

3 Assessment in virtual exchange: a summary of the ASSESSnet project

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Abstract

This chapter outlines the ASSESSnet project [ASSESSnet: Language assessment in Virtual Mobility (VM) initiatives at tertiary level – teachers’ beliefs, practices and perceptions; grant number 845783; <https://www.assessnet.site/home>]. First, its underlying mission is explained in this introduction, before a detailed description of the compilation and analytical approach to data undertaken during the project trajectory is provided. Following the research methodology, main findings of the ASSESSnet project are summarised and conclusions drawn.

Keywords: virtual exchange, telecollaboration, assessment.

1. Introduction

ASSESSnet was proposed to the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship in 2018, and was awarded funding for 2019-2021 (extended to February of 2022). The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions are among Europe’s most competitive and prestigious research and innovation fellowships and aim to support postdoctoral researchers’ in their careers while promoting excellence in research. The funding allows fellowship recipients to carry out

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their research activities abroad, under the supervision of more experienced researchers in their field.

The ASSESSnet project proposal was motivated by the dearth of research, teaching resources, and teacher training opportunities in the area of Virtual Exchange (VE) for language teaching and learning (Werneck Barbosa & Ferreira-Lopes, 2021). The project is centred specifically around assessment in VE in Foreign Language (FL) courses, looking particularly at tertiary level across different educational contexts, with the goal of contributing to this gap in educational research.

The general goal of the ASSESSnet project is to support FL practitioners in the process of assessing student learning in VEs, particularly in terms of selecting appropriate assessment content, criteria, and tools. In order to complete these aims, the project focused on these central objectives:

- investigating teachers' beliefs about the assessment objectives, practices, and content in VE in order to identify teachers' rationale behind the choice of classroom assessment method and content;
- exploring the planning of the assessment process in VE. This research objective aimed at identifying the stakeholders involved in the planning of the assessment process and grading policy (i.e. the role of the teacher, the home, and partner institutions and learners);
- investigating the implementation of assessment in VE. Here, the objective was to investigate the share of responsibility between the involved stakeholders, timeline of gathering evidence, approaches to providing feedback, and the documentation of assessment;
- analysing the form of assessment in VM projects at tertiary level. Within this objective we addressed the types of assessment measures (both formal and informal) applied by teachers to verify learning outcomes in

VE projects. In particular, the use of specific assessment tools (e.g. tests, portfolios, projects, peer assessment, etc.) was explored;

- identifying the content of assessment in VE. This objective focused on establishing the construct of assessment and how its content was aligned with course objectives and activities.

The mixed approach of both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis was chosen as the best means to fully explore the values, perspectives, experiences, and worldviews of the VE practitioners around the world (see research methodology below for a detailed description). This allowed for a rich, wider scale of examples of innovative, effective methods regarding assessment practices, materials, and tools specifically aimed at language learning in VE at university. The characteristics of the respondents is noteworthy given that the majority hold more than a decade of experience in language teaching, which speaks of the quality of the perspectives collected. There is also a significant representation of languages taught as well as contexts in which the VE has been carried out (see section below), which accentuates the diversity of views and experiences presented and discussed. The heterogeneity of contexts also highlights the relevance of the institutional parameters contingent to the VEs when it comes to assessment procedures, as is discussed in this book.

There are some result outcomes that can be highlighted, beginning with the emphasis that many of the respondents place on the facet of assessment as key support for student learning and as a means of providing students informative feedback on both the process and the product of learning. This is of specific relevance for instances of VE that take place outside of ‘regular’ class timetables and in many cases, without teacher/instructor presence. This places additional weight on learner autonomy and its role in the overall assessment of VE. Relative to this, the question of whether the VE is a compulsory or voluntary part of the overall institutional parameter of the course also comes into account when designing assessment for VE.

Inevitably, the very nature of compiling, synthesising, and publishing the results may seem to imply straight-cut procedures that belie the complexity of carrying out evaluation in this type of exchanges. In this chapter we do not endeavour to deny these inherent difficulties; on the contrary, the challenges of assessment in VE are acknowledged and even embraced as part and parcel of the results presented herein.

