

# 2 Virtual exchange: issues in assessment design

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## Abstract

Virtual Exchange (VE) is typically set up in an institutional context, which implies the need to verify student learning through assessment. The difficulties in designing and implementing assessment in VE arise principally from the complexity of VE itself, as well as from a combination of institutional and sociocultural factors. This chapter aims to discuss the main tenets that need to be considered when designing assessment in VE on tertiary level. In particular, the importance of defining the construct and selecting appropriate content in safeguarding the validity of assessment is highlighted. The chapter also discusses the interplay between the purposes and the consequences of assessment in VE, and the form of assessment. All of these features are interconnected and often need to compromise formative and summative functions in order to comply with the institutional requirements. Next, the constructive alignment between the course objective, learning tasks, and assessment is addressed. The chapter concludes with the discussion of the sociocultural factors that require particular consideration in pedagogical initiatives involving participants from two or more distinctive educational contexts.

**Keywords:** virtual exchange, assessment, validity, constructive alignment.

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## 1. Introduction

By definition, VE is a learning programme “set up in an institutional context” (Helm, 2013, p. 28; Dooly, 2022, this volume), which implies that the students carry out assigned tasks to achieve concrete learning outcomes specified in the course description. Within institutional parameters, normally, students’ time and work investment is expected to be assessed – to verify the fulfilment of the learning objectives, to offer students corrective feedback, to help teachers reflect on the effectiveness of their own work, and to provide the institution and funding bodies with evidence of learning (see more about assessment accountability in e.g. McNamara & Roever, 2006; Miller, 1999). However, the results of a recent European project indicate that as many as 36% of teachers do not assess students learning in VE in language learning contexts (Guth, Helm, & O’Dowd, 2012). Additionally, there is a shortage of research studies, practical resources and training opportunities that tackle this important aspect of running VE (Akiyama, 2014; Dooly & Vinagre, 2021).

The difficulties in designing and implementing assessment in VE arise principally from the complexity of VE itself, as well as from a combination of institutional and sociocultural factors. First of all, VE is considered to be the most complex and unpredictable of computer assisted language learning pedagogies (Kurek, 2015; O’Dowd, 2013). Kurek (2015) considers VE to be a complex learning environment, in which many individual agents constantly interact, influence, and depend on one another. In VE, the main axis consisting of teachers, students (in all participating institutions), and technology is supplemented with “the dynamic (and thus unpredictable) interplay of geographical distance of participants and their resulting cultural and linguistic diversity, married to double technology and language mediation, collaborative format, as well participants’ different linguistic and cultural backgrounds” (Kurek, 2015, p. 18).

As regards evaluation in exchanges, this chapter sets out to discuss the main tenets that need to be considered when designing assessment in foreign language courses involving a VE component on tertiary level. First, the role

of defining the construct and selecting appropriate content in ensuring validity is highlighted. The chapter presents how the purpose and the consequences of assessment administered in a higher education context may affect the choice of assessment methods and tools used in VE. Next, the constructive alignment between the course objective, learning tasks, and assessment is addressed. The chapter concludes with the discussion of the interplay between the above-mentioned elements of assessment design and the sociocultural factors that require particular consideration in pedagogical initiatives like VE, which involve participants from two or more educational contexts in different locations.

## **2. Issues in assessment design**

### **2.1. Construct and content of assessment**

The most important criterion of good assessment is validity (e.g. [Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010](#); [Messick, 1989](#)). Assessment is valid when it assesses what it claims and intends to assess. To ensure validity, the first step in designing both the whole assessment strategy and a single assessment tool is identifying the construct, that is, the set of knowledge, skills, and abilities that a teacher intends to evaluate.

Thus, the construct of assessment is tightly linked to the course objectives and content; consequently, in the process of designing course assessment, teachers and other stakeholders involved need to ask themselves: *What knowledge/skills or abilities does the course aim to develop?* In a foreign language course, depending on the course objectives, the construct may involve general foreign language proficiency or, more likely, achievement in listening, reading, writing, or speaking skills. Once the construct is identified, it is then necessary to determine what each particular item entails. For instance, students' writing skills in an essay assignment is typically broken down into several subcomponents (such as language accuracy, richness of vocabulary, and grammar structures, content and text organisation) and then described in detail in a rubric.

