

8 Is (inter)cultural competence accessible? Assessing for fluency

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Abstract

Globalization and the digitalization of our lives have made it impossible to avoid (inter)cultural encounters. In the traditional classroom environment, students are expected to juggle a myriad of choices almost simultaneously. Factors like grammar, pronunciation, word choice, etc. are all important assessment factors to consider when looking at the accuracy of the students' target language performance. However this changes considerably in Virtual Exchange (VE) courses with a primary goal of fluency. In this case, the assessment should take into account social cues, silence, turn taking, correction, reactions to new ideas, signal words, and speaker confidence, among others. In this article, we would like to share our ideas of how we assess a fluency course using a modified version of [Byram's \(1997\)](#) model for teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence and provide an example of a course design that was particularly successful, in which students worked together to complete a poster about the 100-year anniversary of the Bauhaus School. Additionally, to create an environment that promotes learner autonomy and helps students fully experience empathy, understanding, and tolerance while collaborating, a portfolio of tasks and self-assessment journals were used.

Keywords: assessment, collaboration, fluency, intercultural competence, virtual exchange.

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How to cite: Dolcini, G., & Matthias Phelps, G. (2022). Is (inter)cultural competence accessible? Assessing for fluency. In A. Czura & M. Dooly (Eds), *Assessing virtual exchange in foreign language courses at tertiary level* (pp. 123-134). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2022.59.1414>

1. Introduction

Globalization and the digitalization of our lives have made it impossible to avoid intercultural communication. Encounters with foreign cultures are not limited to holiday trips over the summer break. Workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods in the USA and Europe (and around the rest of the world) have developed into communities whose many members have a different cultural identity and/or come from families with mixed national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. It is imperative then that Foreign Language (FL) courses prepare students to interact appropriately with speakers from other countries in different communicative contexts.

The definition for what ‘appropriately’ could mean in this context has a few possibilities. The approach adopted for the purposes of our project complies with the standards set by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2006), which underline the ability to converse with openness and also the willingness to put themselves in the place of the other speaker. Consequently, mutual understanding, empathy, and curiosity are important components of FL education. In order to successfully incorporate these standards into our VE project, we have adapted the four axes described by Neuner (1994). The first axis is to become aware of one’s own identity and (re)activate one’s own cultural concept. The second axis refers to the ability to realize that everyone has a unique culturally determined understanding of the world. The third is empathy and underscores the need to understand cultural perspective of others: “From being ethnocentric and aware only of cultural phenomena as seen from their existing viewpoint, learners are to acquire an intercultural awareness which recognizes that such phenomena can be seen from a different perspective, from within a different culture and ethnic identity” (Byram, 1991, p. 19). As Kramsch (2011) underlines, “the challenge is to understand how and to what extent our perspective is culturally determined” (p. 365). Finally, the fourth axis, which is particularly important in the practice of VE, embraces tolerance to ambiguity, i.e. the ability to withstand difficult situations, especially when they cause strong emotional reactions. For instance, when the communicators’ emotions might almost take over their actions, they need to be able to step back, examine the

reasons and try to understand their interlocutors' motivations. This can only be applied and acquired solely through practice. With the hope of bringing a slice of the 'real world' into our classrooms, we implemented a VE during which our students could interact with peers from the target country. This created opportunities to practice authentic communication skills, tolerance of ambiguity, and intercultural competence in a safe and guided environment.

In the traditional classroom setting, students are expected to juggle a myriad of choices almost simultaneously. Factors such as grammar, pronunciation, or word choice are all important assessment factors to consider when looking at the accuracy of the students' target language performance. However, this changes considerably in VE courses, where fluency becomes the primary goal. In this case, the assessment should additionally take into account social cues, silence, turn taking, reactions to new ideas, signal words, and speaker confidence, among others. A student of both culture and language is competent at not just communicating in an FL, but also understanding how their speaking partners' perspectives might be shaped by their culture and personal experience (Byram, 1997).

So how do we assess these less-tangible factors? Many of FL textbooks used in language courses include information and exercises that introduce the learner to cultural specifics tied to language accuracy. Then, assessment in VE needs to address the following questions and focus on students' communicative skills.

- How do I tell my partner I disagree without sounding insulting?
- When and how do I interrupt my partner?
- What does it mean when my partner is silent?
- How would I feel about a positive or negative reaction to something I have said?
- How has my upbringing and background affected the way I view the world?

