10 Business communication skills through virtual exchange – a case study

Jean-François Vuylsteke[1]

Abstract

Assessing the skills of the students who take part in a Virtual Exchange (VE) project is a challenging and complicated task, especially if it aims to engage both the students and VE co-organisers in the feedback and evaluation process. The objective of this chapter is to outline the pedagogical design of a business communication skills course and present how a VE component and its assessment were integrated into the core course syllabus. The text explains how all the members of the created VE learning community were involved in defining the skills to be developed by the students. Pedagogical choices were made that involved the design of the learning path, the design of the VE activities, and the course assessment in such a way that everyone had a precise role to play. In particular, the chapter focuses on how different assessment tools prompted the students to reflect on the development of language competence while working together to prepare for a professional job interview in an international and collaborative learning setting.

Keywords: assessment, portfolio, virtual exchange, responsibility, soft skills.

1.   Introduction

For the past 15 years, I have integrated two pedagogical pillars into my business English course at EPHEC (Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes Commerciales, Brussels) university college: (1) VE activities, and (2) applied case studies. However, it is only quite recently that these activities have turned digital and that, in addition to learning how to interact and cope in English in different business situations, the students also began developing their soft skills. In 2019, a VE project with the PPCU (Pázmány Péter Catholic University) in Budapest started in which students worked collaboratively in order to develop both their digital and language skills.

The business communication course design at EPHEC was supported with the *ABC Learning Design Model* (Young & Perovic, 2016; https://abc-ld.org/; Jourde & Gallenne, 2021), a curriculum development tool that helps to design new courses or adapt the existing ones to the needs of an online or blended learning format. It also calculates the time spent by all the participants on achieving the learning path designed in the course. The teaching methodology was based both on flipped classroom (cf. Awidi & Paynter, 2018; Chuang, Weng, & Chen, 2018) and the *six learning styles* approaches (Laurillard et al., 2018). The flipped classroom approach (referred to also as 'the inverted classroom', 'flipped learning', or 'the flip'; cf. Arnold-Garza, 2014, p. 8) is a pedagogical model in which students get acquainted with the learning materials (e.g. recorded lectures, articles, textbooks) before the class, whereas the classroom time is used to deepen understanding of the content through discussion and problem-solving activities. As Dooly and Sadler (2019, p. 2) underline, this approach "should be seen as placing emphasis on active learning, both inside and outside the class". The application of flipped learning in our VE project, which aimed to make it possible for students to keep learning when outside the classroom, required that the course material be adapted and tailored appropriately. That is why 100% of the course content was made available online on the Learning Management System (LMS)[2] platform of the course.

---

2. EPHEC LMS platform is Moodle. This LMS platform enables the students to get access to learning paths designed by their lecturers and made 100% available online.

Apart from the flipped classroom element, the course design made use of *six learning types*, which involve "learning through Acquisition (i.e., to read/watch/listen), Collaboration, Discussion, Investigation, Practice, and Production". This models draws from the theory-based Conversational Framework, where each type of learning activity "is a cycle between learner and teacher, or learner and peers, at the concept and/or practice level" (Laurillard, 2012 in Laurillard et al., 2018, p. 1049). Consequently, in this business English course, a large space is designated for exchange in the classroom, self-study, personal research, and peer-to-peer learning and assessment.

When a VE component was added to the original business communication course, assessment presented its own challenges and these had to be considered in the process of designing the course. How is it possible to reach a high-standard level of assessment which remains fair for all the students, knowing that much of the learning process takes place outside the classroom? How can one measure, weigh, and assess the students' learning processes when it is out of the presence of the teacher/lecturer? Thus, in the rest of chapter, the business communication course is explained, the original teaching method outlined, the VE project in the course is summarised, the business communication course objectives are explained, the learning outcomes described, and the assessment approach adopted in this VE course by the Belgian partner is laid out. In particular, attention is paid to the importance of keeping a balance between testing, peer-to-peer assessment, informative evaluation, and self-study grading.

