

Virtual exchange in foreign language for specific purposes courses: Assessment strategies and tools

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study aims to explore the assessment strategies and tools teachers use to assess student learning in Virtual exchange (VE) in foreign/second language for specific purposes (FLSP) courses at tertiary level. The quantitative data were collected by means of a purpose-designed questionnaire that focused on assessment tools teachers used in order to give feedback to students involved in a VE project. The questionnaire data was supplemented with oral interviews with language teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds and aimed at eliciting more in-depth information about the planning of the assessment process, the form of assessment (e.g. summative or formative) and feedback provision. The results indicate that the teachers tend to perceive assessment as a formative process and apply assessment tools that focus on both content and language components, and encourage reflective practice and collaboration.

Keywords: *Virtual exchange, assessment, foreign language for specific purposes*

Introduction

Qing and Akins indicate (2005, p. 52) that even though “face-to-face pedagogy can and should be used to inform online pedagogy”, it is necessary that assessment in Virtual Exchange (VE) does not merely replicate the assessment strategies applied in a traditional language classroom, but takes into account the specific nature of these complex, collaborative and intercultural projects. Despite being perceived as one of the most difficult aspects of running a VE project (O’Dowd, 2013), assessment remains a severely underexplored topic in research and teacher training handbooks (Akiyama, 2014, Dooly & Vinagre, in press). Even though, by definition, VE is a learning programme “set up in an institutional context” (Helm, 2013, p. 28), the results of the Intent project indicate that 36% of teachers do not assess student learning in VE in language learning contexts (Guth, Helm, & O’Dowd, 2012).

The difficulties in planning and administering assessment in VE may arise from a number of factors. Firstly, the assessment tools and the choice of assessment criteria depend on the type and the objectives of VE (for discussion of different approaches to VE cf. Dooly & Vinagre, in press) and the recognition of VE at the institutional level. In

some institutions of higher education (HEIs) VE constitutes an integral part of the curriculum, whereas in others, it is offered on a voluntary basis and students do not receive credit points for their involvement in VE. Cloke (2010) observes that differing approaches to assessment in partner institutions may affect students' motivation and engagement in task completion. Secondly, assessment is determined by a larger educational and institutional context in which it is situated. The importance attributed – by both teacher, learners and other stakeholders – to foreign language learning, developing intercultural competence and learner autonomy, as well as the general perception of the importance of assessment and grading may affect the choice of assessment tools and criteria. This leads us to the question of the construct of assessment as student learning in VE goes far beyond foreign language practice. The planning of assessment needs to take into account such affordances of VE projects as collaborative and interactive learning, interculturality and the potential for developing digital competences. For instance, intercultural (communicative) competence is notoriously difficult to assess (e.g. Deardorff, 2006; Furstenberg, 2010), yet given that VE projects are essentially cross-cultural and interactional, these aspects need to be addressed in order to help students observe and critically reflect on the changes in their own intercultural knowledge, attitudes and skills. Another important aspect than needs to be considered in the assessment process is the collaborative and interactive nature of such projects, which implies students' joint responsibility for both the process and the product of learning. Finally, Akiyama (2014) points out to the difficulties in introducing standardised assessment due to the dynamic nature of VE projects. Most of student learning takes place outside the classroom in collaborative dyads or groups, making it difficult for the teacher to access and assess student work according to set criteria.

This paper sets out to present the outcomes of ASSESSnet, a European Union (EU) funded project that investigates the assessment objectives, tools, procedures and teachers' beliefs in VE at tertiary level across a large number of contexts. In the present study, I focus specifically on the assessment strategies and tools tertiary level teachers use to assess student learning in VE in foreign/second language for specific purposes (FLSP) courses. The following research questions are addressed:

1. What tools do FLSP teachers use to assess student learning in VE?
2. What aspects of student learning in VE are assessed in FLSP courses?
3. How is feedback provided in VE in FLSP courses?
4. What is the role of assessment of student learning in VE at the institutional level?

Methods

The data presented in this text constitute a fragment of a larger study addressed to Foreign Language (FL) teachers involved in VE at tertiary level. In the following, only

responses provided by FLSP teachers are analysed. The quantitative data in this mixed-methods study were collected by means of an online questionnaire containing both Likert-type, rating scales and open-ended items. The questionnaire was available in four languages (English, Spanish, Catalan and Polish) and aimed to explore the assessment tools and forms of feedback provision the teachers used to assess the process and product of learning in VE. In total, 13 participants of the study (9 female and 4 male) proved to teach foreign languages for specific purposes in 9 European countries as well as in Mexico and the USA. The languages taught were: English – 12 participants, Spanish – 2 and French – 1. The responses of these 13 participants are attended to in the present study. The questionnaire data were supplemented with qualitative in-depth oral interviews with 7 participants, which aimed to observe in a greater detail the assessment strategies and tools. The interviews conducted by means of a video conferencing tool were transcribed and content analysed.

