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Capstone Project

Authentic Assessment Practices in the Literature Courses
of the English Teaching Program
at Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica

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Contents

Introduction.....	3
Abstract	3
Resumen	3
Research Question.....	4
Purpose and Motivation	4
Context of Project.....	9
Literature Review	10
Methodology.....	31
Findings.....	34
Focus Group	34
Authentic Assessment	35
21 st century skills	36
Assessment activity implemented in a literature course that was considered successful.....	36
Creation of new assessment activities considering authentic assessment and 21 st century skills frameworks	38
Interviews	38
Authentic Assessment	39
21 st century skills	40
Assessment activity implemented in a literature course that was considered successful.....	40
Creation of new assessment activities considering authentic assessment and 21 st century skills frameworks	42
Discussion.....	42
Limitations and future research.....	45
Practical implications	46
Works Cited	47

Introduction

Abstract

The redesign of the English Teaching program at Universidad de Costa Rica adopted a competency or skills-based approach, which moved away from the objective or content-based approach of the terminal program. Therefore, the new program's pedagogical approach emphasizes authentic assessment and 21st century skills. The researcher examined how both authentic assessment practices and 21st century skills were integrated in the current literature courses of the English Teaching program to understand what needs to be improved or modified when the new courses start. The research uses a qualitative analysis comprised of a focus group and two individual interviews of participants who have taught a literature course or include literary texts in their courses, accounting for the authentic assessment frameworks proposed by Ashford-Rowe et al. (2014) and MacArthur (2023) and the list of 21st century skills stated by Binkley et al. (2012). Participants shared their understanding of what authentic assessment and 21st century skills are in a general form and situated in a literature course. They also shared examples of evaluation tasks for literature courses that they had used in the past and considered to be successful, and they attempted to formulate new forms of assessment considering the selected frameworks. Findings showed that participants have a general understanding of both authentic assessment elements and 21st century skills, but more explicit guidance is required to comply with the proposed frameworks and truly integrate these two elements in the newly redesigned literature courses.

Key Words: authentic assessment, 21st century skills, teaching of literature, evaluation in higher education, competency-based approach

Resumen

El rediseño del programa de Enseñanza del Inglés en la Universidad de Costa Rica adoptó un enfoque basado en competencias o habilidades que se alejó del enfoque objetivo o basado en contenidos del programa terminal. Por lo tanto, el nuevo enfoque pedagógico enfatiza la evaluación auténtica y las habilidades del siglo XXI. Se examinó cómo se integraron las prácticas de evaluación auténtica y las habilidades del siglo XXI en los cursos actuales de Literatura del programa de Enseñanza del Inglés para comprender qué se necesita mejorar o modificar cuando comiencen los nuevos cursos. La investigación utiliza un análisis cualitativo compuesto por un grupo focal y dos entrevistas individuales a

participantes que han impartido los cursos de Literatura o han incluido textos literarios en sus cursos, considerando los modelos de evaluación auténtica propuestos por Ashford-Rowe et al. (2014) y MacArthur (2023) y la lista de habilidades del siglo XXI establecida por Binkley et al. (2012). Los participantes compartieron su comprensión de lo que son la evaluación auténtica y las habilidades del siglo XXI de forma general y en el contexto de un curso de Literatura. También compartieron ejemplos de formas de evaluación para cursos de literatura que habían utilizado anteriormente y que consideran exitosas, e intentaron formular nuevas formas de evaluación considerando los modelos seleccionados. Los resultados mostraron que los participantes tienen una comprensión general tanto de los elementos de evaluación auténtica como de las habilidades del siglo XXI, pero se requiere una orientación más explícita para cumplir con los modelos propuestos e integrar plenamente estos dos elementos en los cursos de literatura recientemente rediseñados.

Palabras clave: evaluación auténtica, habilidades del siglo 21, enseñanza de la literatura, evaluación, educación superior, competencias

Research Question

Research question: *How are authentic assessment practices and 21st century skills integrated in the literature courses of the English Teaching program at Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica?*

Purpose and Motivation

This research centers around the English Teaching Program at Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica. This is a four-year bachelor's degree that prepares undergraduate students to become English language instructors for high school levels, language institutes or higher education. The program belongs to the School of Literature and Language Sciences and the Education Division of Universidad Nacional, as the courses and credits of the program

encompass language acquisition, linguistics, literature, applied linguistics and second language teaching.

Currently, the program is taught in four campuses of Universidad Nacional (Fig. 1): the main campus of Omar Dengo, located in the Central Region (Heredia province), and the regional campuses of Pérez Zeledón (San José Province), Coto (Puntarenas province), which belong to the Brunca Region, and the regional campus of Nicoya, located in the Chorotega Region (Guanacaste province). The program was also taught in the regional campus of Liberia (part of the Chorotega Region, in the province of Guanacaste) up until 2021. According to the Student Statistics page¹ of Universidad Nacional, over the past five years (2020–2024), the program, in all the above-mentioned campuses, has averaged 176.5 new admissions annually, 696.2 enrolled regular students each year, and 104.8 graduates per year.

¹ <https://www.eeuna.una.ac.cr/>



Fig. 1 Map of Costa Rica and location of Universidad Nacional's campuses,

<https://www.una.ac.cr/acerca-de-la-una/#conocer-mas>

The relevance of the English Teaching program rests in the country's efforts to teach English in the public education system, from kindergarten to high school. Costa Rica's economy relies in the manufacturing, service, and tourism industries, with a high number of foreign companies operating in Free Trade Zones, such as Intel, Dell, HP, Bayer, DHL, IBM, Amazon, and others. Thus, the country understands the need to train English instructors in order to become a bilingual nation with citizens who can work in different English speaking environments.

The English Teaching program at Universidad Nacional started at the same time the university was founded in 1973. Through the years, the program has changed and evolved with the needs and trends of language teaching. The latest redesign of the program started

in 2024, and it adopted a competency approach, following higher education standards across the world which emphasize the development of practical skills alongside theoretical knowledge to better suit the students with the demands and needs of the education market of the moment. This skill-based or competency-based approach represents a change in methodological and evaluation practices, since the previous model used objectives and was content-based. This shift also stands as a challenge to the faculty group as we are becoming familiar with teaching with competencies in mind and adapting to the new form of assessment that is expected for this new model.

The relevance of this research question arises from the need to understand the new way instructors for literature courses should evaluate learning and knowledge within the implementation of competencies or skills. Since the field of literature is neither vocational nor technical, it can be difficult to pinpoint how skills would fit in the instruction of literature courses. As seen in the scholarship gathered about competencies and assessment in higher education, authentic assessment is a form to evaluate the application of skills or competencies. Again, because literature courses are not related to a trade, vocation or technical major, the assessment should include soft skills or 21st century skills, which imply the exercise of social, cognitive and digital domains. Therefore, the research question seeks to find out three main issues: how the professors in charge of literature courses perceive what authentic assessment and 21st century skills are, how they have been creating assessment activities with them (or without them) in the past, and how they can create specific evaluation activities with authentic assessment and 21st century skills in mind.

