

6 Mission (im)possible: developing students' international online business communication skills through virtual teamwork

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Abstract

This case study outlines an example of cooperative online learning for teaching business communication skills at a Hungarian and a Belgian university. During this eight week long Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (E+VE) project, students collaborated online in virtual teams on a weekly basis to complete the following main missions: (1) giving constructive feedback; (2) creating an elevator pitch; (3) promoting themselves by creating a digital CV; (4) preparing for a job interview; and (5) participating in a real online job interview with a professional recruiter. Not only does this case study describe the planning, design, and implementation of the project from a pedagogical perspective, but it also details its challenges and outcomes.

Keywords: international collaboration, Erasmus+ virtual exchange project, online intercultural exchange, business communication, virtual teamwork.

1. Context

Graduate students lacking relevant work experience are often at a disadvantage when they step out into the European job market (EPSC, 2019). European higher

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education institutions have a key role in equipping graduate students not only with marketable knowledge, but also with skills to facilitate their school-to-work transition. Efforts have been made by European educational institutions and instructors to react to this need and incorporate skills development courses into their graduate programs (Carretero et al., 2018). At Pázmány Péter Catholic University (PPCU) in Hungary and École Pratique des Hautes Études Commerciales (EPHEC) University College in Belgium, we have also taken up on this challenge and redesigned our business communication curriculum to cover and teach new sets of skills to boost students' English business communication competences with digital and transversal skills, hence making them highly competent job applicants (Burke, 2019; EPSC, 2019). Job-seekers in Europe also need to acquire intercultural or rather intra-European cultural competence as they need to respond to culturally-different requirements depending on the country where they are applying for vacant positions. All these should be taken into account when preparing for job interviews, very often done online and in English. Also, job applications and CVs are scrutinized by the recruiters for proof of digital skills, English language proficiency, and business soft skills to identify the best candidates for job interviews matching their strict selection criteria. Therefore, new graduates need to acquire a new skills set and be able to demonstrate them effectively during the recruitment process.

Our unique online virtual exchange project was born out of an informal partnership between two professors at PPCU and EPHEC. The project was designed and implemented during the fall semester of 2019/2020 as an E+VE project and was embedded into two BA-level English business communication courses run in tandem at the Belgian and the Hungarian universities. Thirty-four students participated in the first cycle of the project: ten Hungarian students were from PPCU, one Russian student was studying at PPCU on Erasmus exchange, and 23 students were international students studying at EPHEC on Erasmus or Campus Mundi programs. The latter group represented ten different nationalities. The students at EPHEC were business administration majors, while the students at PPCU were majoring in international studies.

2. Aims and description of the project

Our VE project brings together graduate students across Europe to work in virtual teams, acquire and develop skills they need for a successful job interview, and provide the opportunity to try themselves out in the real European job market. The participants brought 12 different nationalities and multiple perspectives into the project, which created a culturally-diverse learning environment reflecting multicultural diversities in Europe. During this eight week long project, students worked online in mixed virtual teams on pre-set assignments, while also attending in-class sessions with their teacher. Five to six students were assigned to a multicultural team, representing at least four to five nationalities each and a variety of cultural backgrounds.

The project aimed to develop, practice, and demonstrate students' English business communication skills in an intra-European virtual setting. During the individual and team assignments, students had the opportunity to (1) develop intercultural competences, (2) practice international online collaboration and teamwork, (3) apply digital technologies and master digital skills, (4) organize and manage online meetings, (5) promote professional skills, (6) prepare for an online job interview, and (7) prepare a team charter, team performance reviews, team reports, and a final digital personal portfolio.

At the beginning of the project, students were assigned to teams, and were then encouraged to get to know their team members. In the first week of the project, students participated in an online facilitated dialogue session with a professional external facilitator and engaged in ice-breaking and team-building activities online. During the project, student teams had to accomplish the following five main missions: (1) give constructive feedback, (2) promote themselves by creating an elevator pitch, (3) promote themselves by creating a digital CV, (4) prepare for a job interview, and (5) participate in a real online job interview with a recruiter. Each mission comprised both individual tasks and team assignments. Student teams had to organize and manage weekly online team meetings to discuss individual tasks and complete their team assignments. Their findings,

task completion, and lessons learned, together with the meeting minutes, were then documented and shared with the tutors in the weekly team reports. The project concluded with an online facilitated session, where students could share their individual experiences of the job interviews with their peers and reflect on their learning outcomes. At the end of the project, students had to write and present a digital portfolio on 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.