2.   Overview of the project

This 12-week-long business communication course in the Belgian institution was addressed to undergraduate students and involved an eight-week VE component. The remaining four weeks were used for in-class introduction and conclusion. The whole course was organised around the learning modules (see Figure 1), which were introduced in-class by the teacher and led to class discussions, group work, and both individual application and production exercises.

Figure 1. The business communication course content on the LMS platform

According to the *ABC Learning Design* (cf. Young & Perovic, 2016) time estimates, the whole learning process in the business communication course included:

- +/- 20 hours spent in class and in the presence of the teacher;

- +/- 40 hours of the learning time spent in asynchronous activities – the VE component included;

- +/- 10 hours spent in both formative and summative assessment of the students; and

- +/- 16 hours of the learning time spent in small teams – the VE component included.

The self-study exercises, video material, quizzes, texts, forums, vocabulary, and grammar input were easily available in the LMS platform (see Figure 2). The grammar and lexical revision exercises were completely digitalised and integrated in the learning path of the students. This solution offered the possibility of organising the necessary vocabulary and grammar activities

outside the classroom. Self-study and revision activities were scheduled prior to certification quizzes made in class.

Figure 2.   Interactive language-oriented tasks on Moodle platform

Additionally, the LMS platform provided the teacher with results and indications about the completion of each student's learning journey, including their participation in different stages of the VE project (see Figure 3). This enabled efficient feedback provision, the possibility of sending reminders and adjusting in-class activities to the students' preparations.

As a part of the course, the students were involved in a VE project between a Belgian and a Hungarian university, during which they worked online in mixed international teams of five to six students on topics and tasks introduced during in-class meetings in their home institutions. The students were given the same deadlines, instructions, and input material. The VE activities centred on five main missions and tasks: (1) giving constructive feedback, (2) creating an elevator pitch, (3) creating a digital CV, (4) preparing for a job interview,

and (5) participating in a real online job interview with a professional recruiter. During weekly online synchronous sessions, the students from both institutions completed both individual and group tasks, starting from ice-breaking exercises, to more business-oriented activities that centred on navigating a job recruitment process (more detailed description of the VE component in both institutions can be found in Koris & Vuylsteke, 2020).

Figure 3.   Moodle completion progress bar
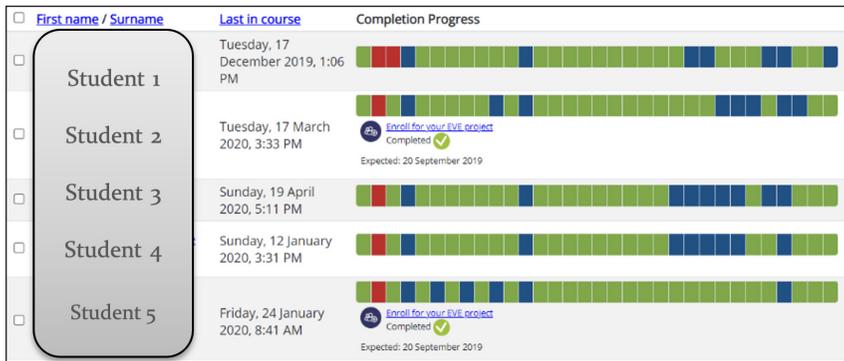
3.   Assessment in the VE project

Given that the normal teaching programme is 12 weeks long, the eight-week VE project was designed to weigh significantly in the assessment. The students were told that instead of a final exam there would be a final face-to-face meeting with the teacher. The meeting would be based on their personal portfolio as support for evidence of their learning journey. Everything they were assigned to do (research, exercises, written, and oral productions, etc.) would be taken into account in the calculation of the final grade. Given the number of persons involved (two lecturers, the external recruiters, and the students), it was necessary to propose uniform assessment criteria and to follow the same assessment guidelines. Table 1 lists the Belgian students' course assignments and presents the responsibility delegated to each party involved in the assessment process in this VE project.