To add a level of relevance to the research question, it is important to remember that the English Teaching program is taught in four campuses at Universidad Nacional: the main Campus Omar Dengo, and the regional campuses of Pérez Zeledón, Coto, and Nicoya. There are two literature specialist professors at the main campus, one in the Pérez Zeledón campus, and another in the Nicoya campus. Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) professors would teach the literature courses when there is no literature specialist on the campus or when the literature specialists are performing assigned other courses, are part of research or extension projects, or are performing administrative tasks. As a Spanish-speaking country, the higher education options for English and English teaching focus more on language acquisition, and there is only one graduate program for Literature in English in the whole country, while there are many graduate programs about Applied Linguistics and English as a Foreign Language. Thus, the majority of the faculty members at Universidad Nacional's campuses hold a TEFL degree. If the instructors teaching the literature courses in the English Teaching major in different campuses are not Literature specialists, it would be interesting to find out what type of assessment they are doing, and to provide some guidance now that the courses will focus on competencies.

The school year at Universidad Nacional starts in February, and it is divided into two semesters: the first semester goes from mid-February to mid-June, and the second semester goes from mid-July to mid-November. The new redesigned program started in January of 2024, with the opening of the first-year cohort. Following the new program, the first literature course would be taught in the first semester of the third year, which will be 2026, and there is a literature course in each semester until the end of the fourth year.

Therefore, there is plenty of time to prepare for the new courses in terms of professional development and academic discussion such as the study that is presented here.

Context of Project

The redesign of the English Teaching program was a task that many faculty members were waiting for, since the last modification to the program happened in 2013 and it only entailed a change in the number of weeks for the semester, and other minor changes. Thus, the program needed to be updated to meet the current demands of the educational field of the country and the world. A committee of five professors was chosen to work on the redesign of the program, under the guidance of the Teaching Vice-President's office² which mandated that the new program had to incorporate skills or competencies instead of objectives. Much of the analysis and work for each to the academic fields of the program (writing courses, oral expression courses, linguistics, literature, etc.) was done in small groups of faculty members according to their field of specialty. Thus, the whole redesign was an effort of all the faculty members, yet there were some people who opposed the inclusion of competencies and the effort to approve the program was marked by heated discussions and arguments. Other faculty members voiced their discontent because they say they do not feel equipped to teach a competency-based program. The faculty members

² Universidad Nacional is organized in the following form: *Rectoría* (President of the University), *Rectoría Adjunta* (Adjunct President, deals with funds and hiring processes, among other things), and five *Vicerrectorías* (Vice-Presidents) that deal with (1) administrative issues, (2) teaching, (3) research, (4) extension, and (5) student life. The Teaching Vice-President's office coordinates, advises, integrates and formulates the teaching actions of the university.

have received some talks about teaching with competencies but there is still need for more professional development on the topic.

The research question arose first as the researcher's personal task, since the first literature course will be taught in 2026, so this capstone project would be a good opportunity to research forms of assessment for competency-based courses, specifically in the field of literature, which the researcher teaches. Then the researcher reflected on the fact that sometimes other fellow professors from the regional campuses contact the English specialists because they are assigned a literature course, and it is not their area of specialization. That made the researcher think about what was happening in terms of assessment when a non-literature specialist planned the evaluations for a literature course. These issues converged in the creation of the research question.

The following paper includes a literature review that focuses on different authentic assessment frameworks between the late 1980s and the year 2024, plus the overview of 21st century skills from different perspectives. The qualitative methodology is presented and the findings discussed and analyzed in order to answer the research question, recognize limitations and propose implications for the study.

Literature Review

New forces of the postmodern world, such as globalization, mobility, integration and fusion, have created new demands in the field of language acquisition at the higher education level (Pérez-Cañado 1). These new demands have evidenced the need for higher

education institutions to make changes in the teaching methodology and evaluation of their curriculum. Traditional, content-based approaches have been replaced by skill-based or competency-based approaches, so students will no longer be just content specialists, but they will also demonstrate the skills, abilities, and attitudes that are pertinent to their field of study or future jobs, and as assets in their personal life. Specifically, in the case of the English Teaching program, taught at Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica, when the moment came for a redesign of the program, the competency-based approach was chosen as it proposes a change from traditional teaching where curriculum is objective-based, focused on contents and theory, and where its evaluation measures knowledge. The competency-based approach mixes theory and practice through the student's active learning, and its evaluation can combine traditional assessment with self-assessment and peer-assessment. The new program acknowledges that stakeholders demand a series of generic and specific language competencies that are related to the English teaching professional field, but they are also related to the benefit the students personally (Álvarez-Martínez et al. 88). In terms of methodology, the redesign of the program proposes a competency-based and action-oriented methodology, from the constructivist and socio-reconstructionist approaches. This means that methodology should be student-centered and socially centered. In terms of evaluation, it should be a process that involves both formative and summative activities. Students will be evaluated continuously in each of the theoretical or practical activities, using different forms of assessment. This evaluation approach seeks to assess the assimilation of content and the construction of knowledge by students, mainly based on the principle of problem solving or carrying out activities, so

that each student integrally develops competencies, abilities, skills, capacities, values and attitudes. This study and the research questions attached to it focus on the topic of assessment practices, therefore the topic of methodology will not be addressed.

The connection between competencies and authentic assessment has been analyzed by different authors, from K-to-12 environments (Wiggins) to higher education (MacArthur). From the scholarship studied, two important issues have been revealed: there is a lack of consensus in the definition of what “authenticity” means or what “authentic assessment” comprehends, and there are different ways in which an authentic assessment activity can be evaluated with a systematic framework.

Grant Wiggins (1989) reflects on the nature of true tests as a form of authentic assessment as he recognizes the importance of setting standards in education, specifically in K-12. He also exposes what he considers to be the nature of authentic tests and provides some examples. The criteria of authenticity in the form of assessment that Wiggins (90-91) propose are:

1. Structure and logics: authentic assessment should be public, have an audience, be completed in a realistic time frame, implicate collaboration with others, involve practice, rehearsal, retaking, and feedback.
2. Intellectual design features: authentic assessment should be created to point out to students more sophisticated and effective ways to use knowledge. It should pose as an intellectual challenge, showing research or creation of product. It must involve

representative challenges within a discipline. The issue of providing feedback is again addressed.

3. Fairness and equity: authentic assessment should not rely on right or wrong answers, but on identifying students' strengths depending on students' learning styles and interests.