This shift from accuracy-oriented to communication-centered assessment is vitally important in a VE class and is symptomatic of a transition to new pedagogy: “By virtue of engaging learners in a dynamic process of inquiry, discovery, exploration, and interpretation, together with learners from another culture, such a project invariably favors a collective, constructivist approach to learning” (Furstenberg, 2010, p. 56). The constructivist approach assumes that students find culturally substantial meaning in the language they are studying. Instead of a language being reduced to just grammar and vocabulary, it suddenly becomes a means of communication between individuals that will also enable them to become global citizens and bring them a step closer to cultural competence.

In order to assess these intangible markers and solve this assessment conundrum, our universities have been experimenting together with different VE modules. Since our course is designed for fluency and not accuracy, the criteria for assessment focus on the participants’ abilities to develop a sense of awareness, an openness and discovery of new ideas and viewpoints, and finally through all this, the confidence needed to communicate in a variety of situations. In this chapter, we would like to describe our approach to assessing a fluency course using a modified version of Byram’s (1997) model for teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence and provide an example of a course design that was particularly successful.

2. Overview of the VE project

In 2011, Grace Dolcini from the Fachsprachenzentrum (FL Center) at Bielefeld Universität and Grit Matthias Phelps from the German Department at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, came together to create an online VE in which university students from diverse backgrounds could not only practice their fluency skills, but also connect with other participants living in another country. Student participants must have a minimum of B1 in the target language and C1 in the home university/native language (it should be noted that not all participants are native speakers – at both universities there are international students with

a high competency level in the home institution language). All are assigned partners to meet twice a week for 50 minutes using synchronous computer mediated communication over the course of seven weeks. They remain with the same partner(s) for the duration of the project. During the exchange sessions students use solely English for half the time and solely German for the other half while discussing assigned topics and collaborative projects. These topics in most cases revolve around a central theme, which the entire course is based on, as well as the final project or a portfolio.

One of the challenges when designing this course is that both partner universities have different requirements. The students on the Bielefeld side take this course to either fulfill an elective requirement or to use it toward their internationalization module. For both of these cases, the entire course is contained in these seven weeks. However, on the Cornell side, the students are at the end of a semester-long course, and the VE is only one component of the requirements in the course. This is also challenging in terms of assessment since both universities have different policies on what is required of the students to successfully pass or receive a grade, as well as on how many credit points are awarded after course completion.

Despite these setbacks, our intention was never to create a tandem course with rigid guidelines and a strong focus on language correction and assessment. Although students have an opportunity to be corrected by their partners on lexical choices and grammar, the course does not base assessment on accuracy. In fact, no conversations are recorded for feedback, and the students work without teachers' direct supervision in their VE rooms to promote autonomy in their collaborative learning process. Instead, the objectives for the students are to boost their confidence in the ability to communicate their thoughts and opinions, to heighten their awareness of new ideas and viewpoints (especially in a collaborative context), and to practice their skills of negotiating non-verbal communication.

An important component to the course is that students are handed the responsibility for their learning outcomes. Although each meeting has a

specific set of tasks within a theme, the partners themselves decide in what order to do the tasks, in what direction to take the conversation, and when to switch between the languages. They are also responsible for scheduling potential changes as well as any extra make-up or planning sessions for the final collaborative project. In addition, the tasks are designed to leave enough time for the partners to engage personally in topics of their choosing. In authentic communication, students will need to be able to comfortably and confidently negotiate their decisions and circumstances, and we believe these VE sessions are an important starting point.

Over the years, we have tried many different ideas with different results, but the main focus for both small and large tasks in our courses is an opportunity to collaborate and experience success. This is especially important in terms of creating scenarios where students can practice tolerance and learn to overcome conflict that may arise in difficult situations. Regardless of whether that means collaborating to gather information or to create an end product (like a poster or a video), all tasks are designed in a way that forces the students into situations in which they need to make decisions together and negotiate (with the correct meta language) what they want their collective outcome to be.

One particular semester, the course was designed around the 100-year anniversary of the Bauhaus School, and the students were assigned a set of tasks exploring the topic, its history, and influence around the world. The end assessment consisted in designing a poster for a contest (see [supplementary materials](#) Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 for syllabus plans in both institutions). These tasks mostly involved getting acquainted with readings and videos on different aspects of the theme and discussing these with VE partners. The students were also asked to reflect on the conversations in a journal on an ongoing basis.