Table 1.   Division of responsibility in the assessment process

	The Belgian teacher	The Hungarian teacher	The recruiters	The students
Self-study quizzes				Multiple attempts possible until they reach 70% of correct answers
Certification quizzes	One single attempt in class			
Forums	Feedback and grading			Feedback only
The three team reports And the team charter	Co-assessment	Co-assessment		
Other VE productions	Feedback and grading			Feedback only during the VE
Video pitch	Feedback and grading for oral production			Feedback only during the VE
Class discussions	Grading for oral production			
Presentations	Grading for oral production			Feedback via Wooclap
Digital CV	Formative feedback		Feedback	Feedback only during the VE
Web mag productions	Grading for written production			Groupwork interaction analysis
Job interview			Feedback and grading	
Final portfolio	Grading for written production			
Final face-to-face meeting	Grading for final VE and oral production			
VE return on experience				Grade awarded on the basis of collected evidence

3.1.   Collaborative written reports

It was decided that all online meetings organised during the VE would result in a written group assignment: three meeting reports, a team charter, and different mind maps representing the outcomes of their discussions. This material was given feedback upon reception and systematically assessed for content, style, and grammar. Antidote 10[3], a correction software which offered the possibility for us to automatically share feedback about style and grammar, was used. All these documents contained paragraphs that had to be filled in by the teams and a final section that had to be completed individually by each team member. This allowed each VE project teacher to provide a grade for each team production but also for each student's individual contribution.

All the online meetings were recorded and shared among the team members. The objective was to always keep the results of the students' discussions available for each team member and to allow them to rewind any past recording to get information to complete their assignments and portfolios (see below).

3.2.   Online magazines

In addition to this, the Belgian students were asked to coproduce two web magazines. The first one was designed together with the students from Budapest as an introductory activity aiming to break the ice and let the students introduce themselves to their potential VE partners. The second web magazine, prepared in teams by Belgian students only, contained tips and advice about how to succeed at a job interview. This collaborative contribution was submitted at the end of the VE, when all the interviews were over, and their learning journey completed. It was the students' final written team production, giving the teacher an opportunity to assess how they worked together in order to coproduce the magazine.

---

3. Antidote 10, https://www.antidote.info/en/antidote-10

3.3.   The job interview

During the VE meetings, the students were involved in a number of activities that aimed to help them prepare for a realistic online job interview, coached and assessed by external professional recruiters. Before the interview, the students were expected to share their earlier output, such as elevator pitches and interactive digital CVs, with the external professional recruiters. After the interview, the students from both institutions got feedback from the recruiters, who were fully in charge of assessing this component. For this reason, both involved VE teachers proposed an assessment grid to the recruiters (see supplementary materials, Appendix 1).

3.4.   Presentation

Finally, once the VE had been completed, students were asked to prepare a short presentation of what they had learnt. The presentation was recorded and shared online. It was limited in time (five minutes maximum) and in the number of slides commented by the students (five maximum). The clips were then submitted to groups of five, for feedback and comments. Wooclap[4] was used to propose the same feedback guidelines to all students taking part in the assessment. Wooclap makes it easy to aggregate the remarks and feedback of the assessing students and to propose one PDF document with the report filled in by the evaluation team, as in the examples in Figure 4.

The students got a code to access the Wooclap interface and directly provided their personal choices/answers. We had agreed on an assessment grid which was then transferred to the Wooclap system. At the end of each presentation, the teacher's and the students' feedback was discussed and compared to formulate suggestions and give each student guidelines about making better presentations.