The teachers proved to be experienced practitioners – 11 respondents had been teaching a FL for more than 10 years. As for the respondents' experience with VE, there is a balance between novice and experienced teachers – 6 participants have run 1-2 such projects, whereas 7 teachers more than 3 projects. Figure 1 illustrates the teachers' perceptions of the level of training on different aspects of VE they have received. With the possible response options ranging from 1=no training to 4=extensive training, the teachers indicated that the level of training they have in regard to assessment in VE is lower in comparison with other aspects of running a VE, with the mean oscillating around 2, which indicates minimal training in this area.

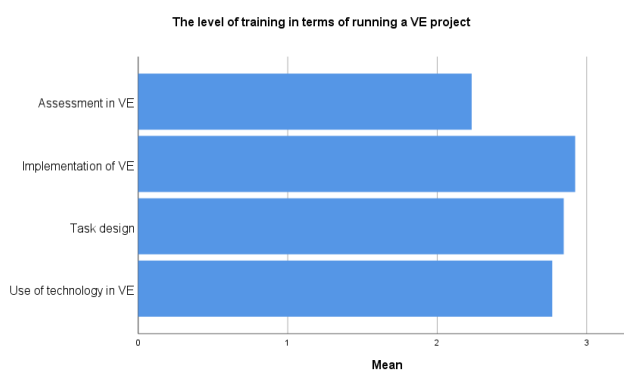


Figure 1. The perception of the level of training in terms of VE

The questionnaire data indicates that a typical VE in a FLSP course lasts 1-2 months (10 respondents). Two teachers run shorter exchanges lasting less than 1 month and one teacher is involved in a project lasting from 3-5 months. In the case of 10 of these courses, the students typically use one language as a means of communications. Two languages were used in VE projects facilitated by 3 respondents. Except for one project, during which students communicate in the written form only, the VE usually involves both oral and written communication.

Results

The presentation of the results starts with the quantitative data and is further supplemented with open-ended responses and the data derived from the interviews. The first research question focuses on the assessment tools the participants typically use to assess student learning in VE projects (see Figure 2). On the basis of the scale, where 1=never, 2=once or twice in a project and 3=several times during a VE project, students' presentation, written report and transcripts of oral production are most frequently used to assess student learning, whereas a written test and a learning diary were reported as least frequently applied assessment tools. One participant added using recordings of Skype interviews as the basis of assessment (P1). Another teacher (P2) highlighted the use of self-assessment as an integral part of VE. One year s/he used reflective journal, in which the students were encouraged to reflect on their progress in communicating with the VE partner. The goal of the journal was clearly explained and the subsequent entries served as the basis of group discussion: "On the first day of class we discussed what it means to communicate and be a good communicator. Once we established a list of important points, this became the subject of the first couple of weeks of journals. Mid-project we talked about how communication changes as partners become more comfortable with each other" (P2). The reason for discontinuing this assessment tool was not provided.