Later, Joy Cumming and Graham Maxwell (1999) explore how other authors have interpreted authentic assessment and the relationship between these interpretations and the original focus of authenticity in learning proposed by Newmann and Archbald in 1992. Cumming and Maxwell note that there are different interpretations of authentic assessment, so it is natural for terms to evolve, but this can lead to confused theory and practice. They conclude that Newman and Archbald first use the term "authentic" in the context of learning and assessment in 1988 later expanding it in 1992 to the characteristics that emulate the kinds of mastery demonstrated by successful adults: production of knowledge, discipline inquiry, and personal value. Cumming and Maxwell (178-179) remark on the relationships between theories of learning and authenticity, which led to variations in the construction of authenticity and the implementation of authentic assessment (180). They conclude that the concept of authenticity has drawn more attention on the validity of assessment, and to more creative forms of assessment. They warn against simplified forms of implementation such as camouflage, focus on performance, and simulation, and to the favoring of second-order expectations instead of first-order expectations. Cumming and Maxwell come up with a framework to evidence the relationships between learning goals, teaching activities, learning processes and assessment procedures in the form of a tetrahedron which is a system of interrelationships where all of the four components

mentioned above are in dynamic tension or balance. Adjustment of one component requires sympathetic adjustment of the other three. The tetrahedron can be seen below in

Figure 2:

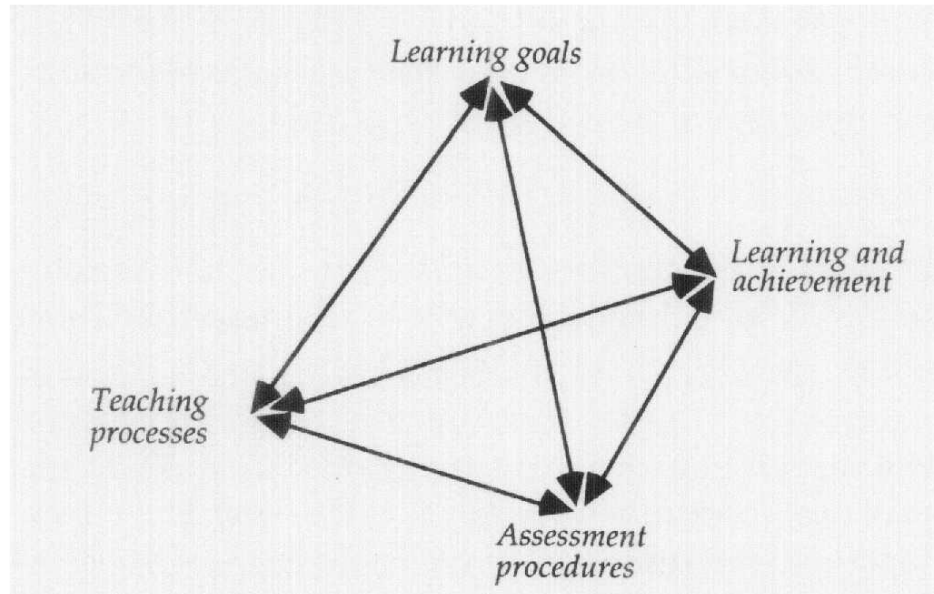


Fig. 2 Joy Cumming and Graham Maxwell, Figure 1 The teaching, learning, assessment domain, 1999.

Another early framework to evaluate authentic assessment was created by Judith Gulikers and colleagues (2004). The authors propose a five-dimensional assessment framework. Their qualitative study focuses on nursing students and teachers in order to prove that the framework works, is complete, and to find out if students and teachers perceive authentic assessment differently or the same. The framework focuses on task, physical context, social context, result, and criteria in the following simplified form:

1. Task: What do you have to do?
2. Physical context: Where do you have to do it?

3. Social context: With whom do you have to do it?
4. Result or form: What has to come out of it? What is the result of your efforts?
5. Criteria: How does what you have done has to be evaluated or judged? (Gulikers et al. 77)

The authors provide a figure for their five-dimensional model, which can help others understand what the questions presented above really mean:

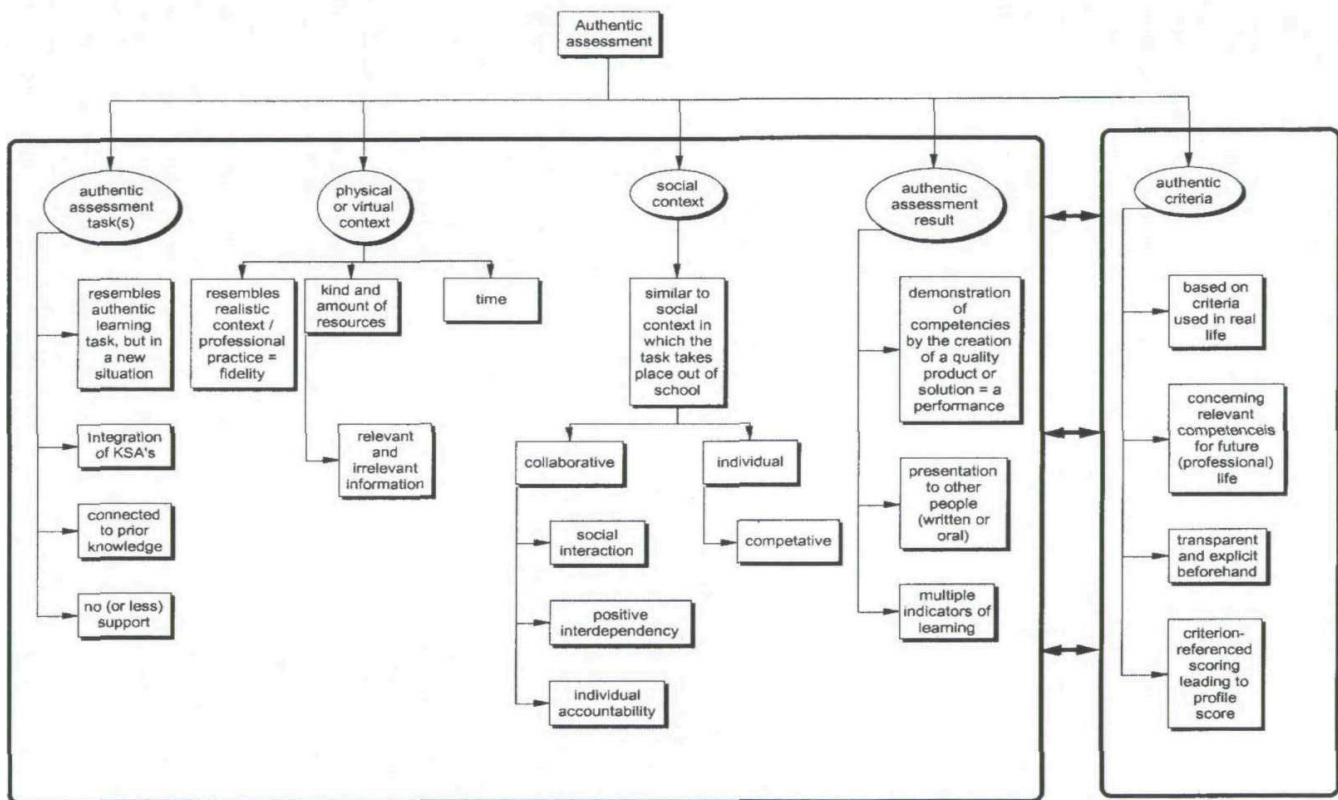


Fig. 3. Gulikers et al., Five-dimensional model for authentic assessment, 73.

Another approach to define and frame what authentic assessment means in higher education was produced by Thuy Vu and Gloria Dall'Alba (2014) when they formulate an ontological conceptualization of authentic assessment using Heidegger's concepts of being-in-the-world, authenticity and inauthenticity. This ontological perspective focuses on the nature of being, on who the students are becoming through their education and

learning experiences. Thus, authentic assessment, in the terms Vu and Dall'Alba propose, encourages students to challenge routine practices, in both what they learn and what they accept as knowledge. Also, this definition of authentic assessment expects students to reflect on what they are becoming, providing moments or spaces of reflection on their learning, in their personal and professional development.

