

A black and white photograph of a desk with a laptop, notebooks, and hands working. The image is used as a background for the top half of the cover. The laptop is in the center, with hands typing on the keyboard. To the left, a hand is holding a pen over a notebook. To the right, another hand is holding a pen over a notebook. The desk is cluttered with papers and a glass of water.

A MENTORING HANDBOOK FOR VIRTUAL EXCHANGE TEACHERS

Strategies to Help Students Achieve
Successful Synchronous and
Asynchronous Online Intercultural
Communication

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1. Introduction

This handbook is intended to be a tool to provide teachers who implement class-to-class Virtual Exchanges (VEs) with guidelines, strategies and materials that will be useful for them in acting as mentors to help their students make the most of their online intercultural interactions in both synchronous and asynchronous communicative contexts.

In the field of education, it is common nowadays to refer to students as 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001). This categorization presupposes that those born from 1984 onwards will naturally have special skills in handling technology due to the fact that they have coexisted with it throughout their lives. It is therefore often assumed that students will be somehow naturally prepared to navigate online interactions effectively and efficiently. However, research over the past few years indicates that 'digital natives' could benefit from training in the use of technologies just as much as their predecessors, the so-called 'digital immigrants'. (Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017)

The Stevens Initiative Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report (2019) pointed to the need for VE teachers and facilitators to be specifically trained both on how to effectively conduct a VE in order to make their students aware of how to interact online as well as on the importance of providing students with opportunities to engage with multiple modes for communication (i.e. synchronous/asynchronous) during their VEs.

In view of the above, the initiative to create this handbook came from a group of international VE practitioners and researchers who noticed that their students were not fully aware of effective communication strategies in synchronous and asynchronous communicative contexts and that they could benefit from their guidance in this regard. To this end, this handbook has been developed by triangulating conversational data coming from VE participants' videoconferences and discussion forums and self-reported data stemming from the portfolios and interviews from various VEs in order to provide VE teachers with specific mentoring guidelines for each communicative modality based on authentic scenarios.

At no time does this tool intend to prescribe what is the right thing to do, but rather it is intended to offer mentoring possibilities that teachers can adapt to their own contexts and needs.

1.1 How to use this handbook

For each of the two main sections (i.e. mentoring guidelines for synchronous online intercultural communication and mentoring guidelines for asynchronous online intercultural communication) there are three subsections divided by when the action is happening (i.e. before, during and after the VE). Each of these subsections is divided into different issues that will contain reflective questions for the instructor, examples of the issue taken from real scenarios, and then a mentoring guideline that shares a good practice to improve communication related to that issue.

The handbook invites you to ask some questions to yourself in each stage of the implementation of a VE (i.e. before, during and after) and to let the answers to these questions (upon reflection or consultation with the students) guide your mentoring. For instance, before the interaction starts, you may take some time to ask yourself "Do my students know how to use the (a)synchronous communication tools they will be engaged with?" If upon reflection or consultation with the students the answer is yes, you may want to move on to the next mentoring category, but if not, you may be interested in spending some time in class working on this with the students.

After reflection, once you have decided which aspects of mentoring are or are not relevant to your specific group of learners, comes implementation. The methodology proposed in the presentations designed for use in class derived from this study is to use examples drawn from real communication scenarios as prompts for discussion to engage students in the process of proactively uncovering effective and ineffective communication strategies.

2. Mentoring guidelines for synchronous online intercultural communication

This section presents mentoring guidelines for online intercultural interaction through synchronous communication tools. Synchronous communication is that which occurs in real time either orally or in writing, and examples of this type of communication include videoconferencing or instant messaging chat conversations. These guidelines presented here specifically stem from the analysis of the interaction of VE participants mainly through videoconferences but also through Whatsapp groups, as well as their reflections on these interactions.

2.1. Before the interaction starts

As a teacher, before starting a VE there are certain questions you may want to ask yourself as you get your students ready for the interaction:

- *Do my students know how to use the synchronous communication tools they will be engaged with?*
- *Are my students aware of aspects of communication such as the basic rules of netiquette or non-verbal language?*
- *Do my students have the necessary skills to successfully organize and develop their first synchronous interaction together?*
- *Are my students aware of common concerns before a first synchronous online intercultural interaction?*

If upon reflection (or consultation with your students) your answer to all of these questions is yes, you may want to move on to the next section, but if not, you may be interested in the guidelines below.

VE teachers can get their students ready for the interaction by teaching them technology use, organizational skills and awareness of common concerns.

2.1.1. Technology use: Technical and netiquette aspects

Do my students know how to use the communication tools they will be engaged with?

Sometimes when VE teachers are working with young students they may tend to assume that they will be familiar with the communication tools they are going to be using (i.e. their different buttons and functionalities). However, this is not necessarily the case. Look at the following excerpt from a first videoconference between international students:

- *1: okay. Ahm, I have a lot of links and links and maybe I will share my screen...I can't share my screen.*
- *2: ahm...I don't know, you know?*

- 3: *I think it's on the screen, there's a button at the bottom.*
- 1: *ah, green*
- 2: *but you need...*
- 1: *ah I don't have 'permission', I'm sorry*
- 2: *that's right, 'permission'.*
- 3: *I mean, do I make you a host? I think I made it*
- 1: *oh, okay, thanks. This is very new to me, sorry can you see my screen?*
- various: *yes, we can*

Mentoring guidelines for technical aspects

Before your students start interacting with their international partners, you may spend some in-class time guiding your students in familiarizing themselves with the videoconferencing tool they will be using (i.e. get to know its buttons and functionalities). For example, you can help them to find out beforehand how to share their screen with them or how to record their meeting as well as any other aspects you think they may need during their meeting. This will help them feel more confident and the interaction will flow more smoothly. You can adapt this suggestion to your context or preferences and other options could be encouraging them to explore the buttons and functionalities by themselves if you prefer a more autonomous way of learning or using [the presentation](#) we propose to bring this topic up in the classroom.

Are my students aware of aspects of communication such as the basic rules of netiquette or non-verbal language?

It is clear that both netiquette and non-verbal language are very extensive areas that we cannot cover in detail if we are realistic and take into account the time constraints we face when implementing a VE. However, a number of basic guidelines can be very useful. The following are examples of a series of reflections from VE participants on this topic:

- *It is not easy to look at the camera instead of the screen, and it is not easy to notice the gestures as it is if you have someone in front of you. Therefore, I think this type of online exchange helps a lot.*
- *I think that I have improved with the communicative ways to make the people understand that you are listening by nodding the head, listen carefully and trying to look directly at the camera while I was speaking.*
- *If you don't directly look at the camera, that can be seen like something rude or even people can think that you're reading. From that moment of realization, I worked on that during the exchange.*
- *Excerpt from a videoconference:*
 - 1: (...) *(speaks but no one can hear him)*
 - 2: *your mic!*
 - 3: *you're muted!*

Mentoring guideline for netiquette and non-verbal language

You may consider holding an in-class discussion to help your students be aware of some basic netiquette rules such as muting oneself while one is not speaking to avoid background noises, looking at the camera to make others feel that one is looking at them or nodding one's head to make the interlocutor see that one is either agreeing or understanding them, etc... You can also help them become aware of and able to interpret the meaning that their and their partners' facial expressions and body language (or the lack of them) may convey. You may prefer providing your students with a list of good practices in this regard or using [the presentation](#) we propose.

1: Now, you can hear me?

2,3: yes

2.1.2. Organisational skills

Do my students have the necessary skills to successfully organize and develop their first interaction together?

One of the first challenges that synchronous communication can pose to VE participants is finding a date and a time that suits all of them, especially when participants are in different time zones.

Once resolved, there is the challenge of moving the meeting forward that is: getting the conversation flowing and tasks completed during the meeting. This can be especially demanding if during the first videoconference when the participants do not yet know each other well everything is left to improvisation. To address this, VE teachers can help their students develop organizational skills by showing them how to schedule their first meeting and how to prepare their first agenda. The following examples illustrate students' challenges regarding the scheduling and development of their first videoconference with their international partners:

Scheduling a meeting:

- *It has been difficult for us to balance the dates because they all work part-time and full-time and we also work and it has been a bit complicated.*
- *Portfolio reflection: They were confused about the time of our meeting. They thought it was Ireland time and not the time in Madrid, although I wrote it very clearly. / Excerpt from the videoconference: E.g. 1: Is your partner there? Because I don't see her 2: I messaged her 3: She might have thought it was 5 Irish time*

Mentoring guideline for scheduling and moving forward the first meeting

You may consider spending in-class time guiding your students on how to schedule their first meeting together. To that purpose you can teach them how to use specific tools (e.g. Doodle) to find the date and time that best suits them or just assist them in writing their first email to their international partners (e.g. by showing them how to write an appropriate email). Remind them that when organizing and/or attending a synchronous meeting they should always bear in mind time differences across countries.