2. Research methodology

The data was principally collected by means of an online questionnaire and interviews. The former consisted of Likert-type, rating scales, and open-ended questions. This tool, available in four languages (English, Spanish, Catalan, and Polish), was designed to explore teacher beliefs as regards assessment objectives, tools, and content. The in-depth oral expert interviews centred on the teachers' attitudes to assessment and grading, as well as their assessment practices, instruments, and strategies in courses involving elements of VE. The interview data was transcribed and content analysed. The combination of these two instruments gave us a more thorough understanding of the assessment procedures used in different contexts. These data were supplemented with the analysis of assessment-related resources and documents (e.g. syllabi, assessment rubrics, descriptions of assessment tools) provided by some research participants.

In order to collect the relevant data, we contacted many associations of tertiary level education and university FL centres; we sent individual invitations to over 200 teachers involved in VE. Despite the difficult time of the Covid-19 pandemic, which necessitated a sudden shift from in-class to online teaching, 63 teachers volunteered to complete the questionnaire and 33 took part in the interview. Due to the international nature of VE projects, the foreign/second language teachers who took part in the study teach in a wide range of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Europe and beyond (e.g. United States, Mexico, Brazil, Japan, Oman). As many as 85% of the participants have been teaching a foreign/second language for over ten years (with 51%

teaching more than 20 years), which suggests that the research group consisted of practitioners with extensive teaching experience. English, indicated by 46 respondents, proved to be the most widely taught language. It was followed by Spanish (17 teachers), German (7), French (4), Chinese and Italian (3), and Japanese and Portuguese (2). Arabic, Catalan, Polish, Russian, and Swedish were taught by individual teachers.

3. Summary of research findings

The ASSESSnet study revealed that the approaches to assessment are highly diversified across educational contexts and tend to differ from institution to institution, but also from teacher to teacher within one HEI. It reflects the diversity of VE projects carried out around the globe and reported in the subject literature. Yet, some common observations can be made as regards teachers' approaches to assessment, the use of particular assessment tools, but also problems practitioners struggle with assessing student learning in VE. This section summarises the main project findings in terms of the role of the institution and teachers in assessment, the latter's beliefs about assessment objectives, practices, and tools, as well as how these beliefs are translated into classroom instruction.

3.1. Same or different?

On the inter-institutional level, parallel approaches to assessment adopted by all VE partners facilitate, but are not essential to the success of the assessment process. Minor differences deriving from, for instance, the institutional requirements or assessment standards, or different course objectives typically do not hinder student involvement and task completion, as long as the assessment procedures in the respective institutions share common points that all students can easily relate to. To this end, students in all institutions need to be appointed clearly defined roles, be involved in the same or parallel tasks, and work towards precisely stated objectives. This can be achieved when all teachers involved in VE discuss and agree on assessment formats, criteria, and tools well in advance, and continue cooperating closely to ensure consistency

throughout the project. Institutional recognition of students' work in the form of grades or credit points proves to be a key factor that fosters more sustained cooperation among students and, thus, increases the likelihood of task completion. Many of these findings are anthologised in this book. For instance, the examples of projects in which students, despite different course objectives and assessment regulations in partner institutions, collaborated successfully within clearly defined roles can be found in chapters by [Cavalari and Aranha \(2022, this volume\)](#), [Dolcini and Matthias Phelps \(2022, this volume\)](#) and [Vuylsteke \(2022, this volume\)](#).

On the other hand, as described in chapter eleven ([Rolińska & Czura, 2022, this volume](#)) a significant imbalance in approaches to assessment between the partners may result in students' dissatisfaction, decreased commitment, and even withdrawal from the project. This happens particularly when in one partner institution VE learning objectives are integrated into the course and assessment, whereas the students in the other institution contribute on a voluntary basis and/or do not see any tangible gains from such a time investment. To overcome this imbalance, in courses in which VE constitutes a voluntary component of the course, some research participants try to integrate students' contribution in such projects into a formal assessment procedure. For instance, in appreciation of students' time and effort invested in VE, they may be exempted from selected regular course assignments as long as they hand in specific reflective tasks or outputs of the collaborative efforts in the VE project. This way, instead of submitting a writing task assigned in the course, the VE participants prepare a text that reflects their contribution to the virtual and collaborative practice. In other contexts, the participants sometimes received a certificate or a virtual badge in recognition of knowledge and skills they have acquired in the course of VE. Such certificates, however, do not always prove sufficient to motivate students to complete the course.

