned in the learning outcome' (Moon, 2012).

Below are the discussion boards Assessment criteria that reflect the course ILO:

You need to comment on two statements on the small businesses in Russia and franchising in Russia and also on the entries of other students

Your posts should show:

a. that you have read the articles that we studied in class as well as other students' posts
b. that you have understood the teacher's statements
c. that you haven't merely repeated what the articles say but worked with this material analysing and interpreting it
d. Your posts should also demonstrate:
e. critical thinking
f. originality
g. ability to develop an argument
h. ability to produce evidence to support your conclusions
i. ability to integrate and evaluate information and data from a variety of sources
j. ability to explain reasons and causes
k. ability to justify your position

If we look again at the Advanced Business Russian course ILO and Biggs and Collis' Solo Taxonomy Relational Level verbs we will see that the criteria for the Discussion Boards Assessment are fully aligned to the learners' desirable level of understanding (Relational) of Biggs and Collis' Solo Taxonomy and the course ILO.

The Discussion Boards Assessment marking

Marking of the Discussion Boards Assessment is based on the criterion-referenced scored rubric which allows us to assess and mark several aspects of the students' work. The Discussion Boards Assessment rubric, presented in Table 1 below, describes the level of students' performance by using scores which reflect the Discussion Boards Assessment criteria and the levels of understanding according to Biggs & Collis' SOLO Taxonomy.

Table 1 The Discussion Boards Assessment scored rubric

SOLO Taxonomy levels of Understanding	Extended abstract	Relational	Multi-structural	Unistructural	Pre-structural
Scores	100-85	84 -70	69-50	49-36	35-0
Originality and critical thinking.	Excellent originality and critical thinking. There are new ideas and observations.	Very good originality and critical thinking. Content is of a very good quality showing excellent understanding of the problem.	Good originality and critical thinking but with occasional incoherence and use of tautology.	Originality and critical thinking are barely adequate. Only one point of the argument is presented.	Originality and critical thinking are practically absent. No evidence of any analysis of the problem.
Ability to develop argument and provide evidence to support conclusions	Excellent development of argument. Excellent provision of evidence to corroborate argument.	Very good development of argument with solid evidence to support conclusions.	Good development of argument but with occasional lapse in logic. There is evidence to support conclusions but occasionally it is not fully convincing.	Development of argument is mostly not logical. Evidence to support conclusions is flawed as it is inconclusive and tautological.	No ability to develop argument. Evidence to support conclusions is not presented.

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Table Continued.....

Ability to integrate and evaluate information and data from a variety of sources	Excellent ability to integrate information and data from a variety of sources.	Very good ability to integrate information and data from a variety of sources.	Good ability to integrate information and data from several sources.	Satisfactory ability to integrate data from one source, mainly from the textbook. Extensive use of tautology.	Information and data are not integrated from any sources
Ability to explain reasons and causes, ability to justify your position	Excellent ability to explain reasons and courses. Excellent ability to logically and coherently justify your position.	Very good ability to explain reasons and causes and to justify your position in a logical and coherent way.	Good ability to explain reasons and causes and	Satisfactory ability to explain reasons and causes and to justify your position but reasoning is often flawed and incoherent.	No ability to to explain reasons and causes. Attempts to justify your position fail due to lack of logic or coherence.

The Discussion Boards Assessment place in the course design

In designing the Discussion Boards Assessment we use the principle of the so–called backward course design.[7] It means that the first step in designing the course should be examining the course ILO in order to analyse what sort of knowledge students should have at the end of the course, what ideas they should understand and what skills they should develop as a result of this course. After analysing the course ILO we start thinking of how the teacher and the students will know that these goals are achieved and what kind of assessment is needed to answer this question.[8–10] The next step then will be to decide what the teacher and the students should do in order to achieve these goals. So in designing the Discussion Boards Assessment we align the course ILO with learning and teaching activities that provide the attainment of the ILO. As it has been explained earlier, the Advanced Business Russian course ILO implies that the students are expected to demonstrate the understanding and the skills corresponding to the Relational Level of Biggs and Collis' SOLO Taxonomy. It means that the course should be designed in such a way as to include an assessment which uses the same verbs as those listed in Biggs and Collis' SOLO Taxonomy Relational Level –'analyse, compare, explain causes, justify' etc. in order to check whether the learners have managed to achieve the course ILO.[10–12]