In order to provide them with the tools they need to move their first videoconference together forward you can assist them in collaboratively preparing an agenda before their videoconference starts. Tell them to include the points to be treated during the meeting and to pay attention to distributing them coherently according to the time each has available. This will help them to be able to cover all the necessary points and to know what to talk about in every moment.

In addition to the agenda, you can encourage them to prepare some notes on what they would like to share with their international partners in the meeting beforehand so that they can feel more at ease during the videoconference. Pre-meeting organization can help a lot in terms of self-confidence.

Finally, you can also encourage them to agree beforehand on the roles they are going to take during the meeting (e.g. leader, spokesperson, chairperson...) to make sure that there is at least one person in charge of the different parts of the job as well as to contribute to a smoother interaction. You can also use [the presentation](#) we propose to talk about videoconference scheduling and development in class.

Staying on track:

- *From my point of view the most difficult thing was to keep the conversation on track because there were moments where we were blank. Since you don't have a relationship with them yet you don't really know what to talk about. There were times when the 5 of us didn't really know what to say.*
- *It was like "well, we can do that, okay". But who takes the lead? you know who says well let's do that, don't keep saying more. Everybody was like well I don't know, I don't know, I don't know... So, it was like nobody was taking the lead.*

2.1.3. Awareness of common concerns

Are my students aware of common concerns before a first online intercultural interaction?

A final aspect you may consider dealing with before your students have their first synchronous interaction with their international partners are the initial common concerns. The fact that many students tend to feel nervous to a greater or lesser extent when faced with the situation of having to speak in a foreign language is extremely common, although it is not usually discussed openly in the classrooms. Usually the participants of VEs are faced with the situation of having to interact with people they do not yet know well in a foreign language and using technological tools, which gives rise to a number of common concerns such as embarrassment about speaking to strangers, fear of being judged on their proficiency in the foreign language or worry that the technology will fail. The following examples illustrate students' common concerns:

- *When the time for our first videoconference came, I could not be more nervous. These kinds of things always make me quite anxious because I am not good at talking with people I do not know and even less via the Internet, for I am constantly checking whether my connection is good enough and whether people can hear me well enough. (Embarrassment about speaking to strangers; worry that the technology will fail)*
- *Having to communicate via Zoom was weird for me at first because I am not used to that, and I am camera shy so I would have to gain the courage to speak at first. (Unfamiliar with technology/videoconferencing)*
- *It was very difficult to communicate, not because of language problems, but because of shyness. We were trying to conduct the discussion, asking questions and thus having an active conversation with all the members of the meeting. After the meeting we discussed with each other trying to understand how to conduct the next meeting so that everyone feels comfortable and avoiding moments of embarrassment and discomfort. (Making people feel comfortable)*

Mentoring guideline for awareness of common concerns

Openly addressing these concerns with the students can help them realise they are not the only ones feeling like that which could in turn help them rationalise their feelings and feel less anxious about the first interaction. You can help them become aware that many people feel frightened or nervous about speaking in a foreign language with others which is known as Foreign Language Anxiety and you can try to make your students approach this experience as an opportunity to practice and improve. One of the main reasons why people feel nervous lies in the fear of making mistakes or the fear of being judged by others. However, after participating in online intercultural interaction most people feel these concerns were unfounded and wish they had overcome them so that they could have seized the opportunity to its full potential. Therefore, openly addressing together as a group how everyone feels can help all to feel better. You can encourage students to discuss and agree on what could make them feel more comfortable with their international partners. You can use [the presentation](#) we propose to raise this topic in class.

2.2. During the interaction: Communicative strategies

An overall question that may come to the mind of teachers implementing class to class VEs could be: How can I help my students improve their synchronous interactions if I'm not there while they are taking place? In this regard, throughout the VEs teachers can assist their students by dealing in class with various issues such as productive and unproductive communicative strategies, communicative difficulties, technical difficulties or conflict.



Here is a list of questions you may ask yourself once synchronous interactions have started to take place:

- *Are my students ready to face technical difficulties?*
- *Are my students aware of effective and appropriate communicative strategies for synchronous online intercultural interactions?*
- *Are my students aware of unproductive communicative strategies that they should avoid in synchronous online intercultural interactions?*
- *Do my students know the potential of using synchronous personal correspondence during a VE?*

If upon reflection (or consultation with your students) your answer to all of these questions is yes, you may want to move on to the next section, but if not, you may be interested in the guidelines below.

The mentoring guidelines proposed in this section are intended to offer VE teachers support and inspiration in providing their students with the keys to successfully participating in synchronous online intercultural interaction by applying appropriate and effective communicative strategies.

2.2.1. Best practices

Facing technical difficulties

Are my students ready to face technical difficulties?

One of the first challenges that may arise once interactions begin are technical difficulties. The following examples show VE participants' reflections in this regard:

- *Using online communication was weird for me, because we were seven people and sometimes the connection was not good, so I was not able to hear some words that my partners had said.*
- *With online technologies you can always have technical problems that are out of your reach, so it is important to always have a plan B or another backup idea in case something happens.*
- *I had a lot of connection problems and my micro didn't work so it was very complicated for all of us to have the camera and the micro at the same time. So, the only option that I had was to speak in the chat.*

Are my students aware of effective and appropriate communicative strategies for synchronous online intercultural interactions?

When it comes to synchronous online spoken interaction there are a number of strategies that VE teachers can provide to their students in order to successfully navigate their interactions.

Mentoring guideline for technical difficulties

The first step once the interactions begin is to make the classroom a safe space in which to share what happens during the interactions so that the whole group can benefit from it. In the case of technical difficulties, talking about them in class and proposing strategies for dealing with them can be very useful both for those who have already found themselves in the situation and for those who may find themselves in the situation in the future so that they have the keys to face them.

If, due to a bad connection, your students report being unable to hear or understand what their partners have said, encourage them to ask for clarification so that they can follow the conversation. Point out to them to do this at the right time so as not to interrupt abruptly or to use the chat. Also, agreeing as a group on a back up option for a synchronous communication tool can be an effective strategy for dealing with unexpected technical problems such as a system crash. Finally, remind them to stay calm and adapt as best they can to the situation. You can use [the presentation](#) we propose to talk about this in class with your students.

Turn taking

One of the aspects related to this modality of interaction in which students may benefit from guidance is **turn taking**. The following examples illustrate some of the difficulties encountered by VE participants in this respect:

- *It seemed very wrong to me...that I had to say well, what do you think? what do you think? as if I were the "teacher" you know...It's like everyone has the right to speak, to say what they want...but since no one was speaking!*
- *It is true that sometimes it is a bit complicated since if two people speak at the same time you do not understand them, but in general I have liked working with videoconferences.*
- *When it comes to communicating through online technologies such as Zoom, Meet or Teams I think it is very important to keep in mind listening to the rest of your group. Sometimes we don't let the other talk and we take all the ideas the rest of the group was about to say.*

Mentoring guideline for turn taking

Encourage your students to try to assess the situation and group dynamics, and see how they can best help their interlocutors establish their voice in the interaction. To avoid both keeping quiet for fear of all speaking at once and interrupting each other because they don't know who is going to speak, you can tell them to agree as a group on some turn taking techniques such as using the chat when something comes up and they don't want to interrupt so that they don't forget it, raising their hand or using the 'raise your hand' button. Finally, in videoconferencing, people who are comfortable speaking in public or who are more extroverted can "monopolize" the conversation even if they don't want to. Encourage students to try to ensure that the interventions are balanced among all participants in the conversation, for example by asking those who find it more difficult to intervene what their opinion is. You can use [the presentation](#) we propose to talk about this with your students.

Cooperation and inclusion

From the above, another aspect of relevance in this type of communication emerges, which is **cooperation and inclusion**. If VE teachers allow their students' interactions to develop "naturally" without any kind of intervention, there will surely be students who participate very proactively while others will make as little contribution as possible. The following examples illustrate this type of situation:

- *Sometimes our international partners did not answer our questions and they only answered if we asked directly to someone.*
- *Of course, one says: ok and then the others keep quiet, so how can you make the decision to say come on, let's do this because there are 3 that don't say anything, so we said well, if it's ok with you, we'll do this and in the end we ended up doing that. But there was no full consensus to say okay, yes, yes, I agree with all of us. Maybe one of us said it and that is all.*

Mentoring guideline for cooperation and inclusion

Advise your students to try to direct questions to specific participants by stating their name since this strategy can help to the flow of the conversation when it is not running smoothly. Also, stepping in when a partner seems reluctant or hesitant can be a constructive way of initiating cooperation if done in a sensitive way.