---

4. Wooclap https://www.wooclap.com/

Figure 4.   Screenshots of peer feedback via Wooclap
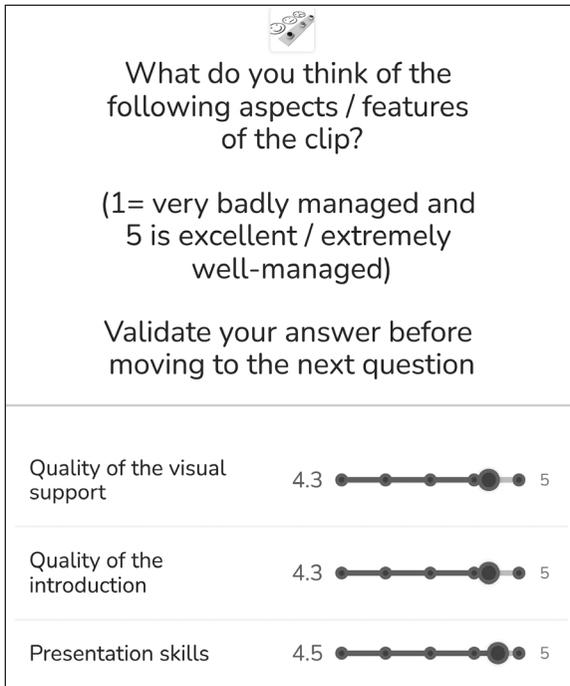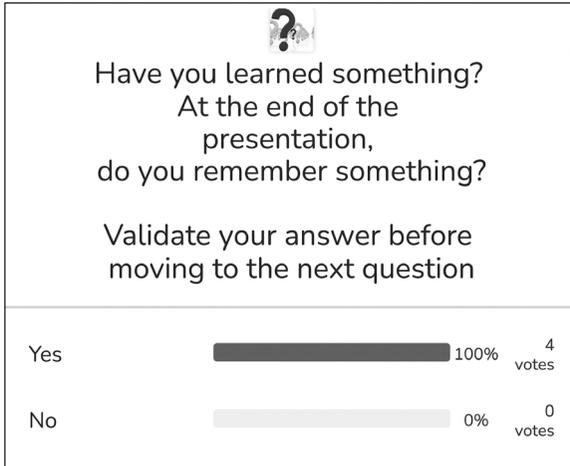
Where does the student excell in finalizing its presentation?
(multiple answers)

Validate your answer before moving to the next question

Catch your attention?	75%	3 votes
Keep your attention?	75%	3 votes
Have s sense of humour?	25%	1 vote
Give simple explanations?	50%	2 votes
Share its experience?	0%	0 votes
Connecting the different parts to build up 1 story	25%	1 vote
Repeat things so that you remember things	25%	1 vote
Manage breaks so that you have the time to digest all the information	25%	1 vote
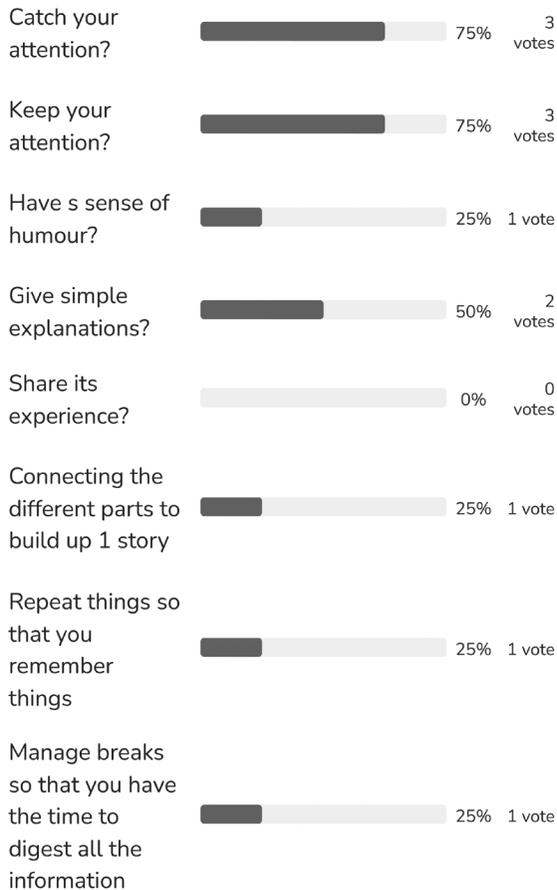
3.5.   The final portfolio