Even though on the surface level the main aim of VE in a foreign language course may seem to be the development of communicative competence, these complex projects support “a wide range of skills, knowledge, and behaviours” (Lee & Sauro, 2021, p. 34), which may include intercultural competence, content-related knowledge, and digital literacies (e.g. EVOLVE Project, 2020). To this, one can add 21st century skills such as collaboration, tolerance, critical thinking, problem-solving, leadership, and flexibility, which are inherent to intercultural VE projects that involve students engaged in completing a task-based activity (e.g. Helm & van der Velden, 2019; Mont & Masats, 2018).

Designing assessment rubrics may be a daunting task that often involves thorough literature review in search for the most appropriate theoretical model. Izmaylova (2022, this volume) describes the process of designing tools and criteria that aimed at assessing intercultural competence for research and pedagogical purposes. Teachers involved in VE can design such criteria on their own, adapt rubrics prepared by other practitioners, or refer to established reference documents that offer descriptors of selected competences and skills. For instance, O’Dowd (2010, p. 352) presents a sample assessment rubric for marking a blog in VE that consists of such criteria as structure and organisation, languages and communication, intercultural and sociolinguistic aspects, and online literacies.

All the reference tools described below, available online free of charge, may help teachers design their own rubrics describing selected competences gained during VE. The Common European Framework of Reference – Companion Volume (CEFR CV, Council of Europe, 2020) offers updated lists of descriptors for language competences and activities, as well as descriptors for mediation, online interaction, and plurilingual/pluricultural competence. Along similar lines, FREPA<sup>2</sup> (Candelier et al., 2007), a reference document for pluralistic approaches, presents a comprehensive list of descriptors of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that underpin plurilingual and intercultural education. The assessment of intercultural skills can be also supported by the framework of the INCA Project (2004), which consists of an array of assessment instruments,

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2. A Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to languages and cultures: competences and resources

including a portfolio designed to assess intercultural competence, language, and subject knowledge competence. The Open Virtual Mobility<sup>3</sup> project targets skills and competencies obtained during virtual mobility, which apart from working in virtual teams, also embrace participation in online courses and internships. The outputs of this EU-funded project include an online self-assessment tool that enables students to reflect on their own virtual mobility skills in eight areas:

- intercultural skills and attitudes;
- interactive and collaborative learning in an authentic international environment;
- autonomy-driven learning;
- networked learning;
- media and digital literacy;
- active self-regulated learning skills;
- open-mindedness; and
- gaining knowledge of virtual mobility and open education.

The self-assessment tool is available in the Open Virtual Mobility Learning Hub upon login.

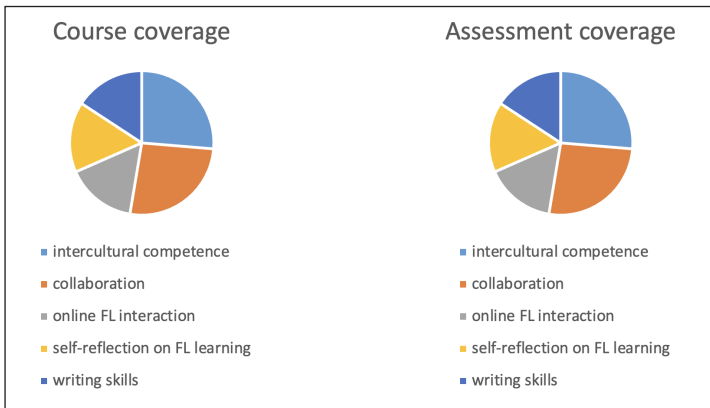
Having selected and clearly defined the construct, it is essential to make sure that the assessee's "performance on the assessment will really require the targeted knowledge, skills, or abilities and that the balance made between components in the assessment will provide a sound basis for the specific decisions that will be made about the assessee" (Green, 2014, p. 78). In other words, assessment should be designed in such a way as to reflect the range of knowledge, skills, or abilities discussed and developed during a particular course in order to provide students with sufficient feedback about their strong and weak points in each area. Such assessment should also offer teachers ample evidence to inform ongoing course modifications and future instructional planning. Figure 1 illustrates how the distribution of skills and abilities to be covered in a potential VE course should also be reflected in its assessment. Correspondingly, assessment should

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3. <https://www.openvirtualmobility.eu/>

not address knowledge and skills that have not been covered in the course. For instance, the objectives of the hypothetical course exemplified in Figure 1 do not include the development of listening comprehension; consequently, the assessment of this skill in this particular course would yield invalid results and would fail to reflect students’ efforts.