At the same time, proactively asking questions and spending time on finding common ground are a good way to show interest in who others are and what their beliefs, worldviews and practices are. These strategies can lay the foundation for relationships and can foster other conversations beyond the assignment, so encourage your students to pay attention to their interlocutors to discern how best to approach them, to be sensitive to what they perceive from them and to act accordingly. Finally, strategies to cooperate in reaching group decisions may be voting by a show of hands or in the chat or have a round where one by one they give their opinion if the group is not very large. You can use [the presentation](#) we propose to talk about this in class.

Asking for clarification and negotiation of meaning

Yet another type of questions that VE teachers can encourage their students to ask are those aimed at obtaining clarification to ensure understanding. Indeed, **asking for clarification** is a strategy for **negotiation of meaning** which is "a process that speakers go through to reach a clear understanding of each other" ([British Council](#)). The following examples illustrate various strategies employed by VE participants for clarifying and negotiating meaning such as: asking for clarification or repetition, asking partners to write in the chat, asking information about unfamiliar concepts or rephrasing to facilitate understanding.

- *Excerpt from a videoconference:*
 - *1: Our philosophy is travelling respecting nature*
 - *2: Can you write it in the chat please?*
 - *1: Yeah, of course*
 - *3: Or repeat it please?*
- *Regarding our presentation, we talked about 'embutidos' and how they can affect our health. During the meeting, they were very interested in the topic and wanted to know more. They asked us a lot of questions and were very curious. I liked that because they wanted to know more about us and about our country.*

- *Excerpt from a videoconference:*
 - 1: *Is that the same Balboa as the soccer team?*
 - 2: *Repeat please*

 - 3: *Maybe you can write it down in the chat*
 - 2: *Better*
 - *(Writes in the chat)*
 - 3: *Ah, no, no. No, this one is Balboa and that one is Bilbao*
 - 2: *Yeah, it's not the same. It sounds similar, but it's not the same*
 - 3: *Bilbao is a big city, this is a small village*

Mentoring guideline for asking for clarification and negotiation of meaning

Encourage your students to ask for clarification if they are not quite sure whether they are on the same page as their partners, rather than remaining in doubt. This will help to avoid misunderstandings as the conversation progresses.

Help students become aware that they may need clarification in terms of the meaning of a sentence or word and need an explanation or repetition, but they also may need clarification about concepts or situations that are unfamiliar to them (e.g. when they are talking about aspects related to culture). Proactively asking questions will make participants feel interest in what they have to say and will greatly enhance the interactions.

Remind them that during videoconferences, the chat can become an ally when they have trouble understanding a word or want to know how to spell it. This strategy can also help clear up misunderstandings. You can use [the presentation](#) we propose for this.

Mediation

In order to contribute to a successful negotiation of meaning in both linguistic and conceptual terms, learners can deploy their **mediation** skills through the application of various strategies. The following examples present VE participants' acting as mediators:

- *E.g. Excerpt from a videoconference: (linguistic mediation)*
 - *Yo fui en...¿cómo se dice High School o Secondary School en español? / Tr: I went in...How do you say High School or Secondary School in Spanish?*
 - *instituto/ Tr: instituto=high school*
 - *ah, instituto sí,sí.En el ¿quinto año? fifth year? / Tr: Oh, instituto, yes, yes. In the fifth year?*
 - *En España es que es diferente las etapas, el instituto aquí son 4 años. ¿con cuántos años fuiste? /Tr: In Spain the educational stages are different, high school here lasts 4 years. How old were you when you went there?*
 - *ehm, like, ¿15 años? / Tr: ehm, like, 15 years?*
 - *tercer año del instituto en España sería/ Tr: That would be the third year of high school in Spain*

Mentoring guideline for linguistic and conceptual mediation

You can encourage your students to act as linguistic and conceptual mediators. Acting as a mediator means trying to facilitate understanding and successful communication by 'creating bridges' and helping partners to 'construct or convey meaning' both within a language and from a language to another (CoE, 2018). You can use [the presentation we](#) propose for this.

- *E.g. Excerpt from a videoconference: (conceptual mediation)*
 - 1: *Yeah, me and x, play football. Have you heard of Irish football?*
 - 2: *football in Ireland is like football in Spain, right?*
 - all: *no!*
 - 1: *you can use your hands*
 - 2: *ah okay (makes a gesture of shock)*
 - 1: *it's basically an Irish football and then there's soccer as well (explains how gaelic football is played)*

Plurilingual and pluricultural competences

The notions presented above such as negotiation of meaning or mediation become relevant in the context of VEs due to the linguistic and cultural diversity of the participants. In this sense, VE teachers can provide their students with strategies to develop their **plurilingual and pluricultural competences** in synchronous communicative settings. The following examples illustrate these competences:

Plurilingual competence:

- *E.g. Excerpt from a videoconference:*
 - *No sé como a todas nos gusta viajar, y había visto que también habéis puesto en las prácticas ecológicas sobre la ropa vintage pues no sé, algo relacionado con esas dos cosas si os parece bien. Like vintage travelers o algo así? / Tr: I don't know, as all of us like to travel and I saw that you posted about vintage clothing when talking about your ecological practices, we could do it about something related to those two things if you agree. Like vintage travelers or something like that?*
 - *Sí! Vintage travelers/ Tr: Yes! Vintage travelers*
 - *¿Tiene que ser en inglés o en español?/ Tr: Does it have to be in English or in Spanish?*
 - *Podemos hacer una palabra en inglés y otra en español. ¿Vintage viajeros?/ Tr: We can do it with a word in English and another one in Spanish. Vintage viajeros? (viajeros=travelers)*
 - *En castellano el adjetivo va detrás/ Tr: In Spanish the adjective follows the adjective*
 - *Viajeros vintage/ Tr: Vintage travelers*
- *E.g. Excerpt from a videoconference:*
 - 1: *Avoid eating with your eyes. I'm not sure if this is said in Spain but here it is said that someone "eats with their eyes" when they think they can eat much more than they can so they order very large portions and don't finish it.*
 - 2: *In Spain we do eat with our eyes but we use it more in the sense that you like something, something you see visually, it goes in through your eyes. It is appetizing.*
 - 1: *It is also said that if I ask for a very large portion, someone might tell me that my eyes are bigger than my stomach.*
 - 2: *That is not the case in our country.*

Pluricultural competence:

- *E.g. During the conversation I felt myself being cautious with my wording as to not stereotype or make assumptions about people or circumstances as I shared what I had heard through news media*
- *E.g. Excerpt from a group interview:*
 - 1: *I think that having participated in the exchange is going to affect how I act personally, to be more open, more tolerant, to be more accepting of other people's*

opinions.

- *2: Yes, just like you have to adapt more and learn to dialogue with other people and see different points of view.*

Mentoring guideline for plurilingual and pluricultural competences

The concept of **plurilingual competence** in general terms can be understood according to two aspects: plurilingual comprehension and the ability to build on a plurilingual repertoire (CoE, 2018). This implies using the knowledge of and proficiency (even partial) in one or more languages to achieve the communication goal displaying attitudes of openness and flexibility to work with different elements of different languages in both receptive and productive terms.

Remind your students that VEs are a great opportunity to learn and practice a more everyday language compared to the formal register in which languages are usually learned in the regular classroom. Both learning and fully understanding the meaning(s) of idiomatic expressions can be challenging for foreign language learners but also a sign of high proficiency. Encourage them to discuss with their partners the meaning(s) these hold in their cultures when they come up in the conversation.

Pluricultural competence as briefly described would refer to the ability to recognise and interpret from a critical and neutral perspective cultural issues (similarities, differences, worldviews, perspectives, practices...) and to act accordingly and appropriately (CoE, 2018).

To put this into practice you can help your students to bear in mind that communication and interaction strategies vary across cultures and to avoid overgeneralizing as each person has its own way of communicating. Guiding your students in paying close attention to how their partners communicate can help them avoid or solve misunderstandings if they are aware of the fact that social, ethical, and cultural norms vary across cultures.

To this end, try to promote that your students approach the VE with intercultural speakers' attitudes (Byram, 1997) such as openness and curiosity since in order to seize this kind of experience to its fullest, students should be willing to question their own culture as well as interested in discovering their partners'. They can put this into practice by being proactive in trying to understand not only the meaning of what their partners are saying but the reasons behind it or its causes or consequences so that they can gain a deeper understanding of their approach.