A more comprehensive explanation of Vu and Dall'Alba's framework was first published in 2011 and then republished 2024, in the book chapter "Becoming Authentic Professionals: Learning for Authenticity." As explained above, they base their application of authenticity on Heidegger's philosophy, only to advocate authenticity in the quality of the educational process and not just on the assessment practices alone. Based on their concept of authenticity, they draw implications for professional education and directions for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. In terms of the implications authenticity should have on professional education, Vu and Dall'Alba come up with five ideas: (1) understanding of the processes related to the field of study/work as a medium in which students will establish themselves in the world responsibly; (2) critical thinking required to evaluate what students learn and their stand on it; (3) collaborative practices with peers, instructors, and others to form wider views of their learning; (4) reflection and introspection to question what kind of professional students are becoming; and (5) transference with other fields, programs, personal knowledge, continuing education, as becoming an authentic learner involves the continuation of this process beyond culminating a degree (73-74).

The directions Vu and Dall’Alba propose for curricular, pedagogical and assessment practices are drawn from the above-mentioned implications, yet they are presented in the form of general guidelines to “promote learning to become authentic professionals” (“Becoming Authentic Professionals” 74). They are the following:

1. A clear and consistent integral curriculum design, stated in forms that students can understand easily.
2. The inclusion of real-world examples of the study field/career as learning opportunities for interaction and work.
3. Moments of reflection where students can assess who they are becoming as professionals in their field.
4. A pedagogical practice that involves less lecturing and more discussions.
5. Flexibility in the manners and outcomes of the discussion of topics.
6. The creation of safe teaching and learning spaces for both instructors and students.
7. The incorporation of collaboration as learning opportunities.
8. Assessment practices that focus on the process and not solely on the completion of the task.
9. Progressive assessment with continuous feedback and initial low stakes.
10. Articulated assessment which incorporates theory, real practical issues of the field, evaluation of outdated ideas, and personal input.

The authors admit in their conclusion that additional research would be necessary to evaluate their propositions in professional education programs.

Perhaps the most straightforward framework to evaluate assessment activities in terms of authenticity was developed by Kevin Ashford-Rowe and colleagues (2014). The authors break down eight critical elements of authentic assessment found in their literature review in order to create a guide for the design and development of more meaningful authentic forms of evaluation. They conclude that the critical elements are an effective model for the design and assessment of authentic tasks, which can be evident in the following questions:

- (1) To what extent does the assessment activity *challenge* the student?
- (2) Is a *performance*, or *product*, required as a final assessment outcome?
- (3) Does the assessment activity require that *transfer* of learning has occurred, by means of demonstration of skill?
- (4) Does the assessment activity require that *metacognition* is demonstrated?
- (5) Does the assessment require a product or performance that could be recognized as authentic by a client or stakeholder? (*accuracy*)
- (6) Is *fidelity* required in the assessment environment? And the assessment tools (actual or simulated)?
- (7) Does the assessment activity require *discussion* and *feedback*?
- (8) Does the assessment activity require that students *collaborate*? (Ashford-Rowe et al. 219-220)

The questions are easily applicable to forms of evaluation that already exist, to keep in mind when creating a new form of assessment, and they are more comprehensive and direct than the ones proposed by Gulikers and colleagues.

The set of critical elements for authentic assessment practices proposed by Ashford-Rowe et al. were tested later in the Way et al. study published in 2021 about the design of an online course within a university's learning management system that implemented case-based simulations. Besides their objective to empirically test the authentic assessment framework proposed by Ashford-Rowe et al. in 2014, this study wanted to assess if the simulation practiced correlated with the outcomes and learning responses of students. The study used a mixed-method approach to explore their hypothesis. The course in question took place in an Australian graduate business administration program, related to occupational health and safety management systems. The simulation element of the course was designed to occur in nine of the twelve weeks of the course, and it dealt with a realistic occupational safety incident. Students had to engage in different materials, resources and emotional life-like situations, such as phone calls, conversations, observations, all which were linked to the incident. The assessment practices of the course were completely based on the simulation incident, and they evidenced the implementation of skills necessary in real work environments, such as decision making based on theory, creation of incident reports, and a presentation of suggestions for change and improvement related to the simulated incident.

The findings of the 2021 study showed that it is possible to design an online course within a learning management platform that employs mimetic simulations while adopting

the critical elements of authentic assessment, and for it to have a positive impact on the students' learning outcomes. Seven of the eight critical elements were evidenced in the results, collaboration being the one element that was not identified by the subjects, though the researchers had foreseen it as the evaluations did not include specific forms of group work as a collaborative practice. Furthermore, the study findings evidenced that the critical element of fidelity of the assessment tools can be broken down into sections such as the depth and detail of the case simulation resources, the emotional content in the simulation, the temporality aspects of the simulation, and the unpredictable nature of real-life scenarios that can be mimicked in the simulation.

A relevant reflection evidenced in the limitations of this study is that the researchers found a conceptual overlap between some of the critical elements which can lead to further research. Overall, the study concluded that the critical elements of authentic assessment can be included in the design of online mimetic simulations to create a “challenging and real-world learning experience” (Way et al. 32).

Veronica Villarroel and others (2018) conducted a systematic literature review to pinpoint thirteen of the most frequent characteristics related to authentic assessment and the three dimensions that conform it. The result of their study was the construction of a model for the creation of authentic assessment for higher education. The authors concluded that the three dimensions that make an assessment authentic are realism, cognitive challenge, and evaluative judgement. The thirteen characteristics that are more frequently related to authentic assessment are: problems contextualized to everyday life, relevance beyond the classroom, authentic performance, competence for work

performance, similar tasks to the real/working world, practical value, higher order thought, ability to solve problems, ability to make decisions, feedback, formative sense, and assessment criteria known a priori. With this information, the authors devised the following four-step model:

Step 1: Consider the future workplace context, taking into account the graduation profile and job requirements.

Step 2: Design the authentic assessment, including rich context (realistic and problematizing questionings), making the task worthwhile task or purposeful within the field of study and work, and requiring higher order skills.

Step 3: Lean and apply standards for judgement, that is, using clear criteria and rubrics, sharing the information beforehand with students, and including forms of self and peer assessment.

Step 4: Give feedback in formative, summative and sustainable forms.

The model helps those instructors who want to move from traditional assessment practices that lean towards memorization or lower order thinking skills to more comprehensive and complex assessment practices that would prepare students better for the real world.