3.2. The purpose of assessment in VE

This brings us to the definition of what constitutes assessment in VE. The ASSESSnet project aimed to explore teachers' beliefs about the assessment

objectives, practices, and content in VE. In respect to the first element, the results suggest that the teachers are principally oriented towards formative objectives of assessment. In this light, assessment is viewed as a continuous process targeted at improving different facets of student learning and as a tool that offers students informative feedback on both the process and the product of learning. As most of the students' work takes place outside of the classroom, assessment is also perceived as an important source of information used by teachers to address students' needs, solve problems, improve the running of the current project, and facilitate instructional planning.

Most of the participants believe that assessment is an essential element of VE. Firstly, assessment is seen as an important motivator that pushes students to engage in the course and complete the assigned tasks, such as a presentation, a poster, or a website. Secondly, formative and continuous assessment, which, according to the research participants, lies at the heart of assessment in VE, enables teachers to guide or coach their students in a secure, guided environment. Reflective (self-) assessment tasks encourage students to pay a closer attention to the quality of their collaborative work, problem solving skills, and the meaning of the intercultural experience. This underscores the importance of incorporating VE into a regular study programme on the institutional level – being granted a grade and/or credit points for their time and work investment, students are more likely to not only commit to the assigned tasks, but also engage in activities on a deeper level and benefit from the learning gains afforded by these projects.

3.3. Assessment practices

As regards the assessment practices, rather than using one assessment tool only, the teachers tend to devise assessment procedures that consist of an array of different tools, which allows for collecting different types of student output and assessing students on multiple occasions throughout the project. Applying diverse assessment tools within one project enables the teachers to use assessment information both for summative, which is sometimes required by the institution, and formative purposes. Traditional tests, used initially by a few

research participants, have proven ill-suited for the dynamics and complexity of student work in VE settings. Unlike O’Dowd’s (2010) findings, assessing students on the basis of participation and the frequency of submissions only, rather than their quality, is sporadic, and when it does occur, the pass/fail grading option is usually supplemented with more detailed feedback.

Except for e-tandem projects, i.e. bilingual exchange projects during which students usually discuss specific topics with their language learning partners, the pedagogical design of VE projects is predominantly task-based – students are typically asked to carry out a concrete task or a series of tasks that produce clear outcomes, e.g. a project, presentation, website, poster, or report. Such task-based assessment is particularly noticeable in, but not exclusive to, Foreign Language for Specific Purposes (FLSP) courses, where task-based and content-based assessment aims to engage students in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) on topics related to their field of study, and thus promotes authenticity and FL use in potential professional communicative contexts (cf. Czura, 2021). These communicative tasks constitute the basis of both formative and summative assessment. While working towards the collaborative output, students are usually asked to reflect on and document their experience, e.g. in the form of a portfolio or a learning diary, and receive ongoing teacher and/or peer feedback on the progress they make towards goal accomplishment. Depending on the VE project, the final outcome is handed in to the teacher or presented in front of the class and subject to peer assessment. Both teacher and peer assessment is typically based on a set of clearly defined criteria the students are familiar with. Teachers’ approaches to making the summative decisions vary; however, in most cases the final grade or a mark is awarded on the basis of the cumulative evaluation of the final task, the subtasks (if applicable) as well as students’ commitment to collaborative work and reflective practice. As can be seen, the implementation of formative and summative assessment tools in task-based projects allows for assessing both the process of working on a task and the final product.

Regardless of the VE type, students’ assignments essentially involve some degree of collaboration with VE partners – the cooperation may consist in planning and completing a task together or providing one another with constructive peer

feedback. For some teachers peer feedback and peer assessment lie at the heart of assessment in VE as they create an opportunity for students to exchange their expertise in content-related and/or linguistic aspects and work towards a common goal. To further foster a process-approach to task completion, in some courses students are offered one or several rounds of feedback before the final outcome is due. Since some students are not used to giving and receiving feedback from peers, preparatory courses or training resources that would guide students on how to offer constructive criticism in a reciprocal way have proven useful in many contexts.