Yet another aspect that is worth discussing with VE participants are the cultures-of-use. Every culture has a way of approaching and using the tools that mediate communication, this is known as **cultures-of-use** (Thorne, 2003) and may have both commonalities and differences with other cultures. You can guide your students in becoming aware of this so that when they engage in online intercultural communication they pay attention to and even explicitly discuss with their colleagues the conception or practices associated with the tools that mediate their communication. You can use [the presentation](#) we propose to introduce this matter to your group.



Cultures of use:

- *E.g. Excerpt from a videoconference:*
 - 1: *and now we have to decide how to communicate during the exchange*
 - 2: *Do you guys have facebook, whatsapp or anything like that?*
 - 1: *I have facebook, I have whatsapp, I have instagram...*
 - 2: *Maybe...whatsapp? We can all put our numbers in the chat [all agree and write their numbers in the chat]*
 - 3: *Oh, and it's +34*
 - 2: *Okay. We don't use whatsapp here, like we do, but I think facebook is the main way.*
 - 1: *Really?!*
 - 2: *Yeah, I know whatsapp in Spain is like a big thing*
 - 1: *and facebook is more like...for elderly people!*
 - 3: *We don't use that at all! [all laugh] (...)*

Adaptability

Finally, **adaptability** is a necessary skill for success in both synchronous online intercultural interaction and collaboration. In this sense, two types of adaptability are equally essential: linguistic and what we might call telecollaborative.

Linguistic adaptability:

- *E.g. Excerpt from a videoconference:*
 - 1: *I was really afraid to Irish English because everyone says that it's different from English one and when I watch films I find it difficult to understand but...*
 - 2: *If I'm talking quickly just tell me.*
 - 3: *Same with me. If I talk too fast and you don't understand something I say, say it to me.*
 - 1: *The same happens with Spanish because I normally speak really quickly.*
- *E.g. Student reflection:*
 - *I did speak more slowly for fear of not being understood, because I am aware I normally speak very fast.*

Telecollaborative adaptability:

- *E.g. I learned that in order to do a common project with people you barely know, it is necessary to understand that you have different lives and that sometimes you must make a sacrifice. It was difficult at first, but after the first meeting, we were able to organize the next one more quickly because we learnt how to do it at this stage.*



Mentoring guideline for linguistic and telecollaborative adaptability

Introducing the topic of adaptability in class can be beneficial in preventing and/or resolving misunderstandings and even conflicts.

As far as **linguistic adaptability** is concerned, you can encourage your students to pay attention to their communicative context and their interlocutors. There are several aspects that they can easily adapt to improve their communication, such as the volume of their voice, the pace of their speech, the register and terminology they choose, etc. One strategy that can have a positive impact on mutual understanding is to openly offer interlocutors and discuss with them the best way to adapt linguistically to each other's needs.

The concept of **telecollaborative adaptability** makes reference to students' ability to adjust to the dynamics of the group in various aspects such as meeting's scheduling, meeting's development, group work division and completion, etc. Remind your students that any group work requires adaptability, even more so when it takes place online with people from different cultures. You can use [the presentation we](#) propose to talk about this with your students.

2.2.2. Unproductive strategies

Are my students aware of unproductive communicative strategies that they should avoid in synchronous online intercultural interactions?

We have devoted several pages to detailing various communicative strategies that can contribute to the success of synchronous online intercultural communication. However, guiding VE participants in identifying those communication strategies that are unproductive and that they should avoid can also be a very effective mentoring technique.

As introduced at the beginning of this handbook it is sometimes taken for granted that learners will be aware of both effective and unproductive communication strategies in the context of intercultural online communication. However, often learners could benefit from guidance in both directions. The following examples show some unproductive communication strategies:

Doing other things during a videoconference:

- *E.g. Excerpt from a videoconference:*
 - *Is your partner there? Because I don't see her*
 - *I messaged her (walking around and doing other things during the videoconference and after a while turns off the camera)*
 - *She might have thought it was 5 Irish time*

Not asking for clarification:

- *E.g. We had some problems as one of the boys sometimes spoke too fast in English and it was impossible to follow him. But I guess for them sometimes it was also difficult because we also speak very quickly or with words that they did not understand very well.*

Lacking body language and facial expressions:

- *E.g. In the videoconferences, 1 or 2 spoke, so the ones we spoke with had a communication style very similar to ours, there was no big difference. Of the others, I have no idea.*
 - *In fact, there was a time in which we thought that one of them wasn't there or was stuck. I sent a message to X saying: is she still there? she was stiff, there was no gestural language.*

Not intervening in the conversations:

- *E.g. We suggested and asked them all the time and said hey, what do you think about this. But of course, in the end, if you are waiting for someone's answer and it never comes, we can't just sit with our arms crossed...*
- *E.g. The biggest difficulty for me is to start talking, because in the video call, nobody wanted to talk...We were trying to ask things but it always seemed like a task, as if there was a fear of saying one's opinion more than the language problem, to overcome that...which is not shame but....*Reading during videoconferences:
- *E.g. I think that even though their presentation was really interesting, and the topic was good, they could have put more effort in it. They literally read all the presentation. This made me lose my focus.*

Mentoring guideline for unproductive strategies

Making the classroom a safe space for sharing and discussing students' experiences in their interactions can make a difference in the development of an VE. In this sense, as a VE teacher you can ask your students to reflect after each interaction on what went wrong or what could be improved for the next one. You can propose specific questions for this in a portfolio (written student reflection diary). Alternatively, sharing this openly with the group can help everyone to learn from their own and others' mistakes as well as to become aware that many mistakes are as common as they are avoidable. In this scenario you can let the students lead the discussion to see if they are able to think of ways to remedy the communication errors but you can and should also help them to come to conclusions that will benefit their future communications.

The above examples show some unproductive communicative strategies that could be addressed as follows:

Doing other things during a videoconference: Ask your students to try to be present in the meeting: if possible, to keep their camera on and to avoid doing other things while they're having a conversation with their partners (e.g. walking around, doing other stuff, eating...). This may give their interlocutors the impression that they are not paying attention to them.

Not asking for clarification: Point out to your students that if they are aware that something in their communication is not working, they should take action to try to fix it. For instance, asking their partners if they can speak more slowly.

Lacking body language and facial expressions: You can advise your students to try to use strategies such as your body language or the reactions button to let your partners know that you are following the conversation when you don't intervene.

Not intervening in the conversations: Every group member should intervene in the discussions held. Various strategies can be used to try to integrate into the conversation those who participate less, such as directing questions to a specific person or addressing people by name.

Reading during videoconferences: Advise your students to avoid reading during videoconferences. While reflecting on what they have to discuss during the meeting in advance is beneficial and even some notes can help them to stay on track during the meeting, preparing scripts and reading or learning by heart what is going to be said makes the interaction lose dynamism and spontaneity and makes the interlocutors lose interest to some extent. It is preferable to speak spontaneously and make mistakes rather than to resort to reading.

You can use [the presentation](#) we propose to talk about this with your group.

2.2.3. Personal correspondence

Do my students know the potential of using synchronous personal correspondence during a VE?

So far, we have referred to students' interactions as an integrated part of their VE. But, in addition to these, students need to have a personal communication channel through which they can keep in touch with each other to discuss issues related to their international working group (meetings, assignments, etc.). For this purpose, learners can agree to use a synchronous communication tool such as instant messaging applications. This type of communication serves organisational purposes such as scheduling meetings or discussing task related issues. But, at the same time, it also provides a more informal environment in which to deal with topics beyond the task itself using everyday language and multimedia sources thus contributing to a further development of the interpersonal relationships. This communication tool greatly contributes to group bonding and increased confidence. The following examples illustrate this:

- *E.g. At first it was difficult to collaborate with a stranger in another language, but then, after talking on WhatsApp we became familiar, which made it easier to carry out the task together. I think that creating a Whatsapp group was a great idea because every time we had to make an appointment to do a videoconference, related to any of the activities assigned, it was a quick way to reach an agreement without any misunderstanding.*
- *E.g. It was very interesting to meet them in Zoom again. As we had been talking by WhatsApp during those weeks, we had more confidence to talk during the meeting. We listened carefully to each other and asked a lot of questions because it was interesting to comment on our thoughts about these themes.*
- *E.g. Now we even talk about other topics outside of class. Just like normal friends. And also, I love it because now it is very difficult to make new friends because of all this situation, so it's great. We talk in the whatsapp group we have and the other day, for example, they congratulated us on Halloween and then we were talking about how they were living the situation with all the coronavirus and so on and it was very good.*
- *E.g. I've developed my writing skills more. Because I have communicated more in English than other times through Whatsapp. I've learned expressions that my partners said in Whatsapp conversations.*

Mentoring guideline for synchronous personal correspondence

The first thing that you should point out to your students is that when proposing a synchronous communication tool for personal correspondence with their group, they should offer the options they think are appropriate, but they should also be open to what others propose and willing to discuss. Remind them that each culture has its own cultures of use and that their colleagues may (or may not) use the tools in the same way or for the same purposes as them or may simply not use the same tools.