The findings proposed by Villarroel and others in 2018 were put into practice two years later when the authors applied the principles to a testing environment, specifically to the creation of written tests. In the 2020 study, each of the three dimensions (realism,

cognitive challenge, and evaluative judgement) was mapped against the phases of assessment, which they showed in Figure 4:

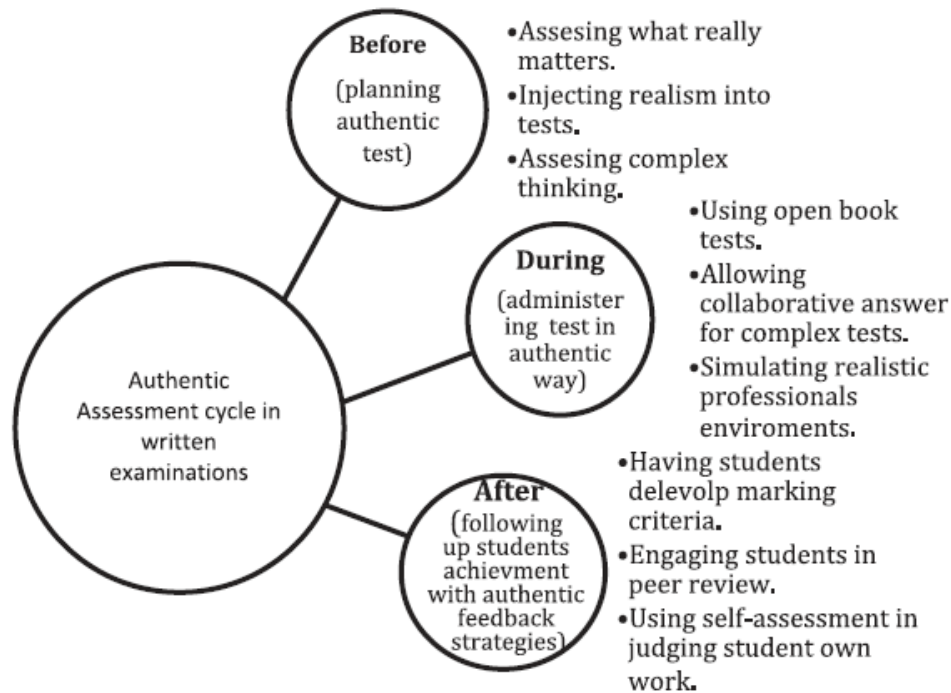


Fig. 4. Villarroel et al., Figure 1. Phases and elements of the implementation of the authentic cycle in written examinations, 2020.

Their conclusion is that higher education needs to assess critical, higher order competences in realistic and contextualized forms, so students become better professionals.

The most recent framework to evaluate how authentic assessment is used in higher education was proposed by Jan McArthur (2023) as she questions the philosophical underpinning of authenticity in the concept of authentic assessment. She uses Adorno's theories to explain what “authentic” means and proposes three principles to re-think

authentic assessment from a more social lens. Most notably, McArthur questions Vu and Dall’Alba ontological conceptualization of authenticity using Heidegger’s ideas. McArthur contrast Heidegger's view of authenticity, which focuses on the self, with Adorno's ideas of authenticity as he sees interrelationships with the self and society. In this form, authentic assessment should have a central social concern and not be grounded solely in the world of work or just the professional skills that are developed in an evaluative activity. The three key principles proposed by McArthur (93-97) to provide this social component to authentic assessment are:

1. From real world/world of work to society: Assessment tasks should be situated in the social world and issues of social justice. The real world is not out there to be experienced once students find a job. Students should apply what they learn to the professional and social roles they will hold, as a member of society.
2. From task performance to why we value the task: Students should reflect on why the task they are completing matters in their social environment, proving empathy or care for others.
3. From the status quo of real world/world of work to transforming society: Authentic assessment should be a form for students to contribute to society and to find their place in it. It should be viewed as a way in which students’ work can help change society.

These principles provide little framework on how to modify or adapt assessments, but they actually serve more as a reflection exercise at the moment assessment is created.

Notwithstanding this, McArthur's principles align with Universidad Nacional's *Pedagogical Model*.

The *Pedagogical Model*³ expresses the principles and guidelines that lead university academic work at Universidad Nacional. With this model, the University conceptualizes pedagogy as a discipline that investigates, guides and qualifies the development of human instruction, and values it as a discursive and critical underlying layer of education that allows the evaluation of the quality, relevance and validity of its formative mission. The model encompasses eleven principles and six elements which should be considered in the different activities of university life at Universidad Nacional. The principles of the *Pedagogical Model* are:

- Respect for diversity in all its forms.
- Respect and commitment to equal opportunities and to building a more just and equitable society.
- Education of supportive professionals committed to social well-being.
- Flexibility to conceptualize learning as a sociocultural, historical, dynamic and transformable process, possible and that can be built in many ways.
- Interaction in educational processes where knowledge is permanently discussed and enriched.
- Development of an investigative spirit in future professionals.

³ The document can be found here: <https://documentos.una.ac.cr/handle/unadocs/9724> (to download). As the document is in Spanish, you can use Google Translate for a quick reference or understanding of the content of the document.

- Creativity that allows innovation, as well as the use of different mediums, strategies and resources in the pedagogical mediation processes.
- Willingness to determine the underlying logical principles in each discipline, which allow for quality professional education.
- Evaluation as an integral, concerted, permanent, contextualized and proactive process.
- Continuous improvement in the comprehensive education of students and in the academic, administrative and para-academic management processes.
- Prospective vision that allows strategic planning to achieve medium and long-term objectives. (my trans.; 5)

Specifically, the notion of educating socially responsible individuals who should respect diversity, equal opportunities and justice aligns with McArthur's proposal of authentic assessment in higher education where the tasks are meaningful to the student in more ways than just to apply a skill that will be used later in a work environment. Her principles plead for a type of assessment that nurtures students' existence and well-being as a form of growth. McArthur implies that such type of assessment must challenge students to incorporate into their professional lives matters that will have impact in their community.

Just as Universidad Nacional's *Pedagogical Model* provides the outline of the instruction should occur at a macro level, the incorporation of a competency-based approach in the English Teaching program provides a methodological and assessment template to follow. As noted earlier, rapid changes in the world have modified the ways

universities see instruction. Higher education needs to develop key skills in the classroom for future employability of students (Terrón-López and García-García 151-152), but that does not mean that instruction would only focus on the skills necessary to complete a task in a future job. As Pérez-Cañado exposes, competencies involve knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values are necessary to perform successfully in an academic, professional and social environment (4). Also, the use of competencies in educational environments indicates that knowledge of content is a crucial part of competencies, along with transference and application of this knowledge into real world contexts. Pérez-Cañado performs an overview of the two main sources of competencies in Europe, that is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the Tuning Project, which were both considered in the redesign process of the English Teaching program at UNA.

The CEFR is comprised of general competencies and communicative language competencies:

1. General competencies:

- a. Knowledge (*savoir*): refers to the knowledge gathered from experience and from formal learning, concepts or content.
- b. Skills and know-how (*savoir-faire*): refers to the forms to complete or do a procedure or task.
- c. Existential competence (*savoir-être*): refers to the attitudes towards oneself and social environment.

- d. Ability to learn (*savoir apprendre*): refers to the manner or disposition to know and learn in an autonomous form or finding lifelong ways to learn.
2. Communicative language competencies: linguistic competencies (lexical, phonological, and syntactic knowledge), sociolinguistic competencies (sociocultural conditions of language use), and pragmatic competencies (mastery of discourse, cohesion and coherence).

