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Foreign language assessment in virtual exchange – The ASSESSnet project

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Abstract

In this article we provide an overview of the ASSESSnet project, funded through a Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions grant by the European Commission Research Executive Agency (H2020-MSCA-IF-2018 845783). The project aims to analyse assessment practices in foreign language courses that involve virtual exchange (VE) and to explore teacher beliefs about the shape and the content of assessment in the virtual contexts where these exchanges take place. The research findings of this in-progress project, illustrated with relevant examples of promising practices, will be used to formulate practical recommendations for improving the type, content and implementation of assessment in VE projects across diverse educational contexts. In the following, we outline the detailed objectives of the project, the methodology used and the projected outcomes. We conclude with a presentation of the project website and an invitation to participate in the project by sharing further examples of good practices with other practitioners.

Introduction

Despite the undeniable benefits it offers and the efforts on the part of the European Union and higher education institutions (HEIs), face-to-face mobility is still available only to a small percentage of students. This trend became even more pronounced in the time of the current pandemic, during which mobility programmes were dramatically reduced or came to a halt, thus depriving students of the opportunity to experience a different educational context, engage in an intercultural dialogue and improve foreign language (FL) skills.

Although it cannot be treated as a substitute for face-to-face mobility, virtual exchange (VE) offers a valuable alternative and presents itself as a valid strategy of promoting internationalisation at home and internationalisation of the curriculum (Jager, Nissen, Helm, Baroni, & Rousset, 2019). VE is understood here as an integral part of a course during which students interact and cooperate, and thus engage in intercultural exchange with peers from partner institutions, by means of online communication tools under the guidance and with the support of teachers or facilitators (Belz, 2003; O'Dowd, 2020; O'Dowd & O'Rourke, 2019). VE is often referred to as telecollaboration, online intercultural exchange or teletandem; however, as Dooly and Vinagre (Forthcoming 2022) point out, these terms are not always considered to be synonyms and each term has emerged from different epistemologies and contexts, and preferences in terminology are often linked to an individual's dynamics and background references. Regardless of the different connotations each of these terms carry, O'Dowd and Dooly (2020, p. 362) indicate that 'they all highlight both the medium [virtual, online, digital, distance, global, networked] and the underlying purpose [exchange, intercultural, collaboration, learning]'. Nonetheless, VE has emerged as the preferred term in the EU, especially as both governmental and private institutions increasingly adopt this term.

So far the research has tended to focus on investigating the impact of VE on foreign language competences (Sauro, 2009), intercultural skills (Vogt, 2006), learner autonomy (Fuchs, Hauck, & Müller-Hartmann, 2012) and selected transversal skills (Vinagre, 2010). Given the benefits of VE, a steady interest in implementing such programmes in teacher education courses can be observed (Dooly & Sadler, 2020; Nissen & Kurek, 2020; Pfingsthorn, Czura, Kramer, & Stefl, Forthcoming 2021). However, there is an acute shortage of studies and case studies that explore and elaborate on the topic of assessment in this mode of learning. The 'ASSESSnet: Language assessment in virtual mobility initiatives at tertiary level – teachers' beliefs, practices and perceptions' project aims to fill in this gap in the subject literature by exploring tertiary-level teachers' assessment-related beliefs, perceptions and practices, and formulate practical resources to facilitate the assessment process in VE courses. In this article, before we present the project objectives and the methodology used, we elaborate on the difficulties commonly associated with assessment

in VE courses. We conclude with the presentation of the expected outputs, preliminary research results and the overview of the project website.

The ASSESSnet project

The rationale behind the ASSESSnet project

Assessment in VE remains a largely underexplored topic in research despite the fact that it is perceived by many practitioners as one of the most difficult aspects of running such a course (O'Dowd, 2013). The difficulties arise from a number of factors. Firstly, at the institutional level, the success of assessment may depend on whether VE constitutes an integral part of the curriculum, and whether students are granted credit points for their involvement in VE (Cloe, 2010). Assessment is also sociocultural and context-dependent and, thus, largely determined by an educational and institutional context in which it is situated. The perceived importance – by both teacher and learners – of foreign language learning, attitudes to learner autonomy, and perceptions of the importance of assessment and grading may come into play here. Finally, the dynamic and interactive nature of VE projects makes assessment of student learning highly unpredictable (Akiyama, 2014). It is therefore necessary that assessment in VE does not merely replicate the assessment strategies applied in a traditional language classroom, but that its objectives, form and content reflect the intricate and interactive nature of VE projects, which in most cases take part outside the classroom and involve an intercultural component. The research findings of the ASSESSnet project are also of relevance to teachers involved in different forms of distance education, which was abruptly integrated into mainstream education in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. VE and distance education are not tantamount as they differ, for instance, in terms of objectives, mode and teacher presence; however, they share such distinctive features as the medium of communication and the autonomous nature of the learning process, which essentially necessitate the emphasis on self-reflection, formative assessment and the mediating role of assessment.