In addition to its value for bonding and personal relationships development, synchronous personal correspondence can contribute to the development of several skills such as written comprehension and production and the acquisition of vocabulary and expressions characteristic of this mode of communication. It also offers the opportunity to learn about the use of emojis, gifs and abbreviations in other cultures and the different meanings attributed to them.

You can use [the presentation](#) we propose to talk about this with your class.

2.3. After the interaction

If the time you have at your disposal allows it and you consider it convenient, once the VE comes to an end and interactions cease, providing students with the opportunity to reflect on their experience

can be a very positive thing. Class-to-class VEs tend to take place over short periods of time and thus tend to be learning-intensive experiences. Therefore, a final period of critical reflection may be helpful in order to look back on the experience with some perspective and reach one's own conclusions.

2.3.1 Critical reflection

If you decide to guide your students on critically reflecting on their interactions to achieve their own conclusions, you may consider introducing one or more of the following topics. You may want to pay attention to the synchronous/asynchronous divide or may simply propose these in general terms including both. At the same time, you may want to use or adapt the questions we propose or think about different ones. In case these can help or inspire you, here are some suggestions for questions to trigger reflection and some examples of students' reflections on each topic:

The impact (or not) that different (synchronous) communication tools have on online intercultural communication: *Do you think that using the kind of (synchronous) communication tools that you did had an impact on your communication with your international partners? If so, how?*

- *E.g. It is different from what we are used to, but I also find it very interesting, for example, to practice for future interviews. It is not easy to look at the camera instead of the screen, and it is not easy to notice the gestures as it is if you have someone in front of you. Therefore, I think this type of online exchange helps a lot.*
- *E.g. In my opinion, the Zoom meeting made us change the way we communicate because it was rather formal at the beginning. After the videoconference, we started to talk like we would do with our close friends.*
- *E.g. The truth is that now we act much closer because before the video call everything was more formal...each one sends his message in the forum very well written with everything just as it had to be put and then already in the video call and after that in the whatsapp group and so on we have been talking much more often and much more casually as we normally talk. We talked mainly about the assignment but then we also talked about our work, our career...*

Online intercultural social relationships: *What is the experience of introducing yourself and getting to know others through (synchronous) online tools like?*

- *E.g. I not only learnt that appearances can be misleading, I also realized what kind of leader I was. Referring to myself, I kept calm all the time reasoning during arguments we may have as well as making decisions or giving ideas when no one did it. I've never done something like this before. I didn't even know that I could be a leader.*
- *E.g. At this stage I learned how to talk during an online meeting. I learned that not everyone has the same ease in talking to strangers or in public, and I've tried to figure out what's the best way to put the other person at ease.*
- *E.g. This first videoconference was very interesting. Each of us was curious about the physiognomy, voice and interests of others.*
- *E.g. What I liked the most was the people, I loved meeting people and for example the 2 girls who spoke more and we were closer to them, we kept talking. Well, with the whole group but with them at a higher level and we have followed each other on social networks and so on and I think that's what I liked the most. And also to be able to speak in English, which you don't have that opportunity every day and it has been very good.*

Reflection on learning: *What skills are developed by participating in a VE (using synchronous communication tools) according to you?*

- *E.g. I think I have learnt a lot about communicating and collaborating with online technologies. Now I know different tools that can make communicating through the computer way easier. I usually don't enjoy video calls, I prefer meeting face to face. But this was very interesting.*
- *E.g. I think it is very useful because you practice English, which is not always possible, because in class you can speak for 5 minutes but here you have to speak for half an hour by yourself in English. So that really helps you to practice a lot. And then I also think that you gain confidence that you can speak and they understand you and they tell you how well you speak English. And then you also learn words or expressions that you don't learn in class. We have learned a lot of expressions more of an informal register that we didn't know.*
- *E.g. In the forum you pay a lot of attention and you are very focused on what you write. And then, in the videoconferences, if you want to communicate you have to make the effort to speak in English so of course, it's an opportunity!*
- *E.g. If there was another virtual exchange again, I would no longer be so ashamed to speak on video calls.*

Mentoring guideline for critical reflection

You can help your students draw their own conclusions, allowing for in-class discussion of their experience. Portfolio writing during VEs is also key to encouraging critical reflections from learners. The possible topics for discussion that have been proposed with the following aims in mind:

Recognizing tools are not neutral: Reflecting on this topic can help students to become aware of the impact that the mediation of technology has on the way they behave when communicating with others. An example of this would be having to make an extra effort to be communicative through the screen by being more attentive to facial expressions and gestures as well as gazes. You may also consider inviting them to reflect on how different modes of communication (synchronous/asynchronous) affect their perception of their partners and their partners' perception of them.

Presenting oneself and getting to know others online: Reflecting on what their behaviour has been during their (synchronous) interactions with their international peers can help them become more self-aware as well as to reflect on aspects they could improve for future online intercultural (synchronous) interactions. As we have already mentioned, when it comes to getting to know others online, synchronous interaction can have a very positive impact on the feeling of 'really getting to know others'. In this sense, a good topic for reflection can be the impact that the first videoconference had on their perception of others.

Skills development: Participation in a VE can lead to the development of a wide range of skills, although these learning outcomes can vary considerably from person to person. It is therefore useful to guide learners towards personal reflection so that each learner can come to their own conclusions as to what skills they have developed or acquired during this experience. For example, it may be the case that participating in videoconferences help students become familiar with the technical aspects of handling videoconferencing tools and therefore contribute to the development of digital skills.

This type of interaction also provides a real communicative context for putting into practice, developing and improving oral comprehension and production skills and may constitute a great help to reduce foreign language anxiety and for students to gain confidence and fluency in the foreign language.

You can use [the presentation](#) we propose for this purpose.

3. Mentoring guidelines for asynchronous online intercultural communication

This section presents mentoring guidelines for online intercultural interaction through asynchronous communication tools. Asynchronous communication is that which occurs on a time-deferred basis either orally or in writing and examples of this type of communication include discussion forums or email conversations. These guidelines presented here specifically stem from the analysis of the interaction of VE participants mainly through discussion forums but also through emails, as well as their reflections on these interactions.

3.1. Before the interaction starts

As a teacher, before starting a VE there are certain questions you may want to ask yourself:

- *Do my students know how to use the asynchronous communication tools they will be engaged with?*
- *Are my students aware of common concerns before the first asynchronous online intercultural interaction?*

If upon reflection (or consultation with your students) your answer to all of these questions is yes, you may want to move on to the next section, but if not, you may be interested in the guidelines below.

VE teachers can get their students ready for the interaction by teaching them how to use technology effectively and to be aware of common concerns.

3.1.1. Technology use

Do my students know how to use the asynchronous communication tools they will be engaged with?

Unlike synchronous communication, asynchronous communication provides the interlocutors with enough time to explore the communication tools without this interfering with the interaction. Still, it may not hurt to spend some time getting to know the functions and possibilities of the asynchronous communication tool(s) to be used during the VE in order to guide learners in their familiarisation with it as well as to help them get the most out of it.

- *E.g. The application we used lacked notifications and some comments got easily lost and were answered late.*

Mentoring guideline for technology use

You may consider guiding your students in getting familiar with the asynchronous communication tool(s) they are going to use to communicate with their international partners. A good moment for this could be (time permitting) the same session in which you introduce them to the functions and possibilities of the synchronous communication tool(s) (in case they will be using both types of communication). In addition, you may consider pointing out the fact that asynchronous communication entails a certain amount of monitoring to keep the conversation flowing and to avoid leaving partners with unanswered questions. Especially in cases in which the communication tool does not send notifications, students will need to proactively check them from time to time.

You can use [the presentation](#) we propose for this.

3.1.2. Awareness of common concerns

Although perhaps to a lesser extent than in synchronous interaction, in asynchronous interaction some people also feel insecure and/or nervous about communicating in a foreign language.

- *E.g. In the forum you are very attentive and focused on what you write. During this week, our conversations in the forum were not the best; I think that it was because we were still really nervous about what the others may think about our way of speaking a language that is not our mother tongue.*

Mentoring guideline for awareness of common concerns

Advise your students to take the time that this mode of communication offers them to prepare interventions ahead of time so that they feel less pressure and can contribute outcomes that they are satisfied with. You can use [the presentation](#) we propose for this.