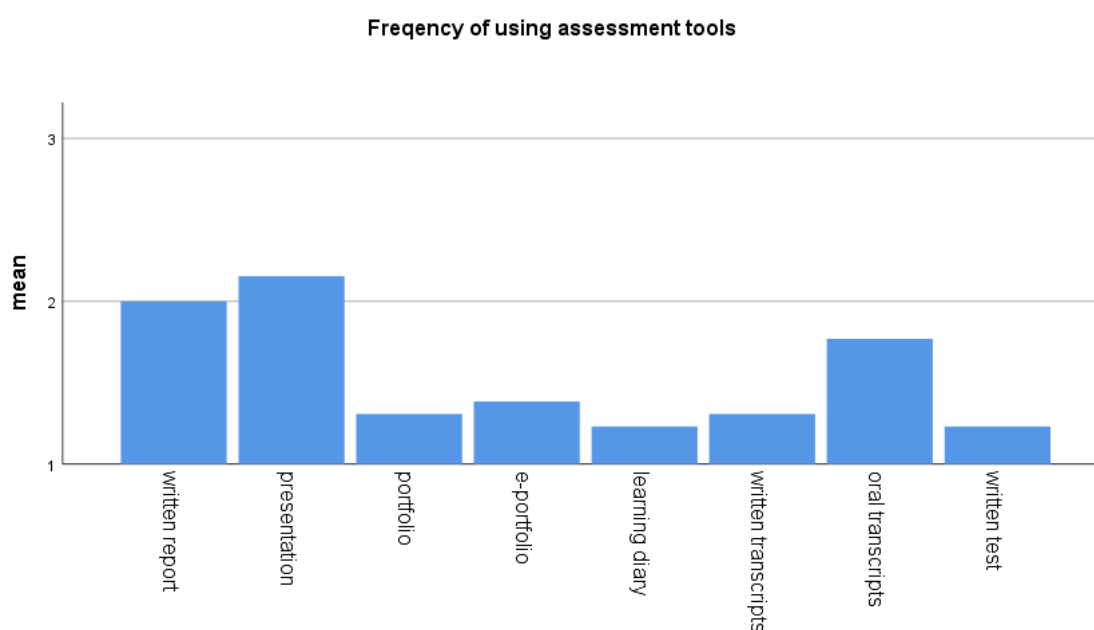


Figure 2. The frequency of using different assessment tools in VE

Content-based assessment proved popular with the participants in the FLSP courses. For instance, in the process of peer-feedback Participant 1 (P1) encouraged students to focus on both the product and the progress of the project: "in these cases, the

assessment is not of their language skills, but of the content being produced through the language”. Content-based assessment was also used by P3, who had to adopt the existing obligatory assessment tools in an engineering course (i.e. a written report and oral presentation) to meet the requirements of the newly introduced VE component. Consequently, both tools elaborated on potential solutions to a selected current engineering problem that would take into account the local context in the country of the partner institutions. The students were able to discuss their ideas with their partners, who served as a “sounding board” (P3); however, the detailed presentation of the problem and the proposed solutions had to be prepared by individual students on the basis of the discussions and thorough research in the field. As P3 underlined, this approach was selected to “create better opportunities for students to think more critically and more analytically”. As regards the assessment criteria, even though P3 claims that since it was a FL course, the assessment was rather language oriented, apart from language use, organisation and style, the criteria also encompassed task achievement and the use of sources.

P6 also considered a written report and an oral presentation based the outcomes of the VE project as the main point of reference in course assessment; however, these were supplemented with tasks of smaller weight (e.g. minutes of the meeting, posts to a forum, an action plan for teamwork). Whereas the two main tasks were assessed in reference to the quality of the analysis (argumentation and theoretical background), quality of the presentation (language and organisation) and the quality of group presentation via a video-conference tool, the smaller tasks were assessed on the basis of punctuality of submission. The final task involved a self-assessment tool, which had a dual objective – it helped students to self-reflect on the learning process and enabled the teacher to compare the students’ responses with his/her own observations of student contribution during VE.

P7 assessed content through a poster that illustrated a specific style in architecture, examples of which can be found in both participating countries. The posters were discussed collaboratively during VE meetings; however, each student had to prepare their own posters individually. Depending on the course objectives, the poster component was replaced with a video project or an interview project that focused on specific content. Additionally, the students kept reflective journals recording their language learning incidents, reflection on the project content and intercultural experiences. The journals also helped the teacher to plan his/her future teaching around areas that the students found particularly challenging. The participants in this VE also peer-assessed each other’s work on the basis of specific milestones provided by the instructors.

During a VE project lasting the whole semester, P8 asked students to design a business plan consisting of several chapters, each of which constituted a number of separate activities and tasks that were allotted a certain amount of points. In some of the projects, s/he introduced elements of peer-assessment, during which students

reflected on each other's work, gave feedback and then reported on that feedback. The students also needed to send the teacher the recordings of their collaborative sessions as a precaution in case problems in teamwork occurred. Additionally, at the end of semester the students needed to reflect on language learning, content and teamwork on the basis of some guiding points in a digital portfolio.

P11 took a different approach – during the online meetings the students discussed and carried out a number of sub-tasks that aimed to help students prepare the final assignments of the course, that is an interactive online CV and a job interview with a human resources professional. After each meeting, a group secretary appointed on a rotational basis, with the support of the other group members from both participating countries, had to prepare a professional business report on the discussion outcomes. Finally, students were required to reflect on the language learning, progress in completing the tasks and other ongoing aspects of VE in individual portfolios.

P12 on the other hand, did not focus on the content as such, but on the students' ability to conduct an online discussion involving an invited professional and other students. The assessment criteria embraced the use of language functions associated with task completion, which involved “not only nominating speakers, but also providing sort of rhetorical bridges sometimes between different speakers to link those comments together” and language skills. The latter, as the participant underlined, did not focus as much on the grammatical and lexical accuracy, as on “the degree to which maybe language related mistakes, hamper the ability for the students to communicate with their interlocutors” (P12).