The Tuning Project competencies are divided into generic and specific:

1. Generic competencies:
 - a. Instrumental competencies: cognitive, methodological, technological, and linguistic abilities which guarantee the student's basic development in a learning environment.
 - b. Interpersonal competencies: individual abilities and social skills.
 - c. Systemic competencies: capacity to learn, problem-solving, decision-taking.
2. Specific competencies:
 - a. Disciplinary knowledge: theoretical contents applied to a specific thematic area
 - b. Academic competencies: abilities needed in a concrete field of study.
 - c. Professional competencies: know-how in a specific professional area.

In sum, Pérez-Cañado concludes that competencies, in the different forms that been described and thought after by institutions and scholars, should comply to the following key aspects:

- The way an activity or learning occurs will dictate their change and evolution.

- The development of new contexts, challenges or job applications will dictate how competencies grow or become delimited. Lifelong learning will continue to be important in this matter.
- Competencies will be transferable and show through a product or action their application.
- They are a product of real-life experience in specific fields and tasks. (5)

Another form to address competencies that is more used in the United States and Australia is 21st century skills. Marilyn Binkley and colleagues (2012) acknowledge, in an academic effort conducted by the University of Melbourne, that as the world, economies, work and technologies change, so do the necessary skills to be successful in such a world. They identified ten skills necessary for the 21st century grouped into four sections, which are shown as follows:

- Ways of Thinking

1. Creativity and innovation
2. Critical thinking, problem solving, decision making
3. Learning to learn, metacognition

- Ways of Working

4. Communication
5. Collaboration or teamwork

- Tools for Working

6. Information literacy

7. ICT literacy

- Living in the World

8. Citizenship – local and global

9. Life and career

10. Personal and social responsibility, including cultural awareness and competence

The International Labor Organization (ILO) also takes into consideration global drivers or situations that bring about transformation or change in the world of work. The organization analyzes the characteristics and limitations of different institutional (OECD, UNESCO, UNICEF) and country (Australia, Chile, India, United States) stated frameworks for soft skills (they use the term core skills) to create a framework for 21st century skills. The global drivers that have changed or can change the skillset necessary for work and life are technological innovation, globalization of production and trade, transition to a sustainable environment, demographic change, impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (ILO 9-16). The analysis the ILO did on other frameworks shows that the studied organizations or countries want to raise awareness of the importance of core skills and to guide the skills necessary for the future. Yet, there are different definitions and terminology related to the topic of skills, a limitation to the relation of skills to some age groups, and the impact of

changing world is not evident in all frameworks. The framework for 21st century skills proposed by ILO encompasses the following:

1. Social and emotional skills: communication, collaboration and teamwork, conflict resolution and negotiation, emotional intelligence.
2. Cognitive and metacognitive skills: foundational literacies, analytical and critical thinking, creative and innovative thinking, strategic thinking, problem-solving and decision-making, self-reflection and learning to learn, collect, organize and analyze information, planning and organizing, and career management.
3. Basic digital skills: use of basic hardware and software, operating safely in an online environment.
4. Basic skills for green jobs: environmental awareness, waste reduction and waste management, energy and water efficiency.

Another comprehensive study of 21st century skills was completed by Dandan Chen (2023) after completing a systematic literature review from six databases of 471 sources published between 2000 and 2017. The sources had to review or cite a framework about 21st century skills. There were three screening processes, which yielded in the end 21 sources to be analyzed. The study found that there are seven domains or categories that encompass the different forms that 21st century skills are described in the literature. The domains are:

1. physical well-being

2. foundational literacies and skills (digital, visual, language, etc.)
3. individual productivity (skills to access resources, use tools, manage and apply info, solve problems, self-development, reflection, metacognition)
4. relation with others (collaboration, flexibility)
5. social-emotional well-being (relations with others, social awareness)
6. ethics, morals, and citizenship
7. lifelong learning (Chen 2082-287)

The seven domains or categories, when seen as a whole, are associated with qualities that are essential for an individual's living, thinking, and working life, be it independently or in collaboration with others. This aspect coincides with the frameworks proposed by the University of Melbourne and the ILO.

Methodology

The project followed a qualitative method as it is “the study of social phenomena and problems of education and the approach to these from the perspective of those who live and experience them” (Ponce and Pagan 45). The researcher’s interest was to know what professors who teach literature understand by authentic assessment in a literature course. This topic is a relevant issue in the implementation of the new English Teaching program, and the professors’ perspective on a matter that they live and experience whenever they teach a literature course. The project followed a constructivist/interpretative

research model to conduct a case study of the assessment views and practices at Universidad Nacional, for the English Teaching program, with the literature courses.

The selection of participants was done through an inquiry with the English Department coordinators of the Omar Dengo, Pérez Zeledón, Coto and Nicoya campuses about the coverage of the literature courses by literature specialists. There are two literature specialists at the Omar Dengo main campus, who are qualified to teach all offered literature courses. The literature courses at the Nicoya campus were completely covered by the literature specialist there. For Pérez Zeledón, there is one literature specialist who teaches most literature courses but because he was not teaching full time at the time of the inquiry, another TEFL instructor has covered the first literature course of the program for some time now. Finally, there was no literature specialist on the Coto campus, so TEFL instructors cover the literature courses.

It was decided that the two literature specialists were going to be interviewed. Then, the English coordinators from Pérez Zeledón and Coto regional campuses selected the professors who had taught a literature course in the past three years, in order to have the most recent access to the different forms of assessment created. Also, as per suggestion of these coordinators, the selection of participants as a criterion sample (Ponce and Pagan 59) was expanded to other faculty members who would be interested in teaching a literature course, or who have used literature in other types of courses, for example culture, composition or oral expression courses.

Two forms of data collection were used: the individual semi-structured interview and the focus group interview. The individual semi-structured interview was chosen because it “can make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee” (Brinkmann 286). The two interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams (MS Teams) video conferencing software, as the interviewees were located in different parts of the country, far from the interviewer’s location. The MS Teams video conferencing software allows for the recording of the call and transcription of the dialogue. The information from these interviews that was included in the Findings section of this text was member checked; thus the two interviewees confirmed that their opinions and views were transcribed correctly by the researcher.

A semi-structured interview was also chosen for the focus group because it is a way to gather the interviewees’ different points of view and experiences (Prior 235) by the researcher/moderator. An advantage of this method is that it lets the moderator “probe and identify questions, issues, or concerns in an in-depth manner over a short period from a large data sample” (Prior 236), thus the discussion on what professors understand as authentic assessment in their literature courses can happen in an environment that prompts focus on detail. All participants signed an IRB consent form (see Appendix 1).

Document or artifact analysis was part of the data collection that took place in both individual interviews and focus group. Ponce and Pagan explain that documents “also allow appreciation of the teaching techniques and expectations that must be met by the educator to achieve them” (72). It is precisely this appreciation for teaching techniques as

previous forms of assessment in literature courses that is part of the data collection.

Participants in both interviews and focus group were asked to share some of their assessment projects or activities that they considered to be authentic to then evaluate them with an authentic assessment framework. A final stage of the study asked participants to think about the creation of new forms of authentic assessment with the above-mentioned framework in mind, which provided a narrative account of the experience and creation of material. The whole process: interviews, focus group, document analysis, and narrative account served as a triangulation of the data and the product of this study.