3.2. During the interaction

An overall question that may come to the mind of teachers implementing class to class VEs could be: How can I help my students improve their asynchronous interactions if I'm not there while they are taking place? In this regard, throughout the VEs teachers can assist their students by dealing in class with various issues such as productive and unproductive communicative strategies, communicative difficulties, technical difficulties or conflict.

Here is a list of questions you may ask yourself once asynchronous interactions have started to take place:

- *Are my students ready to face technical difficulties?*
- *Are my students aware of effective and appropriate communicative strategies for asynchronous online intercultural interactions?*
- *Are my students aware of unproductive communicative strategies that they should avoid in asynchronous online intercultural interactions?*
- *Do my students know the potential of using asynchronous personal correspondence during a VE?*

If upon reflection (or consultation with your students) your answer to all of these questions is yes, you may want to move on to the next section, but if not, you may be interested in the guidelines below.

The mentoring guidelines proposed in this section are intended to offer VE teachers support and inspiration in providing their students with the keys to successfully participating in asynchronous online intercultural interaction by applying appropriate and effective communicative strategies.

3.2.1. Best practices

Technical difficulties

Are my students ready to face technical difficulties?

The types of technical difficulties that can occur during asynchronous communication are of a different nature than those discussed above in the case of synchronous communication. While the technical difficulties that could occur in the latter might be more unexpected or dependent on a good connection and equipment, those related to asynchronous communication may be somewhat

more predictable and avoidable. The following examples show possible problems that can be avoided:

- *E.g.*
 - *Hello, I have requested access to view the presentation. Is there any other format in which you can share the presentation?*
 - *Here it is. Please feel free to let me know if it doesn't work.*

- *E.g.*
 - *Hello everyone, this is my presentation. See you soon!*
 - *Hi ! For some reason I can't see this presentation :(Could you check if the link is correct, I would love to see your video!*
 - *Hi, sorry, I'm not sure why it's not working for you. On my computer it works, so the link is correct, can I email you the video?*
 - *Yes, please, my email is.... :)*

Mentoring guideline for technical difficulties

Once the asynchronous communication tools have been agreed and tested, it may be useful to spend some time making sure that everyone has access and knows how to use them. Remind your students to check the links they post to make sure they work and to keep their privacy settings open (where applicable) so that their international partners can access them. Encourage them not to give up in the face of unforeseen events and to look for alternatives and solutions to them. You can use [the presentation](#) we propose for this.

Are my students aware of effective and appropriate communicative strategies for asynchronous online intercultural interactions?

When it comes to asynchronous online written interaction there are a number of strategies that VE teachers can provide to their students in order to successfully navigate their interactions.

Composing posts

One of the aspects related to this modality of interaction in which students may benefit from guidance is **composing posts**. The following examples show excerpts from discussion forums in which students composed posts following effective strategies:

Use of emphatic words to convey meaning:

- *E.g.*
 - *Also, **I am quite curious** about green mortgages; **I would appreciate it if you explained it to me.***
 - *Green mortgages are when the bank offers a discount when the house you are planning to buy meets a certain energy efficiency level. This is determined by the materials used to build the house, and how much reusable energy is available in the house. It's a cool concept, and one that encourages people to buy energy efficient houses.*
 - ***I really** like the concept of green mortgages! I think it does not exist here, but it would be cool if they implemented it eventually.*

To explain the arguments on which one's opinion is based, to give concrete examples and to explain cultural concepts and expressions:

- *E.g.*
 - *Do you think your government could do more to help the environment? I am eager to hear your opinions.*
 - *Hi. **You are certainly right** that there are many people who don't realize that litter is a very important problem. **From my point of view, the government could help the environment in many, many ways, such as** putting more garbage cans, fining people who throw garbage on the ground or perhaps promoting more movements to collect garbage both on land and at sea. **However** our government does not pay much attention to all these issues and when it does it is for posture (**postureo means** to make believe you are doing something you are not actually doing. For example on Instagram people do a lot of posturing of their vacations).*

Mentoring guideline for composing on posts

Asynchronous communication gives students the opportunity to spend time on their written/oral productions so that they can reflect on the best way to express themselves by using strategies such as **vocabulary research or expressions** to convey their meaning in the best possible way. Encourage them to seize this aspect of this type of communication.

Remind students that since asynchronous written communication does not provide the communicative cues of synchronous 'face-to-face' communication, it is convenient **to use emphatic words to help convey meaning.**

Another strategy that is important to point out is to be sure **to explain the arguments on which one's opinion on something is based and to give concrete examples** that can help international partners understand more easily. It is also important for them to make sure **to explain concepts or expressions that they think may be unfamiliar to someone outside their context.**

You can use [the presentation](#) we propose for this.

Mentoring guideline for commenting on posts

As discussed above, due to the deferred nature of this type of communication, checking the comments is key. Indeed, it is something common to find questions unanswered on the discussion forums. Try to encourage your students **to avoid leaving unanswered questions.**

In addition, remind them that comments on posts should always **show that one has paid attention** to what has been expressed. For example, by making explicit reference to something surprising or interesting about which one would like to know more about. At the same time it is good **to share and highlight positive and common aspects** observed as well as **to include questions to show interest** in who others are and their beliefs, worldviews and practices.

As it was the case when composing posts, when commenting posts, **statements should always be argued** to help others understand the reasons behind them (e.g. "I noticed we are different" (the reasons are...)).

You can use [the presentation](#) we propose for this.

Commenting on posts

In addition to knowing the right strategies for writing their own good posts, students need to know the keys for **commenting on their partners' posts**. The following examples illustrate different aspects that should be considered when commenting on posts:

To avoid leaving unanswered questions:

- *E.g. Many times it happens that nobody answers you. Because they are no longer in this "chapter" let's say, and they don't see it anymore and they don't answer you.*

To show that attention has been paid, to highlight positive and common aspects and to include questions to show interest:

- *E.g. Hello. First of all, your video was **very good and interesting**. Cliffs look awesome! **What brought my attention the most was the fact that you stayed in a hotel that used solar energy.** I've never been to any of them and **I'd like to know more** about your experience. Did you notice any difference from hotels that don't use solar energy?*

Including symbols to convey meaning

A very specific feature of online written interaction is that of **including symbols to convey meaning** (i.e. emoticons, emojis, images, memes...). These symbols are quite linked to both culture and age and can have different uses and meanings depending on the context. This makes it convenient for VE teachers to guide their students in becoming aware and able to interpret these. The following examples illustrate students' experiences with these communicative resources:

- *E.g. As I know that the clover is a symbol there, I put a lot of clover emoticons when I said goodbye as something that gives them a little bit of closeness.*
- *E.g. Sometimes, and more with people I don't normally talk to so they don't misinterpret a message, I usually use some emoticons to transmit the message.*
- *E.g. How lucky, I love that region and the one you mentioned is a beautiful city! It's a pity you couldn't come here... Hopefully soon the Covid-19 situation will be solved and you will be able to come!!!!*

Mentoring guideline for including symbols to convey meaning

As a VE teacher, when discussing this with your group, the first thing you can point out is that when communicating via asynchronous channels, non-linguistic features of language and multimodal resources such as emojis, memes and images can **enrich communication, meaning-making and interactions**. But be clear also about the fact that while they can help convey meaning, they can also be confusing since they are quite culturally and age bound and can have both different uses and meanings depending on the context. Therefore, advising your students **to openly talk about the use and meaning they give to a symbol** when it comes up in a conversation with their international partners can generate an interesting conversation with rich cultural learning.

Punctuation marks are also useful in helping to convey meaning: for example, exclamation points can show enthusiasm or surprise among other feelings and can also help to give emphasis to what is said, others like suspension points can show hesitation, suspense or disappointment among others. You can use [the presentation](#) we propose for this.

Negotiation of meaning

Although asynchronous communication gives students the option of looking up the meaning of words, there may be times when specific concepts or expressions may require **negotiation of meaning**. This is a strategy very common in synchronous communication which can be defined as “a process that speakers go through to reach a clear understanding of each other” ([British Council](#)). The following examples illustrate this:

- E.g.
 - *Si Madrid era fantástico, y juego en la misma posición de Sergio Ramos. No sé el nombre de la posición en español. Lo siento!! Defender?/ Tr: Yes, Madrid was fantastic and I play in the same position as Sergio Ramos. I don't know the position's name in Spanish. I'm sorry!! Defender?*
 - *Oh, I don't like Real Madrid. My favourite team is Atlético de Madrid but the position of Sergio Ramos is 'central' in spanish ;)*
- E.g.
 - *Also, the Spaniards said that light pollution is a problem, I don't fully understand. Could you explain it more please? Also, do you have methods to overcome it in Spain?*

Mentoring guideline for negotiation of meaning

Encourage your students to ask their international partners to further explain expressions or concepts that they don't fully understand. Not only this but there may be times when they may be interested in getting their international partners' input or feedback regarding specific concepts or expressions instead of simply looking up the meaning of words. You can help them become aware of this possibility.