The introduction of a digital portfolio was a crucial element in the strategy developed by the teachers in both participating institutions. The objective was that the students (from EPHEC and PPCU) could keep a trace of everything they have done, learnt, searched, and produced, not only in the course of the VE but also throughout the programme, and present it as evidence of their learning outcomes in the final feedback session with the teacher. In particular, the students were asked to keep a record of "the successful completion of their assignments, document the professional and soft skills they had developed, the challenges they had faced, and provide examples for their intercultural learning" (Koris & Vuylsteke, 2020, p. 72).

3.6.   Face-to-face meeting

The final face-to-face meeting of Belgian students with their teacher was looked upon as an important step in the global assessment of the students' acquired business skills by the end of the term. During this meeting, on the basis of the evidence collected in the portfolio, i.e. the grades they collected for all the self-study quizzes they had completed, the feedback given by their teammates during the VE, their vision of their personal level of proficiency at the end of the VE, the students could propose their final grade.

3.7.   In-class versus VE assessment

Their ability to communicate in English was also measured when grading their oral and written productions in class. The quizzes were there to help individualise the assessment and counterbalance the weight of the team production in their evaluation. The teacher could also assess how they performed in English in different situations (e.g. online meetings) while coaching the production of the second web mag (the one they produced in teams). It provided evidence of how they excelled in promoting their skills when taking a realistic job interview, grading their pitches, and receiving the external recruiters' final assessments.

This is the reason why the students' individual and team grades were given the below weight in the calculation of their final grades.

- Sixty percent of the final grade for all the class and VE activities related to the course modules including: (1) the grammar/vocabulary and other quizzes; (2) the individual and team productions, web magazines; and (3) the oral activities and the animated feedback session, presentations included.

- Forty percent for the outputs of the in-class and VE activities including: (1) the VE self-assessment by the students; (2) the final portfolio; (3) the final face-to-face; and (4) the job interviews.

4. Conclusions and lessons learnt

Involving students in their assessment process is a first step in empowering them to measure the efforts they make to reach their objectives. It is giving them the responsibility of co-assessing everything they do when working outside the classroom and providing their teammates with the most constructive feedback – not only about the hard skills they acquire, but also about the related soft skills. From the start the teacher was open to trying an assessment system in which each learning partner could contribute. These encompassed the VE partner from Budapest (for the activities in relation to the VE) but also the recruiters (for the job interview) and the students (providing peer-to-peer assessment and feedback in class from time to time). Knowing who is in charge of the grading is one thing, combining all of them in the calculation of the final grade is another challenge. That is why prioritisation is so important and must be based on the learning outcomes set for the course at the beginning of the year.

The adopted approach to assessment afforded the students the opportunity to contribute to their assessment, for instance by encouraging self-reflection, which proved truly effective. Most of the students had been able to evaluate their skills

in an adequate way. In +/-30% of the cases, the awarded percentage was a bit underestimated, with a difference of one to 1.5 points out of 20. For one student out of two, the mark totally corresponded to the one the teacher would have awarded (taking all the grades collected into account). Only two students out of ten overestimated themselves. In these cases, a few aspects were missing from their considerations, and the analysis lacked depth and did not meet the satisfaction requirements. It was the first time that such a high percentage of the feedback would be given by students to other students (sharing their first impressions, quoting positive elements, and making suggestions to improve less convincing points). This was possible because they were all trained to give professional feedback and they were expected to regularly do so.