A particularly interesting aspect for this semester was the fact that the final project created an opportunity for the students to have their work shown in a public setting. The main office of the Department of German Studies at Cornell needed new wall decoration, and it was decided that the Bielefeld group would vote on the project posters from their Cornell partners and determine which two

posters would be hung in the office for the next few years (see [supplementary materials](#) Appendix 3). In addition, an exhibition which would include posters from both universities was planned at the beginning of the following semester in the lounge of the FL Center at Bielefeld University.

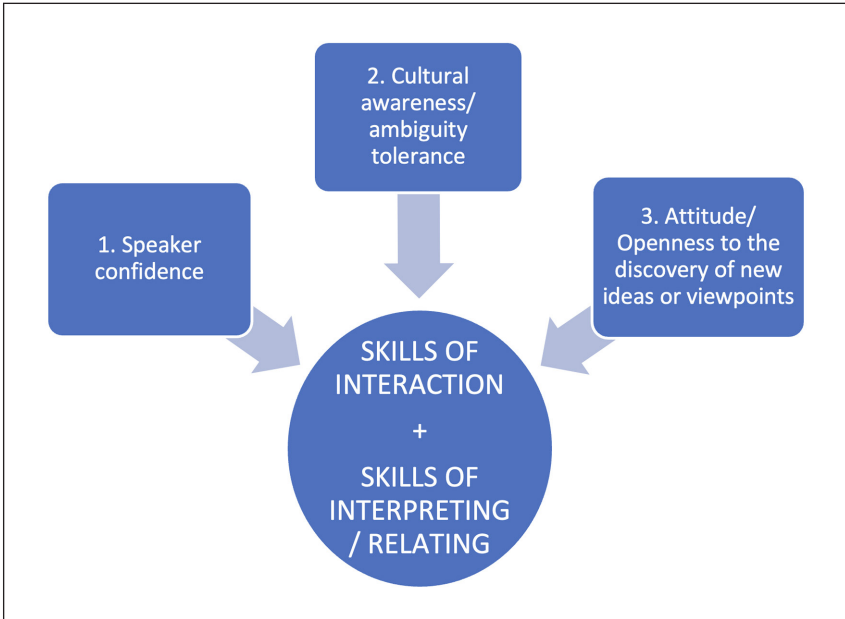
3. Assessment in the VE project

One of the prime benefits of exchanging with other language learners from another country is the experience of communicating with a person living in a different context. However, this adds a large list of extra factors that FL speakers must negotiate when formulating utterances in the target language. For the instructor, the question then becomes how and what to assess in a VE situation.

Practically speaking, assessment was conducted through a mixture of self-assessment in the form of weekly journals, as well as group feedback sessions during which the students worked together with other members of their own class and presented ideas and progress reports for the poster project. This had a twofold effect which allowed students to become aware of and document their own progress in the journals, as well as give us instructors the insight into how students used the target language, worked in group settings, and presented their ideas. When creating our course objectives and designing the activities, three points were chosen as assessment criteria. By modifying [Byram's \(1997\)](#) model for intercultural communication (see [Figure 1](#) below), we were able to create a framework on the basis of which activities and outputs could be measured and assessed.

The first point, speaker confidence, was measured by the speech rate and utterance length as well as the length of the pauses between those utterances. In most classroom situations a confident speaker will be able to produce speech at a comfortable rate and avoid any long uncomfortable pauses between utterances. The students were asked to assess themselves multiple times throughout the weekly journals with regard to these abilities and, in addition, feedback was given after any in-class presentations or group work.

Figure 1. The crucial points for fluency assessment determined for the purposes of the course on the basis of Byram's (1997) model



The second point (cultural awareness/ambiguity tolerance) and the third point (attitude or openness to the discovery of new viewpoints) were assessed on the basis of in-class activities, VE engagement, and self-assessment. For the students on the Bielefeld side of the VE, these two points were introduced during the first in-class meeting before the VE with partners began. The students were asked to take a communication questionnaire that was created initially for workers of international organizations in foreign countries. The questionnaire asked about students' assumptions and biases, and rated their own abilities in recognizing these ideas. Students then discussed in groups the questionnaire questions and their relevance to the course. This initial reflection activity was important for setting the tone and awakening students' awareness and sensitivity to their exchange partners. It also introduced concepts and vocabulary that the students could later use in their weekly reflection journals.