The supportive learning system

The creation of the supportive learning system encourages promotion of participation and equality of opportunity for all learners. There is a great student diversity at Regents University. We have students from all over the world with enormous ethnic and cultural diversity which can be a challenge in the classroom with regard to the learner's learning perspective – i.e. what the student intends to learn – and also with regard to the learner's learning strategies and style of learning. But, 'teaching that engages students' learning activities appropriately minimizes differences of ethnicity between students as far as learning itself is concerned'.[1]

To engage the Advanced Business Russian students' learning activities in order to promote their participation and equality of opportunity we first of all try to motivate them by giving them the tasks that they consider meaningful. 'Nobody wants to do something they see as worthless. Neither do they want to do something, however valued, if they believe they have no chance of succeeding. In both cases, doing the task will be seen as a waste of time'.[1] For the Advanced Business Russian learners a meaningful task will be the one that teaches them transferable skills that they will be able to use in their future work.[12–15] This can be writing a summary of the news they listen to, presenting a case–study in class, participating in the Discussion Boards Assessment, etc. In order to promote participation and equality of opportunity for all learners it is also important to respond to learners' diverse needs. Some students need more support than the others and to address this problem we offer them out–of–class, one–to–one consultations and training sessions where they can revise difficult aspects of the Russian grammar or ask for advice on learning strategies We also consider the management of the learning environment, both physical and virtual, a key to inclusive learning and promotion of participation. To create an effective learning environment we help students to access and use a broad range of learning opportunities including a wide range of learning and teaching tools such as textbooks,[16–18] listening materials and Blackboard. The latter is used as a virtual learning environment in three ways: for students' individual work (writing essays using their wikis), for communication and group work (blogs and Discussion Boards Assessment) and for feedbacks and feed–forwards where we comment on the students' past and future work.

Feedback and feed–forward

There is another important issue directly connected with the promotion of participation and equal opportunity, the issue of providing learners with a timely and constructive feedback and a feed–forward. As it has been mentioned earlier, assessment is not an end in itself. Assessment should promote learning and that is why feedbacks and feed–forwards are the most important elements of the assessment. We believe that the main purpose of a feedback and a feed–forward is to motivate students, to inform them about their achievements and their shortcoming and to give them recommendations for their future development (feed–forward).

We use both formal and informal feedbacks and feed–forwards. Informal feedbacks and feed–forwards include chats during the breaks, the question and answer sessions in class or exchange of thoughts about the recent assessment. A formal feedback includes comments on the work done followed by remarks about the learner's overall performance and recommendations for their future work which is a feed–forward. A feed–forward can also include advice on learning strategy, on developing particular skills e.g. listening or writing skills and on improvement in weak areas. Usually we upload our feedbacks and feed–forwards in Blackboard or send them to the students via e–mail.

There is another important function of feedbacks and feed–forwards: they can help a teacher to adjust teaching and identify the areas where students need more support and guidance.

Conclusion

Taking into account all the above said we can draw a conclusion

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that the Constructive Alignment implies organising teaching and learning activities, assessment and feedbacks and feed–forwards in such a way as to encourage a constructivist approach to learning which, in its turn, will lead to the acquisition of the functional knowledge.[1] This means that the students will achieve the Relational Level of Biggs' and Collis' SOLO Taxonomy where they will be able to make connections not only within the given subject area but also beyond it and will also learn how to generalise and transfer principles and ideas into a broader context. In other words, they will acquire transferable skills to be used in their future employment and in life in general.

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Conflict of interest

Author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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