Findings

Focus Group

The findings of the Focus Group provided data on four main topics: (1) what participants understood for authentic assessment, (2) what they understood for 21st century skills, (3) assessment activities that they have implemented in literature courses that were considered successful, and (4) the creation of new assessment activities taking into account authentic assessment and 21st century skills frameworks. The Focus Group took place on November 25th 2024, at the Pérez Zeledón campus. The English coordinators from Pérez Zeledón and Coto campuses had sent a meeting summons to faculty members who had taught a literature course in the past three years, were assigned to teach one in the next year, or were assigned courses such as Culture, Oral Expression, and Reading, where they can include a literature text as part of the curriculum to work on the objectives.

The summons was sent to 19 instructors, but only 11 people attended. The activity lasted 2 hours, and a Power Point presentation (see Appendix 5) was used as a visual aid. A handout (see Appendix 4) was also provided for participants so they could write down their ideas. Only 10 handouts were returned at the end of the activity (n=10). The answers provided in the handout were categorized into thematic categories which were assigned after reading the different written answers made by the Focus Group participants and finding a pattern.

Authentic Assessment

When the Focus Group participants were asked to define and provide characteristics of authentic assessment, they produced the following thematic categories: nine participants mentioned that authentic assessment involves real-world tasks or situations, eight participants thought authentic assessment should focus on the process (formative assessment) and not the product (summative assessment or text book evaluations), six participants stated that authentic assessment must make use of authentic reading and listening materials, and five participants mentioned that authentic assessment should be flexible and involve choice. Other individual ideas referred to authentic assessment being useful, reflective, creative, and used for boosting critical thinking, creativity and imagination.

In terms of how authentic assessment should be for a literature course, five participants answered that it should embrace subjectivity, and that it should allow students to freely express their opinions, and three participants pointed that it should apply

different approaches to understand and analyze literature. Other individual ideas referred to authentic assessment being creative and flexible in choices for students.

21st century skills

Upon being asked about their definition or elements of 21st century skills, six participants answered that they involve teamwork and interactions with others, five participants thought they were equal to soft skills, four participants stated they imply assertive communication, critical thinking, creativity, and three participants mentioned the use of digital tools. In terms of how the participants considered 21st century skills should be integrated in a literature course, there were only two thematic categories: six participants cited the use of technology to implement skills, and five participants the use of reflection.

Assessment activity implemented in a literature course that was considered successful

This prompt provided answers from the Focus Group participants that were in line with the type of courses they normally teach, as most were TEFL professors who sometimes include literary texts in their curriculum, as there were very few who are normally assigned literature courses.

A participant shared the activity implemented in an Oral Expression course which focuses on society and humanism topics, and the story “Harrison Bergeron” by Kurt Vonnegut was used to discuss the topic of technology and artificial intelligence. The professor explained that students read the story and watched a video about it to then participate in a round table about the topic. The participant explained that this activity was

successful because “it allowed us the opportunity to openly discuss about social issues and it was a reading from many years ago” (FC5). Similarly, another participant shared the activity of an oral book report in the form of a carousel. Students had to “contextualize their stands based on the book they read during the semester. They decide how they do it, so they can dress as the characters, used symbolism, etc.” (FC4). Another participant (FC7) explained a reading book club activity as students chose two books to read during the semester. The students did the reading in smaller groups, completed entry journals and created a digital glossary to be shared with the rest of the group. The culminating activity of the reading club was a round table where they shared their journals.

There were two examples implemented in literature courses, specifically for the course called Multiethnic Literature. Participant FC2 explained that for the assessment of the graphic novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, students had to complete a creative response to the text in the form of drawing, song, and role playing, for example. A more comprehensive explanation was provided by another participant, which involved a field trip to the province of Limón:

In the Multiethnic Literature course, my students and I visited Limón for a couple of days to learn first-hand about Afro-Caribbean culture and literature. Previously, we had read a novel in English by Costa Rican author Quince Duncan. In Limón we took a city tour in English, attended a gospel choir concert and were give two key lectures by important figures in town. Upon return, my students were able to integrate the text that they had read, a conference by the author, and our field trip through a forum, in which we explored all the experiences and learnings. (FC3)

Creation of new assessment activities considering authentic assessment and 21st century skills frameworks

This prompt was answered by four participants though two answers did not specify steps in the activities they proposed. The most comprehensive answer to this prompt presented a book blog. FC7 explains that for this activity students choose a book they want to read in order to write a book review and final reflection in a blog post, individually. Other students would read the post and comment. As a whole group, the students have to collaborate to create a socialization strategy for the book. FC9 imagined an activity for a translation course in which the group is divided into teams; some teams are in charge of creating poems, songs, short essays or narratives with a set of topics already decided. The other teams would receive the literary text created and translate it from English to Spanish (or vice versa), keeping in mind the type of audience or purpose the original text serves. After this, both the literary creation and translation processes could be discussed from different perspectives.

Interviews

As mentioned before, there were two individual interviews conducted with the literature specialists which took place on November 20th and 22nd 2024 (see Appendices 2 and 3). As part of the interview process, a PowerPoint presentation was used to guide the questions, which was the same presentation that was also used in the Focus Group. Therefore, the interview questions also asked participants what they understood for authentic assessment and 21st century skills, the description of specific assessment

activities that they have implemented in literature courses that were considered successful, and finally to create or think about a new assessment activity accounting for authentic assessment and 21st century skills frameworks.

Authentic Assessment

The first interviewee (I1) described authentic assessment as the type of assessment that makes students show motivation and commitment in class, in the form of real-world problem solving. It was also described as subjective since it is not necessarily summative. The second interviewee (I2) specified that authentic assessment is directed towards problem solving from both a personal and professional perspective. Also, it should be one that fosters critical thinking and historical and social understanding so students are aware of their situation in the world.

In terms of how authentic assessment should be for a literature course, I1 focused on the importance of formative checks such as retelling the plot of a story or mapping a narrative with fill-in-the-gaps exercises to practice the understanding and application of storytelling. Reflection and self-identification with situations presented in literary texts was also a key point to I2. For I2, authentic assessment in a literature course should foster critical thinking abilities in students so that they have a clear world vision of their culture and the state of the world. Evaluation, then, should show students' critical thinking process.

21st century skills

When asked to describe what 21st century skills are, I1 referred to them as soft skills, and emphasized the importance of groupwork and assertive communication as the most relevant soft skills. I2 focused on the skills necessary to use technology in the students' favor so they can be ahead of what artificial intelligence does. For this, I2 remarked that concentration, abstraction, critical thinking and curiosity are necessary for students not to fall victims of technology and be replaced by artificial intelligence.

In terms of how 21st century skills should be included or implemented in the literature courses, I1 went back to groupwork and communication as the main forms of skills, specifically for activities that involve performative tasks such as role plays or adaptations to literary text, and for activities where students have to evaluate opinions from others and reach a common ground. In the case of I2, the importance of being two steps ahead of artificial intelligence was emphasized, as students can use generative artificial intelligence to organize their ideas but not as the replacement of the literature instructor.