3. Pedagogical design and tools

It was important to involve all our students not only in meaningful oral and written activities, but also to develop their online communication skills. They were all studying English business communication and their English language proficiency levels ranged from intermediate to advanced³. We encouraged them to apply a professional business communication discourse in the way they collaborated with their peers. Students had a series of tasks and research activities to perform, designed to develop their reading, writing, and speaking skills. As a pre-project task, students were invited to contribute to a web magazine and write a small biographical sketch. The magazine was published before the first online meeting and this gave them the opportunity to read about the other students they would be working with. It turned out to be a very useful task in raising students' awareness of the cultural diversity of the group and at the same time it proved to be an excellent ice-breaking activity. Before the teams started to work on their missions, they had to schedule weekly virtual team meetings and organize themselves and their teamwork so that they could accomplish their team assignments together. After their first meeting, the virtual team had to define their team charter in which they laid down the ground rules and organization principles for a successful online collaboration.

3. Equivalent to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) B2 level and above.

As giving feedback underpinned each activity of the project, participants learned how to give constructive feedback professionally in English and explored cultural differences when giving feedback, making a complaint or providing criticism. During Mission 1, students had to read and explore pre-set background materials on how to give positive feedback and how to provide constructive criticism. At the online team meeting, they could discuss their findings and ideas, and learn from one another. During Mission 2, students focused their attention on optimizing not only their personal virtual image, but also their professional one. They produced and shared a one minute personal elevator pitch promoting their professional qualities and skills. Team assessment enabled them to give performance reviews and professional feedback to each other. Mission 3 concerned preparing and finalizing their creative online CVs, which they discussed online within their teams. The purpose of the team discussion was to give each other advice on how to improve their digital CVs and also to practice giving constructive feedback. Mission 4 allowed the students to explore how to succeed at a job interview before facing the challenge of having a realistic one with an external recruiter. In order to prepare for this, the students had to watch a selection of small videos on interviewing techniques, prepare a shortlist of functional tips, and have an online discussion to exchange views and opinions to learn from one another. Also, they discussed possible cultural differences and the challenges they need to face during an online job interview in any European country. At the team meeting, students shared their findings with their peers, gave each other advice, recommended solutions to possible problems, rehearsed, and practiced a job interview scenario. As a final mission (Mission 5), students participated in a real online job interview with a recruiter. An international pool of recruiters, representing ten different nationalities from different companies in various business sectors in Europe, assisted the project and provided expert advice for our graduate students at the end of the interviews as well as a written feedback on the students' performances and areas for development. At the end of the project, students co-edited a final web magazine in which they reported on their project experience. This magazine was published⁴ and shared with all

4. <https://madmagz.com/fr/magazine/1691072>

the different participants, as the tangible evidence of their participation in the project and of their contribution to the different missions.

In order to reach our objectives, it was important for us to facilitate the interactions between the students and to be selective in the choice of digital and online tools that the students would be using. Zoom was selected as the videoconference application. Slack was proposed as a very good application to help students organize themselves, coordinate teamwork, share resources, and chat. The tool Genial.ly enabled the students to create their online CVs and portfolios. Madmagz was the web application selected for the initial and the final web magazine. The team reports completed after each mission were co-edited in Google Docs. This provided a useful opportunity for the students in that they were keeping a personal digital record of all their productions (pitch, online CV, web magazines, team reports, online portfolio) during the project, which they can then decide to share and reuse when they submit job applications in relation to their future career.

4. Evaluation, assessment, and recognition

As far as evaluation is concerned, we thought that the assessment of the whole project was worthy of quite a substantial weighting in the final evaluation of students' course performance. As it was the first time we implemented our E+VE, we had to coordinate university calendars, adjust course curricula, grading methods, and respective constraints, i.e. mode of assessment, calculation of the final grade, university regulations. We agreed on co-assessing the team reports and written productions of our respective students. How we integrated this joint-assessment into our respective grading methods was up to each of us. The final online job interviews were assessed by the external recruiters and they provided written feedback on the participants' performances. Students had received precise instructions and an assessment document with all the important elements for improvement, for example: persuasive power, projected self-image of the student, ability to provide precise answers to interview questions, communication skills, and language proficiency. Student teams were also sent

feedback after each of the five missions they carried out. The way they were graded differed on the basis of the integration of each mission's assessment in the global evaluation of the students.

At EPHEC Brussels, for example, the E+VE project was fully integrated in the global course assessment. Each of the five missions was supported by the grammar and lexical exercises which had been put online on the accompanying Moodle platform. Each mission was evaluated and commented upon in class when completed. One of the tasks EPHEC students had to do at the end of the project was to evaluate their own contribution and involvement. This activity brought stunning conclusions. Very often, the students had a realistic view of their potential, acquired skills, and could explain how they had personally measured their level of proficiency. This self-assessment score was also part of the final evaluation, which was worth five ECTS credits. The results were very good to excellent for a majority of students. Students were very enthusiastic and proud of their achievements, also because they could capitalize on all their online productions.