The ASSESSnet research participants underline the importance of engaging students in the practice of guided self-reflection throughout the VE experience to help them gain a better awareness of autonomous learning, as well as linguistic and intercultural growth. Additionally, since most of student learning takes place outside the classroom in collaborative dyads or groups, students' reflections give teachers valuable insight into the quality and effectiveness of collaborative practice. Students' reflections are typically documented in a portfolio/e-portfolio or a learning diary and may, depending on the VE objectives, focus on the quality of collaborative activities, language learning incidents, content-based learning, or the use of learning and communication strategies (cf. [Cavalari & Aranha, 2022](#), this volume). Such portfolio or diary entries are often guided through specific prompts provided by the teacher (examples available in [Dolcini & Matthias Phelps, 2022](#), this volume). Reflective practice may be also fostered through mediation sessions, i.e. fairly regular one-to-one or group meetings, which create a platform for exchanging learning experiences and solving ongoing problems (e.g. [Elstermann, 2022](#), this volume). Such sessions may be based on students' portfolio and diary entries or be organised as stand-alone meetings, during which students share and re-examine their experience *ad hoc* or on the basis of a script that, if the teacher chooses, concentrates on a selected aspect of VE experience, such as communication strategies, national stereotypes, and digital literacies.

Among the less frequently used assessment tools are recordings of students' online interactions. Teachers admit that they do not typically listen to all the

recordings, but rather use them as a back-up option to be explored in cases of potential problems or miscommunications between students. In one project, to facilitate the final task completion, all collaborating students are encouraged to use the recorded interaction to prepare their group reports in greater detail. Additionally, students are sometimes asked to submit for assessment a selected recording of their online interaction that matches specific criteria indicated earlier by the teacher.

3.4. Content of assessment

Concerning the content, according to the questionnaire results, intercultural competence, online communication, and collaboration constitute main assessment criteria in VE. These three elements lie at the heart of formative assessment, which gives teachers an insight of what is happening during online interactions. The sampling of practices in our study show that except for a few cases when teachers evaluate recordings of synchronous interactions, online communication is not usually attended to directly. Additionally, unless for research purposes, teachers do not aim to measure the longitudinal development of intercultural or linguistic competences before and after the VE project. This implies that teachers prefer to act as facilitators of learning these competences rather than judges. Even though the questionnaire suggests that accuracy is seen as moderately important, many interviewees admit that they take different measures to attend to the quality of language the students produce. For instance, students' reports, selected portfolio entries, or presentations outlining VE project outcomes are often assessed on the basis of rubrics that, depending on the task and project objectives, consist of such criteria as linguistic accuracy, the range of vocabulary and grammatical structures, coherence, organisation of the text, the required content, etc. The last element is often linked with evaluating students' selected academic skills as in order to complete an assignment in task-based assessment students often need to search for, select, and synthesise information from various sources. It is particularly noticeable in FLSP courses, in which teachers additionally pay attention to the subject-specific content (business, tourism, technology, etc.)

3.5. Recurring challenges

Nevertheless, teachers voice a number of concerns as regards assessment in VE courses. First of all, there are limited training opportunities, textbooks, and teaching resources that aim specifically at assessment-related teaching competences in VE. And indeed, the questionnaire indicates that the level of training in assessment proves to be lower in comparison with other aspects of running a VE. They admit that due to the shortage of resources and training opportunities, their approaches to assessment have evolved through trial and error over the years, and some participants still struggle to find assessment tools that would target competencies triggered by intercultural and collaborative online exchanges. Ready-made resources containing clear assessment guidelines and VE scenarios, e.g. developed by the [ICCAGE project \(2017\)](#), used by a few participants, have proven useful, especially to teachers who are new to designing and running VE projects.

When asked about the most pressing training needs, the majority of participants point out that easier access to examples and case studies depicting assessment approaches in different contexts would greatly support their instructional planning. Additionally, the assessment of intercultural aspects and collaboration skills – in terms of defining the construct and selecting appropriate elicitation tools – is perceived as challenging. In the context of FLSP learning, some teachers who do not have subject-specific education and experience found the assessment of subject-related content problematic.

Given its predominantly formative nature, assessment in VE involves a significant time and workload on the part of the teachers and students. This should be recognised by HEI managerial staff in charge of calculating time commitment of teachers running such courses and course credits in the case of students. The ASSESSnet study indicates that in the contexts where teachers' workload and effort were appreciated on the institutional level, the assessment procedures these teachers applied tended to be more elaborate in terms of tools, criteria used, and feedback provision.

