

The assessment of digital project work in the EFL classroom

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Abstract. This paper reports on a project aiming at describing professional practice in the assessment of collaborative digital projects among a group of in-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers within the context of a single workplace, a technologically well-resourced upper secondary school in Sweden. In a previous project (Allen & Berggren, 2016), teachers were provided with an overview of the digital literacy concept as described by Dudeney, Hockly, and Pegrum (2013) as part of an initiative to better integrate information communication technology into their classroom practice. The current study addresses the need expressed in previous projects for developing assessment practices among the teachers working with digital projects, making use of a practical overview of the assessment of digital projects (Dudeney et al., 2013) trying out an assignment. Afterwards, a focus group interview was conducted focusing on teachers' experiences of digital project assessment. The results indicate that while the teaching and assessment of collaborative digital projects are not aligned, the teaching of digital literacy making use of digital resource may augment 'traditional' assessment. Following this conclusion, a necessity of further collaboration among EFL teachers appears, aiming at developing the assessment of the collaborative aspect of digital projects.

Keywords: digital literacy, assessment, exploratory practice, in-service training.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Individually targeted testing and assessment have been at the cornerstone of language teaching performance measurement since the introduction of the *Cambridge First Certificate* course in English over one hundred years ago. As contemporary workplaces increasingly adopt team- and project-based practices in the digital era, the question is how language teachers can begin assessing collaborative digital project work as a departure from more traditional individualised proficiency testing.

This paper describes and discusses an initiative to assess collaborative digital project work in advanced EFL teaching at a technologically well-resourced school within the context of the *digital literacy* framework as set out by [Dudeny et al. \(2013\)](#).

1.2. Digital literacy practices and collaborative assessment

In a series of publications ([Dudeny et al., 2013](#); [Hockly, 2012](#)), the notion of digital literacy applied to language teaching has been advanced as a means of combining the promotion of foreign language proficiency and skills in the use of digital tools and resources. The wholesale adoption of digital practices in EFL teaching necessitates the alignment of teaching with assessment involving not only the final digital artefact, but also the entire collaborative working process with groups of learners leading up to the product ([Palloff & Pratt, 2009](#)).

Moreover, combining EFL teaching with the preparation of learners for real-world application of their language proficiency and making use of digital tools is to be considered as involving Task-Based Language Assessment (TBLA), interpreted as “the elicitation and evaluation of language use (across all modalities) for expressing and interpreting meaning, within a well-defined communicative context (and audience), for a clear purpose, toward a valued goal or outcome” ([Norris, 2016](#), p. 232). This is especially so in the case of the *History Hunt* project, which focusses on the evaluation of communicative proficiency within a well-defined context with a clear purpose. In all, the procedure of the *History Hunt* project is essentially one of TBLA at the intersection of purely performance-based assessment and collaborative process-and-product assessment.

2. Method

2.1. The teaching activity

A pilot group of five EFL teachers at an upper secondary school in southern Sweden were tasked with teaching and assessing a mobile-assisted language learning project in English based loosely on the *History Hunt* lesson activity as described in [Dudeny et al. \(2013\)](#). This activity involved 140 learners tasked with the creation of digital map ‘trails’ based on *Google Maps* highlighting urban locations with historical or cultural significance. Learners augmented maps with textual, video and audio material recorded on hand-held devices³.

2.2. The assessment matrix

Teachers were initially provided with a digital assessment grading matrix as described by [Dudeny et al. \(2013\)](#). Based on this input, teachers adopted the principle that the project assessment should cover both process and product aspects of the learning activity. It was also decided that teachers would use the assessment matrix in the digital literacies resource book ([Dudeny et al., 2013](#), p. 344) in conjunction with the syllabus and the grading system for English adopted by the *Swedish National Agency for Education* (LGY 2011), thus establishing an assessment matrix for the project.

In another step, teachers created together a task description for the project and defined their own set of grading criteria for the assessment of this specific project⁴. The teachers also decided on which aspects of process and product were to be assessed by the teacher and/or peer groups. This step involved deciding on the balance between teacher and peer assessment.

3. Results

3.1. Assessment of the collaborative process

Pupils’ self-assessment turned out to be the most common way of assessing the collaborative process, even though teachers initially had an ambition to include

3. <https://larskaggskolans.wordpress.com/2017/01/16/te16bjan/>

4. <https://larskaggskolans.wordpress.com/category/english-6/>

peer assessment, that is pupils assessing the work of other pupils, as well. The reason given for the lack of peer assessments was a practical problem of groups not working at the same pace. Some teachers then replaced peer assessments with meetings between the teacher and pupils.

Thus, based on pupils' self-assessments, three teachers arranged for seminars in which pupils presented to their teacher and another group of pupils how far they had reached and what problems they were working with in their group. Two teachers did not set up formal meetings, but communicated in the classroom continuously with pupils about their plans, problems, and progress. These meetings, however, were not used in the process of grading pupils. Instead, teachers said their main aim in their meetings with pupils was to promote pupils' communication, making them organise themselves more effectively.

3.2. Assessment of the collaborative product

Assessing the product, all teachers made use of the matrix they had created collectively. However, reflecting on important aspects to focus on in a digital project, they considered it hard for a language teacher to assess technical skills as such. Their professional role is instead to assess to what extent digital resources are made good use of in communicating a reliable content fulfilling the demands of the assignment.

At the same time, the matrix, as well as teacher focus group comments, make clear that in assessing the vodcasts, more traditional components were primarily focussed on by the teachers, such as structure, lexis, grammar, pronunciation, and intonation. To a lesser degree, there was an assessment of the use of digital resources, that is the assignment demanded pupils to exhibit their vodcasts on a digital map, presenting relevant information from different sources, mainly the internet.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Promoting the development of assessment practices working with collaborative digital projects (c.f. [Dudeny et al., 2013](#), p. 342) is a process in several steps, as indicated by the *History Hunt* project. The results suggest that there is a lack of alignment in [Palloff and Pratt's \(2009\)](#) terms between teaching, demanding collaboration on process and product, and assessment in the project. Peer assessment did not occur as planned and teachers did not grade the collaborative process. In the

future, a solution might be to make members of groups interact in the classroom on the topic of process and be graded on this by the teacher. Meanwhile, teachers could at regular intervals offer formative feedback on process.

There is to some extent also a lack of alignment of assessment and teaching, since teachers focussed mostly on individual skills of foreign language proficiency and only to some degree on pupils' collaborative skills in making use of a vodcast to communicate. Teachers tend to fall back on traditional assessment of the language product, saying assessing pupils' individual language proficiency is their field of expertise.

A conclusion may be that to perfectly align assessment with teaching activities in digital projects is not possible, or even necessary in EFL teaching. The *History Hunt* project indicates that teaching digital literacy making use of digital resources augments traditional assessment, helping to ensure authenticity, preparing pupils for a future making good use of digital resources communicating a reliable content, and, according to the teachers, heightening motivation among pupils. Finally, through working together with colleagues, inspired by Dudeney et al. (2013), results obtained from the interview suggest the necessity among EFL teachers of incorporating development of assessment practices working with digital projects alongside busy teaching schedules and administrative demands. Teachers have collectively begun to develop an awareness of what is relevant when assessing a digital project.

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