Figure 1. Illustration of content validity in course coverage and assessment coverage in a sample VE course



Dooly and Vinagre (2021) note that it “is not uncommon to read publications of VE that describe a predominantly oral modality for the learner interaction which is then assessed through a written essay of personal reflection of the experience” (p. 5). A possible solution involves assessing as wide a range of content as possible, on multiple occasions and by means of different forms of assessment – both formative and summative. This way, assessment targets different aspects of student learning throughout the whole course and yields more reliable and comprehensive feedback.

## 2.2. The purpose and consequences of assessment

Another question that needs answering is about the *purpose* of assessment in a given course. In classroom-based and VE contexts, the teachers most often

employ the so-called achievement assessment, which “measure[s] learners’ ability within a classroom lesson, a unit, or even an entire curriculum” (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010, p. 9). Such curriculum- or syllabus-based assessment aims to observe students’ progress and verify whether or not the learning objectives have been achieved within a particular course. Achievement assessment provides students with information of how much knowledge and competence they have mastered, and what areas require further improvement. As can be seen, being directly related to the course syllabus and content, this type of assessment is closer to the learners’ experiences and therefore its aims and results are easier to understand and relate to. The teachers, on the other hand, receive valuable feedback on learners’ progress, which supports instructional planning and allows for necessary modifications in the teaching approach and/or content. However, in some courses, teachers may prefer to apply proficiency assessment to establish students’ overall level of specific knowledge or competences.

The further choice of assessment tools and procedures within the formative and summative assessment paradigm is closely linked to the *consequences* that assessment and its results may have for the learners. High-stakes assessment involves important consequences that may affect the learners’ future, for instance grade promotion or graduation; whereas low-stake assessment typically consists of ongoing progress checks during a course. At tertiary level, the institution, by determining the stakes of assessment in a given course, has an impact on the shape and form of assessment in VE projects, its perceived importance, and the grading policy. Whether or not the students are awarded grades or credit points for their involvement in VE has an impact on their engagement, level of participation, and commitment to the task (Cloke, 2010; Rolińska & Czura, 2022, this volume).

Additionally, digital badges (or open badges) are gaining in popularity as a means of recognition of students’ completion of tasks in VE projects. Digital badges are awarded on the basis of clear standards and criteria to certify that students have developed certain knowledge, skills, and achievements as a result of participating in a certain activity. For instance, students can present such

online badges as evidence of skills and competencies developed during VE to apply for a scholarship or employment (for more detailed information about open badges see Hauck & MacKinnon, 2016; MacKinnon, Ensor, Kleban, & Trégoat, 2020). The idea of digital badges has been further supported by the European Commission's Erasmus+ VE project<sup>4</sup>, during which these digital certificates were awarded to students, educators, and youth workers to certify their participation in project activities.

### 2.3. Approaches to assessment

The purpose and the consequences of assessment entail concrete instructional choices. In order to review what a student has learned during a course and represent it in the form of a grade or other evaluative standard, teachers tend to employ *summative assessment*. The obtained results are often used to report on students' progress and the effectiveness of the teaching process. On the other hand, when the direct purpose of assessment is to improve the quality of learning and teaching, *formative assessment* comes into play. Formative assessment, often termed as assessment *for* learning (Black et al., 2004; Black & Wiliam, 1998), as opposed to assessment *of* learning in the case of summative assessment, implies "the provision of information (usually in the form of feedback) to the learner in a form that the learner can use to extend and improve their own learning" (Hamp-Lyons, 2016, p. 21). There is a shift in the purpose of assessment – from "score reporting, certification, and creating league tables" (Hamp-Lyons, 2016, p. 22) to more learner-centred assessment, where the primary focus is placed on promoting students' learning and growth. The key element is the delivery of comprehensive and timely feedback that emphasises both positive and negative aspects of students' work with an eye to helping them improve their performance on an ongoing basis.

Summative assessment is typically associated with traditional tests, whereas such tools as portfolio, learning diary, and peer and self-assessment are considered inherent elements of the formative repertoire. However, the distinction between

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4. [https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/erasmus-virtual-exchange-badges\\_en](https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/erasmus-virtual-exchange-badges_en)



these two types of assessment do not lie as much in the choice of specific assessment tools as in their purpose. There have been attempts to implement more formative tools, e.g. portfolio (Koretz, Stecher, Klein, & McCaffrey, 1994) and other means of self-assessment (Engelhardt & Pfingsthorn, 2013; Harlen & James, 1997) aimed towards more summative ends. Consequently, summative and formative assessment need not occur as a dichotomy, but as a continuum.