At PPCU, the assessment of the students' project performances made up 80% of their course evaluation. The remaining 20% came from individual and group language development activities and tasks that targeted students' preparations for the project. The course was worth three ECTS credits, most students achieved excellent or good results and only a few students actually received average grades. As our project was implemented under the E+VE project funded by the European Commission, the participants received an official E+VE digital badge for their successful completion of the project. The students who posted it on their professional networks expect recognition by the companies in their respective countries of origin.

5. Lessons learned and conclusion

We did not know what to expect from the first iteration of our virtual exchange when we decided to launch this project in October 2019. We had set goals and

determined our joint online strategy, and we hoped that it would be worth all our efforts. In the course of the eight weeks, we saw that our students were able to really capitalize on their respective talents, take up the challenges, and enjoy working online. Both lecturers and students had to leave their comfort zones and operate in a field in which they also needed to manage the unknown (responsiveness, attendance, involvement). We all learned a lot, probably more than we expected.

The first message we tried to convey to students is that ‘nothing is impossible’ and we also maintained this attitude during the project. In the preparatory stage, the two lecturers often met and discussed the details of the project with the purpose of building trust and also making sure that the pedagogical objectives were fully understood by the two parties. It also gave us the opportunity to explain and reassure, as well as put words to teaching habits we no longer questioned in our respective institutions. We had managed to align our teaching approaches, course objectives, and learning processes before the project started.

The second point that we, instructors, learned is that it requires a lot of energy to get the students onboard. We placed the onus directly on our students and they appeared intimidated at first, thinking the challenge would be impossible to face. It took us some time (nearly two weeks) to assist them and provide them with the necessary tools (methodology, use of the different web applications, and sharing of the objectives of the first E+VE mission).

Finally, we had the opportunity to step out of the conventional teacher’s role and follow a mentoring approach in our teaching (Arnesson & Albinsson, 2017; Lane, 2012). As the E+VE project started, our teaching attitude evolved. Instead of instructing students how to do things, we started guiding them through their missions by promoting students’ autonomous learning (MacDougall, 2012). To do so, we analyzed their contributions, had group discussions, gave them feedback, and encouraged them to take responsibility for their team’s dynamic. Many students reported having developed their management and problem-solving skills in a way they would not have expected.

The students were also encouraged to give feedback to us on this different approach in teaching business English classes. What one EPHEC student wrote in her final report is rather representative of the students' points of view:

“This course has revealed itself as one of the most useful challenges that I ever faced in my university experience. [...] It has led me to a new kind of exercise that I would consider as ‘introspective’. [...] We enjoyed talking about our personal experiences and developed our social skills. [...] My big challenge was the simulation of a job interview. [...] It helped me develop my digital and management skills. [...] I have discovered that helping others develop a common goal could bring a lot of satisfaction. [...] To sum up, I think the E+VE project has given us the possibility to strengthen our personalities and to reflect more about what kind of people we want to become in our future”.

By reviewing and critically evaluating the project, we can conclude that there is space for improvement. First of all, we could have given students more transparent and self-explanatory instructions on the tasks and assignments to be completed and on the expectations we had. Despite the fact that we put all necessary information relating to the project in one place, including task descriptions, deliverables, deadlines, background materials, sample deliverables, and administrative instructions, it proved to be overwhelming for the students at the beginning of the project.

We could also have systematically provided students with the lexical support to help them acquire the terminology they needed for animated discussions. As the level of English differed from one student to the other, it could have given weaker students the opportunity to be more active. Furthermore, knowing that our objective was to put students in situations where they could use their creativity and be totally in charge of their learning process, we had not shown any templates of the expected final products to the students. Some students found it difficult to come up with their own ideas in terms of design and content of their final deliverables and felt that they did not receive enough guidance from the instructors.

Grading of students' individual and team work proved to be challenging, too. Students often expect grading to be only individual, whereas this project combines group evaluations and individual assessment. While we followed a co-assessment approach in the case of team reports and teamwork, individual grading was done by the instructor responsible. Students reported some discrepancies when receiving their final grades, as some students felt that they received lower grades than their team members, even though they evaluated their own performance higher than that of their peers. This may be due to their misperceptions of their own work or the difference in the two instructors' evaluations. Therefore, it is important to work out a common framework for the assessment and evaluation of students' performances for the next iterations of the project.

Is there anything else to learn from our experience? Probably, we can always rely on students to surprise us in a good way. They can certainly overcome unexpected challenges provided they receive clear explanations and guidance on how to reach their goals. We believe that teaching business English can be a vector to transform a language classroom into a virtual multicultural corporate working space in which students meet, discuss, evolve, take responsibility, and learn from one another. Another enthusiastic student wrote in her final report:

“I'll certainly recommend the EVE project: it's a beautiful way to learn, know new cultures and also challenge yourself”.

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