You can use [the presentation](#) we propose for this.

Mediation

In order to contribute to a successful negotiation of meaning in both linguistic and conceptual terms, learners can deploy their **mediation** skills through the application of various strategies. The following examples present VE participants' acting as mediators:

- *E.g. There was some confusion about how to go about making our worksheet, but we were able to talk through it by asking clarification questions and walking each other through it.*
- *E.g. Ham is a typical Spanish cold meat and outside Spain it is usually quite expensive, so I guess that's why your Spanish colleagues always brought it from home!!! ;)*
- *E.g. I wanted to show them how we see "embutidos" here in Spain, so when I went for a walk I recorded the vending machines with "embutidos" and sent it to them.*
- *E.g. Do many people in your country use Depop? It's an app where you can buy and sell second-hand items. It's very popular in my country, especially among young people.*
- *E.g. From my point of view, the government could help the environment in many ways. However our government does not pay much attention to all these issues and when it does it is for "postureo" (postureo means to make believe you are doing something you are not actually doing. e.g. on Instagram people do a lot of postureo of their holidays).*

Mentoring guideline for linguistic and conceptual mediation

Both in synchronous and asynchronous communicative settings, you can encourage your students to act as linguistic and conceptual mediators. Acting as a mediator means trying to facilitate understanding and successful communication by 'creating bridges' and helping partners to 'construct or convey meaning' both within a language and from a language to another (CoE, 2018). Examples of this can be: If/when there is confusion in a working group regarding a task or an issue trying to solve the problem by asking questions, making suggestions and going through the challenges together and also proactively acting as mediators by explaining the meaning of the expressions or concepts included in the posts that may be unfamiliar to the international partners.

You can use [the presentation](#) we propose for this.

Plurilingual and pluricultural competences

The notions presented above such as negotiation of meaning or mediation become relevant in the context of VEs due to the linguistic and cultural diversity of the participants. In this sense, VE teachers can provide their students with strategies to develop their **plurilingual and pluricultural competences** in asynchronous communicative settings. The following examples illustrate these competences:

- *E.g.*
 - *It's really interesting that you are both vegetarians, and really admirable! Is this very common in your country? Although of course people are vegetarian and vegan here, I do not know more than 4 or 5 people who do not eat meat.*
 - *Being a vegetarian is not that common here as it looks like hahaha Our city is famous because of its gastronomy, but it is not veggie at all... Search "embutidos" in Google Images to see what I mean.*
- *E.g. And as we used this social network, I could notice some differences between countries. I had the opportunity to observe 2 different cultures through this chat. I, for example, used some emojis but they were not the same as I used when expressing 'laugh'. Maybe our countries do differ a bit in this topic. And also, the other girls did not use emojis at all. Of course, this all is interpreted through a chat group and also, we are talking about a conversation mainly on an educational project so a more formal way of talking was used as it is assumed.*
- *E.g. One of the things that excited me the most during this project was talking to people with different cultural backgrounds. This opened me up to try to understand the ways they communicated, the way they presented and did the work, and also the friendliness in greeting us or asking for information. It was very nice to see how, despite the first communication difficulties, we always respected everyone's opinions, on both sides, and tried to do our best to get the result we liked.*

Mentoring guideline for plurilingual and pluricultural competences

If you have gone straight to the asynchronous communication section or would like to recall the definitions of plurilingual and pluricultural competences you can turn to page 11 of this handbook.

When it comes to **plurilingual competence**, remind your students that VEs are a great opportunity to learn and practice a more everyday language. Both learning and fully understanding the meaning(s) of idiomatic expressions can be challenging for foreign language learners but also a sign of high proficiency. Encourage them to discuss with their partners the meaning(s) these hold in their cultures when they come up in the conversation.

As for **pluricultural competence**, encourage your students to be proactive in trying to get a deeper understanding of not only the meaning of what their partners are saying but the reasons behind. Guide them in becoming aware of the fact that different cultures may have different practices and norms, and that actions may be perceived differently by people belonging to other cultures (CoE, 2018, p.158) At the same time, before developing a position on an issue, encourage them to weigh the information available to them, ask questions to their partners, analyze and weigh the information and arguments they obtain with critical thinking and avoid overgeneralizing. (CoE, 2018)

You can use [the presentation](#) we propose for this.

Adaptability

Finally, **adaptability** is a necessary skill for success in both asynchronous online intercultural interaction and collaboration. In this sense, two types of adaptability are equally essential: linguistic and what we might call telecollaborative.

Linguistic adaptability:

- *E.g. so I cut some things out and played around with different wordings, especially since I did not completely know my group members' English language proficiencies at first.*
- *E.g. It is important to have good communication between all members of a group, and that's why we insist on repeating things in a different way so people can understand what we were trying to explain.*

Telecollaborative adaptability:

- *E.g. From this experience I have learned that if all of us work together and participate in giving ideas, we can reach a final conclusion and organize our group to do any kind of collective work. Personally, I think that this experience has been a kind of first online contact with my partners but also a contact with technology, so I have learned how to adapt to the limits of online communication and also how to work in a numerous group in which we all have to help each other in order to make communication easier.*
- *E.g. We were flexible with our internal deadlines because we all assumed that we had a common objective, nobody in the team believed that any of the others were trying to boycott the project. Each member of the team adopted a natural role. I think we were the leaders, we created the script, we organized the meeting and covered the agendas, and the Irish part of the team provided technological tools where we could simultaneously write all the members, shared folders, and files. There was a lot of freedom in how we did each part but there had to be a common thread.*

Mentoring guideline for linguistic and telecollaborative adaptability

Introducing the topic of adaptability in class can be beneficial in preventing and/or resolving misunderstandings and even conflicts.

Linguistic adaptability is a process by which students can adopt an active role in making their language suitable to their interlocutors' communicative needs both in synchronous and asynchronous contexts. You can encourage them to pay attention to their communicative context and their interlocutors. There are several aspects that they can easily adapt to improve their communication, such as the register or vocabulary they choose to use.

As for **telecollaborative adaptability** it is concerned with students' ability to adjust to the dynamics of the group in various aspects such as meeting's scheduling, meeting's development, group work division and completion, etc. Remind your students that any group work requires adaptability, even more so when it takes place online with people from different cultures. You can use [the presentation](#) we propose for this.

3.2.2. Unproductive strategies

Are my students aware of unproductive communicative strategies that they should avoid in asynchronous online intercultural interactions?

We have devoted several pages to detailing various communicative strategies that can contribute to the success of asynchronous online intercultural communication. However, guiding VE participants in identifying those communication strategies that are unproductive and that they should avoid can also be a very effective mentoring technique.

As introduced at the beginning of this handbook it is sometimes taken for granted that learners will be aware of both effective and unproductive communication strategies in the context of intercultural online communication. However, often learners could benefit from guidance in both directions. The following examples show some unproductive communication strategies:

Adopting a highly task-oriented approach:

- *E.g. I hope that we all get out of that homework thinking that, for example, in the discussion forum is very noticeable, that in class you write because the teacher tells you that you have to write, you write it and then...many times it happens that nobody answers you.*

Posting generic or repetitive comments:

- *E.g.*
 - *Hello! This is my presentation video. I hope you like it.*
 - *Hi, I enjoyed your presentation. Looking forward to working with you on this project!*
 - *Hi! I loved your video! Can't wait to get started on the project with you!*
 - *Hi, Nice video! Looking forward to working with you guys.*
 - *Hi! I enjoyed your video. Looking forward to starting this project with you and the guys!*

Mentoring guideline for unproductive strategies

Completing the project task is of course important. However, there is a risk that a highly task-oriented attitude will compromise the valuable intercultural process of collaborative virtual exchange. Encourage your students to find a good balance between a goal oriented approach and open-minded awareness of the ongoing interaction especially in asynchronous communicative settings.

Insist on the need to avoid comments that are too generic or repetitive and to try to make their contributions unique and personalized instead. Comments should show in some way that they have paid attention to what their partner(s) have contributed. If they would simply like to say the same thing as a colleague, they can add to the conversation in a natural way rather than adding the same comment in isolation (e.g. "I (dis) agree with you, in my opinion...")