The ability to balance formative and summative purposes of assessment should be seen as an important element of teacher assessment literacy in VE. Continuous and formative assessment shows significant potential in VE contexts (Dooly, 2008) – it is integrated with the ongoing class activities, supports students’ self-reflection, and facilitates the teaching process. In practice, however, teachers are often obliged to award students grades or other evaluative scores at the end of the course to meet institutional regulations and standards. As Huerta-Macias (1995) underlines, the “trustworthiness of a measure consists of its credibility and auditability” (p. 10). Thus, more alternative forms of assessment can also be used for summative purposes provided that “consistency is ensured by the auditability of the procedure (leaving evidence of decision making processes), by using multiple tasks, by training judges to use clear criteria, and by triangulating any decision making process with varied sources of data” (Huerta-Macias, 1995, p. 10). As mentioned earlier, for assessment to be valid, it needs to embrace all knowledge, skills, and abilities that have been covered in the course. This can be achieved by using an array of assessment techniques that cover different areas of student knowledge. Assessing student learning on multiple occasions throughout the course by means of different tools gives a more comprehensive and reliable picture of students’ outcomes, strengths, and weaknesses. It also minimises the risk that a student’s personal preference or learning style will affect the final outcome or grade – there are students who excel in collaborative tasks, whereas others are more disposed towards reflective and individual work.

Another approach to assessment of significant importance in the context of VE is task-based (language) assessment. The pedagogical design of a VE is recommended to be built around specific tasks (Dooly & O’Dowd, 2012;

O'Dowd & Ware, 2009), which are understood here as activities “in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language” (Van den Branden, 2006, p. 4). In VE projects, students often complete tasks in collaboration with their partners – they may co-design a brochure or a poster, write a CV, prepare a report, co-design a marketing strategy, etc. Such a task-based approach to class design should essentially find reflection in assessment. In Task-Based Language Assessment (TBLA), “tasks are used to elicit language to reflect the kind of real world activities learners will be expected to perform, and in which the focus is on interpreting the learners’ abilities to use language to perform such tasks in the real world” (Wigglesworth, 2008, p. 112). Norris (2009) points out to three main functions of focusing on task performance in assessment: (1) it provides both the students and the teachers with formative and diagnostic feedback; (2) supports summative assessment of target language learning outcomes; and (3) sensitises students and other stakeholders to the communicative aim of language learning. Depending on the course objectives and criteria used, teachers may approach assessing students’ performance in two ways.

“In the ‘strong’ sense, assessment is made on the basis of the extent to which the actual task itself has been achieved, with language being the means for fulfilling the task requirements rather than an end in itself. In the ‘weak’ sense, the focus of the assessment is less on the task and more on the language produced by the candidate, with the task serving only as the medium through which the language is elicited – successful performance of the task itself is not the focus of the assessment” (McNamara, 1996, in Wigglesworth, 2008, p. 113).

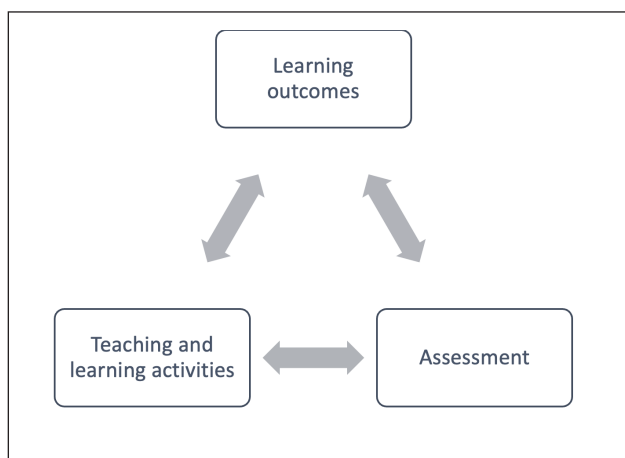
The undeniable value of using tasks in assessment in VE is that they facilitate students’ authentic language use in communicative situations that are likely to take part in outside of the classroom. TBLA can also be easily integrated into the ongoing course instructions and, what is more, promotes collaborative task completion, which is of central interest in a VE context. On the other hand, this form of assessment tends to generate a heavy workload on the part of

the teacher and the students. Additionally, since task completion may involve a wide array of skills and competences, to ensure the provision of precise and targeted feedback, TBLA needs to be based on a set of clearly defined assessment criteria.