Assessment activity implemented in a literature course that was considered successful

The two interviewees were asked to share assessment activities that they had used in their literature courses and that they considered were successful to reach an objective or to show students' understanding of a literary topic.

I1 shared three summative activities: a short story journal, group and individual poetry creation, and group analysis of a story with a literary approach. First, the short story journal is to keep track of the stories or narratives that were read during the semesters, where students have to include a summary of the story, glossary of new vocabulary, and a reflection or opinion about the text. The creation of poetry happens in two sections. The first step is for students to write a poem as a group, each person writing a line, and trying to maintain the overall idea, while using poetic devices. In the second step, each student writes a poem which is distributed among the members of the class, with no written name. The poems are analyzed, and the students try to guess the creator of the poem to ask them questions about the meaning. Finally, for the group analysis activity, the group is divided into four teams and each is given a literary approach to apply to a story. Two teams read the same story and analyze it with the approach they were given. The teams get together to discuss their analysis and evaluation of the story to find out which approach works best or is best suited to understand the narrative.

I2 shared two activities: a forum on the educational platform, and a seminar instead of regular presentations. For the forum, students have to choose and answer one of the questions or prompts left by the professor and participate at least twice with their answers. The seminar is implemented for the discussion and analysis of a text that all students read, but a team was assigned to direct. This team will lead the discussion to critically evaluate the text and promote activities with their classmates.

Creation of new assessment activities considering authentic assessment and 21st century skills frameworks

Only one interviewee provided a more detailed description of a new form of assessment that included both the criteria for authenticity and the use of 21st century skills. This proposed activity focuses on the implementation of a case study of a detective story to apply the scientific method. For this, students would take on different roles such as police officer, detective, criminologist, psychologist, to name some, to explain the events of the story. This can be done in teams, each team presenting a different story, and also fulfilling the role of audience.

Discussion

This study found support for the notion that some authentic assessment criteria and 21st century skills are already being implemented in the literature courses at Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica, even before the first competency-based literature course is taught in the newly redesigned English Teaching Program. This finding is important as it demonstrates that Literature specialists and TEFL instructors already have the knowledge to formulate relevant forms of assessment when the new literature courses begin in 2026.

When the participants' answers are contrasted against the literature about these two topics, several points are found. First, as seen in the literature regarding authentic assessment and 21st century skills, every single participant of this study had their own definition of what an authentic assessment should be and what 21st century skills are.

Second, there was a mixture of concepts between authenticity and 21st century skills because critical thinking was used indistinctively in both categories. Third, frameworks such as the ones presented by Ashford-Rowe et al. and MacArthur can be useful in the planning of future assessment activities to provide guidelines and relevant elements to comply with.

When participants were asked to define what authentic assessment is, the one characteristic that stood out was that it should relate to the real world, or the professional future of English Teaching students, though not all participants described it as such. This characteristic, when contrasted with the Ashford-Rowe et al. framework mainly coincides with their critical elements of *accuracy* and *fidelity*, as participants perceive for an evaluation activity to be recognized as an accurate practice on English teachers, and as one that uses tools or situations that are true to the occupation of an English teacher. The characteristic provided by the participants as the importance of formative assessment coincides with the critical element of transference or application of previous knowledge, skills or theoretical concepts in the exercise, and the element of discussion and feedback after the evaluation is done. The characteristic participants noted of using authentic materials from the target language—such as recordings made by native speakers in a natural manner—and not materials taken from textbooks or produced scripts refers to the critical element of the assessment being challenging to students. Thus, we can see that the participants' understanding of some of the forms authentic assessment align with the framework proposed by Ashford-Rowe et al.

In terms of critical thinking, participants viewed it as both a characteristic of authentic assessment and a 21st century skill. On the one hand, for some participants, authenticity equaled to being critical, while for others, being critical was a skill. Though Ashford-Rowe et al. does not include criticality or the implementation of critical thinking as an element in their framework, MacArthur's proposal of authenticity (2023) implies that evaluation tasks should aim for students' analysis and evaluation of their place in their professional and social environment, which are ideas that coincide with Universidad Nacional's *Pedagogical Model* as it promotes the formation of students who respect diversity, and who strive to create an equitable and just society, therefore, focusing on the country's social well-being.

Regarding 21st century skills, the participants evidenced a more unified understanding of what they are, as they signaled individual skills or referred to them as soft skills, which is how they are known in Costa Rica in Spanish. Of the ten skills presented by Binkley et al. the participants pointed out five of those skills: creativity, critical thinking, communication, teamwork, and ICT literacy. Metacognition and information literacy were not mentioned, and the social dimension of the 21st century skills, such as local and global citizenship, life and career skills, and cultural awareness were only signaled by one participant. This shows that the overall knowledge of the type of skills necessary in our future English Teachers is known, but the participants of the study emphasize some skills more than others.

The data gathered from the narrative account and artifact analysis of the assessment activities participants had already used or others they considered checked

many of the authentic assessment and 21st century skills boxes serve as the base material to generate new authentic evaluations. During the interviews and focus group, participants were shown the framework proposed by Ashford-Rowe et al. and by MacArthur (2023), and the list of 21st century skills stated by Binkley et al. as guidelines for the analysis of previous assessment activities and creation of new ones. Due to time constraints, this exercise was not fully completed, and only some willing participants shared their ideas orally as the rest listened.

Limitations and future research

Time and sample size are two limitations found in this study. Regarding the focus group, the time to complete all proposed activities was not enough, and the narrative account of successful assessment activities and the creation of new activities using the proposed frameworks for authenticity and skills had to be cut short. The initial discussion on what each participant of the focus group understood by authentic assessment and 21st century skills and their application in literature courses was rich in comments and anecdotes, which modified the time allotted for the last part of the study, as participants had to engage in other academic activities of their own. Therefore, a longer focus group with a break between sessions could solve this issue.

The sample size was also a limitation because the total number of participants, counting both focus group and interviews, was 13. On the one hand, the limited number of participants was connected to the decision of focusing on the regional campuses that offered the English Teaching program, and of selecting the Coto and Pérez Zeledón

academics as participants of the focus group because these are the two places where TEFL instructors take over literature courses. A future research study can include the other regional campuses where the English Language program is offered, as it also teaches four literature courses.

Practical implications

The researcher found that both TEFL instructors and Literature specialists have a general understanding of authentic assessment for higher education and of the inclusion of 21st century skills, but a more conscious and aware planning of evaluation tasks with these two elements must be put into practice for authentic forms assessment in literature courses to exist by the time the new courses are opened in 2026. The information presented by Ashford-Rowe et al., MacArthur, and Binkley et al. can be adapted into visual infographics or checklists that can help instructors consciously plan and create authentic forms of assessment in the literature courses. Also, the examples of old and new forms of evaluation shared in the focus group and interviews can be refined, transcribed, and shared with any faculty member that is interested in refreshing their set of activities. A final suggestion is for the literature specialists in all campuses to work collaboratively in order to plan authentic assessment activities for the new program and to pass down the information to other instructors who could be in charge of teaching a literature course or who include literature in their subjects.

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