You can use [the presentation](#) we propose for this.

3.2.3. Personal correspondence

Do my students know the potential of using asynchronous personal correspondence during a VE?

So far, we have referred to students' interactions as an integrated part of their VE. In addition to these, students need to have a personal communication channel through which they can keep in touch with each other to discuss issues related to their international working group (meetings, assignments, etc.) which tends to be a synchronous communication tool such as instant messaging applications (see page 19 of this handbook).

However, asynchronous communication tools can be suitable for a first contact and can serve initial organisational purposes such as scheduling the first meeting or agreeing on a communication tool. The following examples illustrate this:

- E.g. *From the week before the online meeting, we started exchanging some (formal) emails to decide on a convenient date and time for everyone. Subsequently we exchanged phone numbers and created a Whatsapp group to communicate faster and more conveniently and above all in a less formal way*
- E.g. *The way in which we negotiated a means of communication for the rest of the project was decided by email before carrying out any activity or videoconference. They suggested the idea of a WhatsApp group and then sent us an email to ask for our telephone numbers and did the group.*
- E.g. *We finally also decided to be in contact via a WhatsApp group chat, so we could talk about the assignments and choose dates more easily and in a more accessible and faster way, as opposed to emails, for example.*
- E.g.
 - *In order to organise the meetings, what would be your preferred solution? Email? Would you mind, I don't know, whatsapp? I mean, for me it's fine email or whatsapp. Maybe whatsapp is faster, because we're not checking the email all the time.*
 - *yeah, and as well we get so many emails from lectures, everyday I get like 20 emails, so something else maybe. As you said, whatsapp is faster, so, okay.*

Mentoring guideline for asynchronous personal correspondence

Asynchronous communication tools can be a suitable tool for a first contact but may not be the best option for students to keep in touch throughout the whole VE. When/If students write a first email to their partners you can offer them guidance on how to write it (parts, register, politeness formulas, etc...) and encourage them to offer different communication tools for their communication during the collaboration (e.g. WhatsApp).

You can use [the presentation](#) we propose for this.

3.3. After the interaction

If the time you have at your disposal allows it and you consider it convenient, once the VE comes to an end and interactions cease, providing students with the opportunity to reflect on their experience can be a very positive thing. Class-to-class VEs tend to take place over short periods of time and thus tend to be learning-intensive experiences. Therefore, a final period of critical reflection may be helpful in order to look back on the experience with some perspective and reach one's own conclusions.

3.3.1. Critical reflection

If you decide to guide your students on critically reflecting on their interactions to achieve their own conclusions, you may consider introducing one or more of the following topics. You may want to pay attention to the synchronous/asynchronous divide or may simply propose these in general terms including both. At the same time, you may want to use or adapt the questions we propose or think about different ones. In case these can help or inspire you, here are some suggestions for questions to trigger reflection and some examples of students' reflections on each topic:

The impact (or not) that different (asynchronous) communication tools have on online intercultural communication: Do you think that using the kind of (asynchronous) communication tools that you did had an impact on your communication with your international partners? If so, how?



- E.g. Excerpt from a videoconference:
 - **we have to make sure it's not robotic**
 - to make it look more natural, what if we submit a script, like just a small script of what we're gonna say in our bit and you guys can have it revised by us and we can have yours revised. So that maybe if you want to use some sort of expression...to give it a little bit of, you know...
 - yeah, to avoid making it too formal
 - we can create a document on google drive
 - yes and you can give us advice on how to make our pieces, you know, more entertaining and we can give you advice as well
- E.g. Hey, it was nice to meet you (**through a computer**). I really enjoyed your video, especially the virtual tour of your city. I look forward to getting to know you better and working together :)
- E.g. One thing that impressed me a lot is the difference in the way we presented the topics and created the power point presentations. For them everything is focused on the topic prepared and written in a predetermined way and never comes out of the prepared presentation guide. It's a very academic and vertical way that we didn't use and that I had only seen used by some university professors.

Online intercultural social relationships: What is the experience of introducing yourself and getting to know others through (asynchronous) online tools like?

- E.g. I decided to talk about the most relevant things in my life. I wanted to show that I can be friendly and open to meet new people, so it was easier for them to interact with me. I am satisfied with the result.
- E.g. While I did not experience any challenge creating an online presentation for myself because I am proficient in technological skills, I did have 'problems' trying to present myself and, at the same time, drawing the line at what I share online. Even if I wanted to get them to know me as much as possible, I am also a very reserved person who values her privacy a lot. Otherwise, I did not have any problem with determining who I am, what I like, etc.
- E.g. I have learned that it doesn't matter how different your partner is, the important thing is to want to know each other. We have a different culture, education, customs and language. But we have never questioned any aspect of the other's life, we have always had respect. I think they have always shown curiosity about our lives here. Just like us about their lives there.
- E.g. Also, it was an interesting way to meet our partners for the first time with a pre-recorded video presentation. In this way, our first meeting via Zoom, was like we know each other, not entirely, but we do know things about each other.
- E.g. We exchanged a couple of messages with them before doing the task. I think it was very helpful to get to know them a little before the meetings.

Reflection on learning: *What skills are developed by participating in a VE (using asynchronous communication tools) according to you?*

- *E.g. I found that my writing skills had improved from the first day. By doing this task, I've developed my writing skills more. Because I have communicated more in English than other times.*
- *E.g. Writing to them is good for correcting mistakes and learning new vocabulary.*
- *E.g. You also learn words or expressions that you don't learn in class. We have learned a lot of expressions more of an informal register that we didn't know.*
- *E.g. From this experience I have learned how I can better use technologies in order to communicate with my partners and that we can have different opinions but all of them have to be respected. Now I know that if all of us work together and participate in giving ideas, we can reach a final conclusion and organize our group to do any kind of collective work. Personally, I think that this experience has been a kind of first online contact with my partners but also a contact with technology, so I have learned how to adapt to the limits of online communication and also how to work in a numerous group in which we all have to help each other in order to make communication easier.*
- *E.g. I have learned so many things about working in groups. The good part is that we have been in contact with other cultures now that it is almost impossible to travel abroad. I had the opportunity to practice the language that I am studying, which is the most important part for me. I think that maybe the best part of this exchange was that I was able to communicate fluently and with no fear. I made mistakes but I learned from them.*



Mentoring guideline for critical reflection

You can help your students draw their own conclusions, allowing for in-class discussion of their experience. Portfolio writing during VEs is also key to encouraging critical reflections from learners. The possible topics for discussion that have been proposed with the following aims in mind:

Recognizing tools are not neutral: Reflecting on this topic can help students to become aware of the impact that the mediation of technology has on the way they behave when communicating with others. An example of this would be having to make an extra effort to be communicative using emphatic words, symbols or punctuation marks. You may also consider inviting them to reflect on how different modes of communication (synchronous/asynchronous) affect their perception of their partners and their partners' perception of them as well as on their different cultures of use.

Presenting oneself and getting to know others online: Reflecting on what their behaviour has been presenting and getting to know others through asynchronous communication tools can help them become more self-aware as well as to reflect on aspects they could improve for future online intercultural (asynchronous) interactions. You can, for example, invite them to reflect on their experience presenting themselves online through asynchronous tools such as pre-recorded video presentations or written introductions (if they have done so): whether they took into consideration their audience and the specific context of the VE-project, what challenges they faced, how did they feel, etc. When it comes to getting to know others online you may consider dealing with their overall experience and also with more specific aspects of it such as how different communication modes (synchronous/asynchronous) affect the bonding process and the social relationships development (e.g. A possible conclusion that may arise from a discussion about this is that asynchronous communication can constitute for students a 'less threatening' scenario for the first contact with the international partners through which to break the ice before having a live conversation).

Skills development: Participation in a VE can lead to the development of a wide range of skills, although these learning outcomes can vary considerably from person to person. It is therefore useful to guide learners towards personal reflection so that each learner can come to their own conclusions as to what skills they have developed or acquired during this experience. For example, it may be the case that participating in discussion forums helps students who are more shy to get more involved in the interaction and therefore contribute to the development of their communicative skills. This type of interaction also provides a real communicative context for putting into practice, developing and improving written comprehension and production skills and may constitute a great help for students to gain confidence and fluency in the foreign language.

You can use [the presentation](#) we propose for this purpose.

Feedback Questionnaire

[This questionnaire](#) has been designed to learn about the experience of teachers who have used the mentoring handbook for VE teachers and/or the presentations proposed in it in order to identify their effectiveness as well as potential improvements thanks to their feedback.

Thank you very much for your contribution. You can contact <mailto:bferng@unileon.es> with any questions you may have.

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