In the next questionnaire item, the respondent could choose all relevant forms of feedback provision they used during VE. The responses indicated that group feedback in front of the class (12) and teachers' written comments (10) were applied to respond to student learning in VE most often. One-to-one feedback was implemented by 5 teachers and 3 teachers used a numeric/percentage grade. For instance, P3 would provide formative, mostly language-oriented, feedback on the first draft of the written report before the students had to submit the final version. P11, on the other hand, offered ongoing feedback on the collaborative reports written after each online meeting with direct tips on how to improve the skill of writing a professional report. P7 commented on online reflective journal entries, which were considered as additional FL practice provided and provided the teacher with additional insights into the running of VE sessions at the same time. P8 underlined the importance of continuous feedback in a VE course, which s/he provided, for instance, in an online document the students worked on collaboratively: “I'm giving feedback on their progress, whether they're going in a good direction or not, but I try to give them a kind of a freedom ... an element of flexibility in the task so that they can decide and shape it according to their own needs”.

All the teachers offered their feedback at the end of VE and group feedback was the most popular form of commenting on student work (9). Teacher feedback was presented in form of a numeric grade by 7 teachers, while the written comments were provided by 5 teachers and one-to-one sessions took place in 3 classrooms. The results of a written test/quiz were used as means of providing feedback only by one teacher both during and after the VE. An interesting approach was adopted by P11, who had external professional recruiters assess and provide feedback on the job interview, for which the student had to prepare during the VE sessions. P7 and P8 underlined that they always tried to provide feedback on both collaborative and individual contributions to the final outcomes.

The next set of questions referred to the role of assessment in VE at the institutional level and the degree to which both partner institutions were engaged in the planning and implementation of assessment strategies. Only 4 out of 10 teachers who responded to this question were required by their institution to assign grades for their students' involvement in VE. Although P11 personally considered assessment as a means of coaching students, s/he pointed out to the need to grade student learning in VE: "Of course we need to put a mark at the end because of the school system". Six out of 11 teachers indicated that students received extra credit for participating in VE. Eleven out of 13 teachers consulted their assessment strategies and tools with their partners, but the assessment procedures appeared to vary from institution to institution according to 8 respondents. In the case of the VE coordinated by P6, the assessment tasks were agreed on with the partners, but the grading was conducted differently, in accordance with the criteria and grading standards used in each institution.

Discussion and conclusions

The present study briefly outlines concrete approaches to assessment of student learning in VE in FLSP courses. Although due to a small number of participants no clear-cut generalisations concerning assessment should be formulated, a number of practical implications can be drawn. First of all, the results indicate a high variability in assessment procedures from institution to institution, and in the case of a teacher involved in several VE projects, also from project to project. What stands out is the fact that in nearly all the courses, at least some elements of assessment were content-based – be it an interview, a poster or a report supplemented with an oral presentation. This approach encouraged authenticity and enabled students to engage in computer-mediated communication (CMC) on topics related to their field of study, which resembled communication in potential professional contexts (cf. Cunningham, 2019).

Both the qualitative and quantitative data suggest that assessment in VE was predominantly continuous and formative. To accommodate the affordances and

constraints of learning contexts involving Virtual exchange, the teachers used an array of techniques that supported the tracking of student progress and involvement over time. Although most of the projects involved the assessment of the end-product of a VE, the teachers also provided students with ongoing feedback that encouraged constant development and learning throughout the course. All the projects encouraged reflective practice on different aspects of student learning as an inherent element of a VE project. Depending on the course objectives, the students were invited to reflect on language, intercultural, collaborative and content learning. Such self-reflective tools, on the one hand, helped the students better understand their own learning, and on the other, offered the teachers valuable insight into the functioning of online sessions that took place outside the classrooms. The choice of assessment criteria depended on the assessment tool used and ranged from attending to punctuality of submissions to a highly elaborate system of points allotted to specific tasks and subtasks. Of note is that none of the teachers resorted to using language-related criteria only; instead, depending on the project, the focus was placed on the content, structure, complexity of analysis and collaborative effort. The study clearly indicates that assessment is used not only to meet institutional requirements, but also (or even predominantly) to support student learning in these complex learning environments.

Acknowledgements:

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 845783.

I would like to thank the research participants – the teachers, who in spite of the unprecedented teaching load in the midst of the pandemic agreed to participate in this study.

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Multilingual academic and professional communication in a networked world

Proceedings of AELFE-TAPP 2021 (19th AELFE Conference, 2nd TAPP Conference)
 ARNÓ, E.; AGUILAR, M.; BORRÀS, J.; MANCHO, G.; MONCADA, B.; TATZL, D. (EDITORS)
 Vilanova i la Geltrú (Barcelona), 7-9 July 2021
 Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya
 ISBN: 978-84-9880-943-5



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