Research objectives

The ASSESSnet project is a two-year (2019–21) project carried out as a part of Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions Individual Fellowship (MSCA IF) at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) by Anna Czura (researcher) and Melinda Dooly (supervisor), with cooperation of the GREIP (Research Center for Plurilingual Teaching & Interaction) research group. The project sets out to explore the planning, design and implementation of the assessment process in VE in FL education, through the compilation of data regarding the assessment objectives, tools and criteria used in existing VE projects. In particular, we focus on the relationship between summative and formative approaches and the use of specific assessment tools (e.g. portfolios, projects, peer-assessment, etc.). Given the interdisciplinary nature of a VE project, the study also aims to identify the content of assessment; establishing which elements of learners' activity and performance are typically subject to assessment (e.g. FL competence, multimedia literacy, intercultural competence, transversal competences). The study also explores the implementation of VE projects with the objective of identifying possible promising practices as well as the challenges the teachers experience at both institutional and classroom levels. At this point, we have collected both quantitative and qualitative data and are now in the process of analysis.

Methodology

In order to collect the quantitative data in this mixed methods study, a questionnaire containing both Likert-type rating scales and open-ended questions was used. This tool focused mainly on teacher assessment beliefs as regards assessment objectives, tools, content and implementation. The questionnaire was available in four languages (English, Spanish, Catalan and Polish) and was completed by 60 participants. The qualitative data was collected by means of in-depth oral interviews conducted with 25 FL teachers in tertiary education, which focused on their assessment practices, instruments and strategies in courses involving elements of VE. The interviews additionally touched upon the factors that affected the implantation of assessment in VE and the evolution of assessment strategies over time. The interviews were transcribed and content analysed by means of NVivo software. This data is supplemented with the analysis of assessment-related resources and documents (e.g. syllabi, assessment rubrics, descriptions of assessment tools) provided by research participants. Due to the international nature of VE projects, the practitioners who took part in the study came from a wide range of educational context in Europe and beyond, which enabled us to explore the diverse approaches to assessment in VE in different institutions and in different countries.

Project outputs

Teaching resources and project website

In further steps, the research findings will be used to formulate practical recommendations concerning the scope and form of assessment in VE in FL courses. These will be available in an open access handbook that will focus on the aspects of good assessment and will present an array of assessment tools and criteria that can be implemented to attend to student learning in VE. The guidebook will be supplemented with a collection of good practices illustrating actual use of assessment across a variety of educational contexts. Depending on the VE project, the good practices delineate the assessment process in the entire course or focus on a specific tool. What is most important is that these examples are produced *by* practitioners *for* practitioners with the objective of facilitating future assessment practices in VE projects. The assessment strategies the teachers use are characterised by a high degree of diversity that is shaped by the local educational context, institutional demands, the set-up of the VE partnership as well as the teachers' personal preferences. Consequently, the examples of good practices are applicable to synchronous, asynchronous or a mixture of these two communication approaches, in settings in which the participation in a VE component is either an integral part of the syllabus or offered as a voluntary activity. Although addressed primarily to tertiary-level teachers, the guidelines will find application also in other educational contexts. The results and the practical implications of the study may be of interest to school authorities and policy makers interested in improving the quality of VE or in introducing this form of learning as an element of internationalisation at home. All the publications presenting research results, the handbook and the examples of good practice will be available open access at the UAB Repository and project website: www.assessnet.site. The website also contains an annotated bibliography of publications and projects that touch upon the topic of assessment in VE and distance learning.

Preliminary results

This is research in-progress and the data analysis is still underway; however, on the basis of the questionnaire and interview data collected and analysed so far, the following general conclusions can be formulated:

- The approaches to assessment are highly diversified across educational contexts and depend to a large extent on whether or not VE is formally incorporated in the curriculum on an institutional level.
- Teacher beliefs are principally oriented towards formative objectives of assessment, with the aim of improving student learning and informing the planning of the teaching process.
- Formative assessment that offers informative feedback on both the process and the product of learning tends to prevail; however, its implementation is to a large extent context-dependent.
- Teachers tend to consider reflective and collaborative approaches as key to assessing students' VE experience.
- The assessment of the intercultural component usually entails students' reflective practice on the VE experience and formative feedback.
- There is a shortage of training opportunities and resources aimed specifically at assessment-related teaching competences.
- Parallel approaches to assessment in all partner institutions facilitate, but are not essential to, the success of the assessment process.

Conclusions

Although assessment is generally recognised as key to the success of VE, some teachers acknowledge their lack of efficient strategies, which is coupled with the shortage of relevant research findings and practical resources that would guide them in the process. It was also observed that the planning and implementation of assessment are characterized by a high degree of variability not only from project to project, but also within one project. To address the urgent need for hands-on resources and training opportunities aimed at these aspects of VE, the ASSESSnet project will include practical resources that are research-based and draw from the experiences from practising teachers across many educational contexts. We would like to take this opportunity to invite teachers experienced in VE to contact us and share the examples of their assessment practices on the project website.

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