A major part of the assessment process for the Bielefeld group was the use of self-assessment in the form of a weekly journal. Each week, students were tasked with writing a reflection journal on how they felt they performed during VE sessions in terms of using the target language (the reflection prompts are included in the course syllabus in [supplementary materials](#) Appendix 1). This allowed the participants to discuss the context of the language, assess their FL use, elaborate on their own speaker confidence levels, and reflect on how they feel they came across as a communicator. A preliminary reflection journal entry was assigned to document the students' expectations of the entire experience before the VE began, whereas the final journal entry aimed to determine if those expectations were met after the sessions were completed. In this final journal entry, students were encouraged to share their hopes and fears, and to rate themselves and their abilities on the basis of a questionnaire similar to the one described before. This approach helped generate not only discussion about different ways of communicating, but also internal reflection on what determines successful communication in the VE setting.

At Cornell, their assessment was also tied to the output of the final poster project. The following criteria were provided to students as a guideline for their posters. These points were used for assessing their completed posters and were also used as the criteria for the Bielefeld group when voting for the winning posters.

Your poster should demonstrate a clear visualization of the topic, including explanations in German. Please use the following resource on how to create a good poster – <https://guides.nyu.edu/posters>. Create something you would like to see. The following criteria will be considered in the evaluation:

- the topic highlights a connection between Bauhaus in Germany and another country;
- it is evident that you collaborated with your partner in Bielefeld;
- you chose an appealing topic, e.g. a topic that is not very known;

- you visualized the topic well; and
- you used Creative Commons or ensured that copyright was not violated otherwise. You can find material under a Creative Commons license here: <http://search.creativecommons.org>.

4. Conclusions and lessons learned

Most activities covered multiple competencies simultaneously. Just like FL speakers manage multiple speaking decisions when formulating a sentence, the same can be true for VE partners managing the cultural layer of decisions. In traditional classroom settings, as a language learner, the student is focused on the correct formation of the target language. To better prepare students for real-life communication, courses need to be designed to give multiple chances in the same activity (or related activities) for the student to realize the cultural connection embedded into the task. In VE, this can be achieved, for instance, in simple vocabulary activities, in which students ‘teach’ their partners key vocabulary in a topic of discussion. The use and context for this new vocabulary should be a part of this ‘teaching’. We have observed many encounters within this activity that have underlined the cultural knowledge that would have otherwise gone unnoticed.

One of the main objectives of the course is to improve speaker confidence; however, this can be difficult for the instructor to assess. Confidence should be neither too low (where the participant experiences hesitation to say anything) nor too high (it may involve arrogance and possible tendency toward stereotyping and not making a personal connection with the VE partner). Using a reflective journal helped highlight the issues surrounding this factor and proved quite helpful with the Bielefeld exchange group.

Although the activities are designed to encourage discovery and discussion, the actual path to empathy and awareness differs for every student. Each student

comes with a different starting point, a different background, a different opinion of the USA, and a different opinion of Germany. With our project design, we try to embrace this variety of opinions. Results from the feedback questionnaires, reflection papers, and diaries have shown evidence of a definitive shift from the use of ‘us and them’ to ‘we’. Encouragingly we have had feedback that directly remarked how different, yet how similar, the students from the other university are to themselves. Also noteworthy is the amount of empathy and understanding that has been communicated with regard to their partners’ situations in the final reflection journals. By giving learners autonomy and shifting the focus away from rigid assessment, we are able to foster cultural learning, which is closer to ‘real life’, and offers opportunities to grow as global citizens and experience empathy, understanding, and tolerance while collaborating.

5. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/pnyv9hwx9zo95wlawejb8wj68mn5g0f4>

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Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
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Assessing virtual exchange in foreign language courses at tertiary level
Edited by Anna Czura and Melinda Dooly

Publication date: 2022/09/12

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Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover Layout by © 2022 Anna Czura
Cover photo © 2022 studioroman via Canva.com

ISBN13: 978-2-38372-010-2 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-2-38372-011-9 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)
ISBN13: 978-2-38372-009-6 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: septembre 2022.