4. Conclusions

There are many emergent themes that can be found in the ASSESSnet findings, however, for sake of brevity we will foreground points which will be useful for VE practitioners. In particular, we look at the need for recognition, coordination, and mutual respect regarding how each partner/institution assesses their pupils in the VE; authenticity in VE language and intercultural assessment and perhaps most importantly, the need for training in assessment procedures in VE.

VE consists of collaboration – between students, teachers, and even institutions – in order for the outcomes to be beneficial for learning. This includes the design, the implementation, and the assessment. Therefore all partner institutions should be considered as important stakeholders that affect the shape and the perceived significance of the assessment process. This does not mean that the partners must have identical assessment procedures since the course and institutional parameters, language levels and learning goals may differ for the partners involved. However, agreement on relevance of assessment and an understanding of how assessment will be dealt with by each partner is paramount. Tangential to this, the results indicate that regardless of the goals and content of the VE, some degree of collaboration with VE partners must occur; otherwise this very nature of the VE is set to fail (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021). This implies that collaboration should be included in assessment from all partner teachers, usually in the form of constructive peer feedback, given that many of the VE activities take part outside of the classroom and without the teachers being present.

The nature of VE also comes into play regarding the authenticity of language assessment in these exchanges. As Czura (2021) points out, VE is typically implemented with the aim to engage students in ‘real’ communication (CMC) on topics related to their field of study, often through the use of a target FL. This engagement is promoted outside the classroom and therefore goes beyond more controlled, target language use to include contexts where the learners must use the language to communicate ideas, opinions, to argue their points, and to work together to achieve common goals. This authenticity extends to the assessment

procedures in VE in which task outcomes are “authentically representative of tasks in the target situation” (Douglas, 2000, p. 19). Additionally, since VE is often about interactions that involve heterogeneity regarding participants’ socio-geographical backgrounds, assessment typically aims to include these aspects in the criteria, reflecting intercultural gains and the ability to interact competently in variegated communicative situations and with diverse groups.

The results of the study also indicate that teachers’ beliefs about assessment objectives in VE are closely correlated to their assessment practices. In most cases, the experienced teachers indicated that they perceive assessment as being highly formative and therefore their assessment practices, in turn, included the means for continuous collection of evidence that can indicate evolution and learning gains such as rubrics, self and peer assessment, portfolios, diaries, etc. Formative assessment tools were also seen as an important element of promoting learner autonomy, and offering students guidance on language learning, effective collaborative engagement, and dealing with intercultural communication. Such a scaffolded support to fostering learner autonomy is of particular importance in contexts in which most of the learning takes place outside the classroom and without teacher’s direct supervision (Czura & Baran-Łucarz, 2021).

Many of the respondents lamented their own lack of training opportunities when first starting out with VE and zeroed in on the need for language teachers’ access to examples and training opportunities, not only for designing and implementing VE but also more specifically for dealing with the complexity of assessing language learning that occurs in relatively short timespans (usually a semester or less) and in technological environments that may, at times, impede the communication and which are singular in their reliance on learner autonomy. This spotlights the need for examples and case studies (such as produced by this project) as well as the importance of networks of practitioners that facilitate the exchange of experiences and teaching and assessing resources, in particular for novice VE teachers.

It is necessary to point out the inherent limitations of these findings. The number of respondents for qualitative data is significant (63 completed questionnaires;

33 interviews) and quite heterogeneous, ensuring variegated perspectives and practices. However, it is recognised that these conclusions were formulated on the basis of responses provided by participants who kindly responded to our invitation and agreed to participate on voluntary basis in this study. This implies a prior engagement and interest in the theme and therefore cannot be treated as a fully representative picture of assessment approaches adopted in all settings. Nevertheless, the results of the study offer valuable insight into both the institutional and pedagogical aspects of assessing student learning in such complex environments as VE projects.

This study lays the foundation for fruitful research in the near future. Given the growing importance of VE in higher education, there will be ample opportunities – and need for – further exploration into the solid assessment procedures in VE in FL courses, not only at tertiary level, but also across all ages and levels; especially as this educational practice becomes more extensively applied around the world. Attention needs to be given to longitudinal studies that trace in-class cohorts of established VE partnerships to better detect gains outside of the immediate learning context. Such studies will also lay the foundations for a detailed analysis of constructive alignment between the objectives, tasks, and assessment. There are also few studies on VE for beginners (both as research on design and implementation as well as assessment). This may be due to lack of confidence or fear of the complexity of setting up VEs for beginner learners.

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