## 2.4. Constructive alignment

Constructive alignment (see [Figure 2](#)) is an approach to curriculum planning and delivery proposed by [Biggs \(1999\)](#), which assumes that learning outcomes, teaching, and learning activities and assessment need to be closely correlated in order to ensure high quality teaching and learning. Thus, irrespective of the subject matter and the mode of learning (in-class, online, or blended), it is prerogative that assessment be integrated in instructional planning. Moreover, the details of assessment – its objectives, tools, and criteria – should be aligned with the course learning outcomes, tasks, and teaching materials. Careful planning appears of crucial importance in VE, where the successful execution of the three elements presented in [Figure 2](#) depend on close cooperation between the partner teachers and the participating institutions.

Figure 2. Constructive alignment (adapted from [Biggs, 1999](#))



Gallagher (2017) underscores the dual role of feedback within this scheme: “feedback, and in particular formative feedback, provides ongoing opportunities for teachers and students to monitor the extent of the alignment of the existing three elements of the constructive alignment model” (p. 3011). This shared understanding of the link between course objectives, the tasks, and the assessment, with ongoing formative feedback as an integral part of instruction, supports teachers in instructional planning and, at the same time, gives students a sense of coherence and safety. Students are familiar with transparent course objectives and can expect that the assessment, both formative and summative, of their learning will reflect the envisaged learning outcomes, course content, and instructional methods they experienced throughout a given course.

## **2.5. Assessment as a social activity**

Assessment should essentially be understood as a social activity because it is conditioned by the sociocultural contexts in which it occurs. To choose one example, language education policy has a direct impact on the content and the shape of classroom assessment as it determines “which language(s) should be taught, when (at what age), for how long (number of years and hours of study), by whom (who is qualified to teach), for whom (who is entitled and/or obligated to learn), and how (which teaching methods, curriculum, materials, tests to be used)” (Shohamy, 2007, p. 119). Furthermore, the impact of the educational policy and assessment stakes is also mediated by an interplay of more covert variables such as teachers’ beliefs and professional development, and “traditional beliefs about teaching, learning, and assessment [that] dominate the learning community or culture” (Tierney, 2006, p. 258; also in Lock & Munby, 2000). Both the teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the role of assessment, the importance of constructive feedback, and their readiness for autonomous language learning and teaching (Lin & Reinders, 2019) may affect the latter’s motivation, interest in the assignment, and, consequently, commitment and performance (McMillan & Workman, 1998).

There are additional complications in VE assessment. In VE we deal with the sociocultural contexts of all partner institutions – each with its distinctive system

of education, institutional requirements, and stakeholders' conceptions of language learning, teaching, and assessment. Students involved in VE typically work collaboratively towards a common goal, but both the actual perception of the task and the level of commitment may differ depending on the students' perceptions of assessment in a given educational context and the internal assessment-related regulations in their institution. For instance, students from different educational contexts may exhibit different levels of learner autonomy and have different experiences of being assessed formatively, or may not be used to receiving criticism, no matter how constructive, from peers. It poses an additional challenge to teachers, who need to mediate these differences and collaboratively design assessment that is acceptable for all partners and meet the contextual profile at the same time.

### **3. Conclusions**

There are five main principles of assessment – validity, reliability, authenticity, practicality, and washback (e.g. in [Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010](#)). Even though some of them are not named verbatim in the text, the discussion of the issues in assessment design presented in this chapter clearly indicate that high quality assessment in VE, similar to any other form of instruction, needs to adhere to these ground rules. The difficulty in assessing VE lies in the need to adapt FL assessment to the affordances of computer mediated communication in an intercultural and collaborative environment. In VE, both learning and assessment are learner-centred. During VE, a large portion of learning takes place outside the classroom, without teacher's supervision. This form of learning involves a high degree of learner agency and independence, which implies that teachers need to step down from a position of an evaluator, and be ready to assume a new role of a mediator and a facilitator who supports students in the process. On the other hand, these difficulties can be translated into an opportunity to introduce more formative, continuous feedback and authentic task-based assessment in VE projects, online learning, and a FL classroom at large.

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