Without a doubt, this approach can be questioned and improved. For instance, it is worth considering how to provide a larger space for self-assessment and how to better include it in the grading system. The teacher aimed to challenge the students on giving their feedback about how they managed teamwork (based on the way they had managed the team production of their second web magazine) and from this some issues emerged. For instance, to provide feedback on the teamwork management, the *Team_effectiveness_questionnaire* (University of Colorado, n.d.) was used to create an Excel document which was very helpful to animate a group discussion; however, unfortunately it was not tailored to give a mark based on the students' collective conclusions.

A Moodle app called Dynamo is in preparation and should enable students to assess their own and the other students' commitment in teamwork. What is special about this app is that students would be asked questions about the way the team worked together, and make it possible to spot inactive students, unproductive followers, authoritative leaders, and so on. It would allow students to compare satisfaction scores they award to themselves and to their teammates. In addition, an algorithm would calculate each student's degree of commitment in the completion of the team activity. The teacher in charge can be free to integrate this percentage in the calculation of the final grade for this team activity and moderate it individually according to the scores obtained. This would be yet another tool that would help involve the students in the evaluation of their own skills.

As a final thought, if I were to have more time in class, I would also try to invite the students to fill in a satisfaction chart at the end of the most relevant oral or written assignments (see supplementary materials Appendix 2 for examples). This would give the students the opportunity to analyse his/her production according to criteria listed in a grid and, ideally, open a constructive dialogue with the lecturer on the basis of a radar graph that automatically shows the points of convergence.

5.   Acknowledgements

6.   Supplementary materials

https://research-publishing.box.com/s/xweoa5egmtkho6weq6i7uatbqkt5wphi

Recommended readings

- https://www.enseigner.ulaval.ca/guide-web/guide-des-bonnes-pratiques-de-l-enseignement-en-ligne#categorie-16

- https://teaching.cornell.edu/spring-teaching-resources/assessment-evaluation/peer-assessment

- https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/centres/centre-expertise-higher-education/didactic-information/teaching-tips-english/assessing-students/pa-reliability/

- https://abc-ld.org/

- https://abc-ld.org/6-learning-types/

References

Arnold-Garza, S. (2014). The flipped classroom teaching model and its use for information literacy instruction. *Communications in Information Literacy, 8*(1), 7-22. https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2014.8.1.161

Awidi, I. T., & Paynter, M. (2018). The impact of a flipped classroom approach on student learning experience. *Computers & Education, 128*, 269-283. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2018.09.013

Chuang, H.-H., Weng, C.-Y., & Chen, C.-H. (2018). Which students benefit most from a flipped classroom approach to language learning? Flipped classroom does not fit all students. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, *49*(1), 56-68. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12530

Dooly, M., & Sadler, R. (2019). "If you don't improve, what's the point?" Investigating the impact of a "flipped" online exchange in teacher education. *ReCALL, 32*(1), 4-24. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344019000107

Jourde, F., & Gallenne, E. (2021). *ABC Learning designer*. https://sites.google.com/view/learning-designer-spreadsheet/

Koris, R., & Vuylsteke, J.-F. (2020). Mission (im)possible: developing students' international online business communication skills through virtual teamwork. In F. Helm & A. Beaven (Eds), *Designing and implementing virtual exchange – a collection of case studies* (pp. 69-79). Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2020.45.1116

Laurillard, D. (2012). *Teaching as a design science*. Routledge.

Laurillard, D., Kennedy, E., Charlton, P., Wild, J., & Dimakopoulos, D. (2018). Using technology to develop teachers as designers of TEL: evaluating the learning designer. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 49*(6), 1044-1058. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12697

University of Colorado. (n.d.). *The team effectiveness diagnostic*. https://www.cu.edu/sites/default/files/Team_effectiveness_questionnaire.pdf

Young, C., & Perovic, N. (2016). Rapid and creative course design: as easy as ABC? *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 228*, 390-395.