

# DEVELOPING BUSINESS ENGLISH COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: A STUDENT-CENTRED APPROACH

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## Abstract

Communication is the cornerstone of organisational life, either at an internal level or exogenously [1]. As organisations expand internationally, having to interact with transcontinental intermediaries, distinct government agencies and institutions [2] or company foreign representatives, an adequate level of linguistic competence is likely to play an even more significant role in facilitating or hampering any global operation [3].

As language and culture go hand in hand, in today's globalised world it is also of paramount importance to develop cultural sensitivity. According to [4], it is not just helpful to business but a recognized essential, since businesses that understand and accommodate individuals from different cultural backgrounds are better equipped to scale and build a better reputation amongst their competitors.

With over 1.5 million speakers worldwide [5], English has become not only the language of science and technology [6] but also the global language of business. The awareness that communicative competence in English is crucial in today's labour market is reflected in the study programme design of the 1<sup>st</sup> cycle degree in Office Management and Business Communication (OMBC) held at the University of Aveiro (UA), which includes five 60-hour courses of Business English: English Language (1<sup>st</sup> semester), English Translation and Terminology (2<sup>nd</sup> semester), English Language and Business Communication (3<sup>rd</sup> semester), English Documentation (4<sup>th</sup> semester), and English Language and Organizational Culture (5<sup>th</sup> semester).

Literature demonstrates that student-centred learning environments, where practical and more realistic assignments can be developed, are likely to be more effective and conducive to a greater level of development of both technical and interpersonal skills [7]. Bearing this view in mind, the present paper aims to describe two project-works developed within two OMBC courses: English Language and Business Communication and English Documentation. In their first assignment (1<sup>st</sup> semester, 2018/19), students were called to develop research on a country of their choice, analyse it through Hofstede's 6-D model, allocate it to Hall's high-/low-context cultures and identify each country's specific characteristics in terms of business etiquette. The results of their research, whose main purpose was the development of students' intercultural business communication skills, were displayed in poster format and presented to the class, simulating a conference setting. In their second project-work (2<sup>nd</sup> semester, 2018/19), those same students were challenged to conduct research on the impact of digital transformation on organizations, one of the topics of their syllabus, and again exhibit their findings in a scientific poster — this time not having the classroom as venue, but in the context of a conference organized at the UA. After following the regular procedures of an abstract and poster submission, selected students have the opportunity to present their assignment in a real scientific event, to their peers and to conference participants.

In addition to the detailed description of these project-works, this paper also aims to present the results of a survey on students' perception of the activities. The gathered data indicates that both technical and interpersonal competences were successfully addressed.

Keywords: language teaching strategies, English for specific purposes, business communication, communicative competence, intercultural sensitivity.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The undergraduate academic degree in Office Management and Business Communication (OMBC), awarded by the Higher School of Technology and Management of the University of Aveiro (ESTGA-UA), aims at training qualified professionals capable of assisting and providing support to board or

administrations members of public and private companies or agencies, at both national and international levels.

Since its adequation to the Bologna Process, in academic year 2007/2008, the course structure of this three-year full-time degree (180 ECTS) covers different disciplinary areas such as Languages (66 ECTS), Secretarial Studies and Business Communication (54 ECTS), Social Sciences (18 ECTS), Information Technology (12 ECTS), among others. Due to its multi- and interdisciplinary training, graduates are prepared to manage complex communication flows, contributing thus to the management process and development of organisations.

With over 1.5 million speakers worldwide [5], English has become not only the language of science and technology [6] but also the global language of business; according to [8], more and more multinational companies are defining English as their common corporate language with the aim of facilitating communication and performance across geographically diverse functions and business ventures. Aware of this fact, as well as of the importance of mastering other foreign languages in an ever more global and competitive labour market, the study programme in OMBC includes nine 60-hour Second Language (SL) courses, five in English and four in a second foreign language, which can be French, German or Spanish, according to the students' preferences (see Table 1). Moreover, in their 6<sup>th</sup> semester, students have the opportunity to complete an internship in an organisation; during this period, business writing and oral interactions with different stakeholders in one or two of the learned SL are also frequent activities integrated into students' work plans.

Table 1. OBMC course structure: SL for specific purposes

1 <sup>st</sup> YEAR	<b>1<sup>st</sup> semester</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> semester</b>
	- English Language - French/German/Spanish for Beginners	- English – Translation Technologies - French/German/Spanish Language
2 <sup>nd</sup> YEAR	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> semester</b>	<b>4<sup>th</sup> semester</b>
	- English Language and Business Communication - French/German/Spanish – Customer Relations and Hospitality	- English Documentation - Technical French/German/Spanish
3 <sup>rd</sup> YEAR	<b>5<sup>th</sup> semester</b>	<b>6<sup>th</sup> semester</b>
	- English Language and Organisational Culture	(Internship)

In today's globalised world, where cultural differences can affect the efficiency of processes and the development of a business, it is also of paramount importance to develop cultural sensitivity, i.e., the ability to relate to the "other". According to [4], awareness of how cultural differences can affect business communication is not just helpful, it's essential. In fact, organisations that understand and accommodate individuals from different cultural backgrounds are better equipped to scale and build a better reputation amongst such a competitive global market.

Major changes have taken place in European higher education over the past years. One of the most significant developments is the shift in the learning paradigm: the evolution from traditional, teacher-centred instructional models to learner-centred approaches, which, according to several studies, tend to be more effective and conducive to a higher level of competences development [7]. Competences, which the European Commission defines as "the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development" [9], can be divided into two distinct categories: the cognitive and technical competences, also commonly known as "hard skills", and the so-called "soft skills", i.e., the combination of interpersonal and social skills.

The objective of the present work is, on the one hand, to present two student-centred experiments based on project-works that seek to integrate knowing and doing while developing students' organisation, cooperation and sense of agency and responsibility, among other aspects. On the other hand, this paper aims at assessing the effectiveness of these experiments in terms of concrete outputs and competence development.

## 2 CONTEXT

In the 2018/2019 edition, OMBC 2<sup>nd</sup> year English learners were challenged to develop two different project-works, one in each semester. Project 1 was developed within the curricular unit (CU) English Language and Business Communication (ELBC) and Project 2 was carried out within the course English Documentation (ED).

ELBC aims, on the one hand, at consolidating and improving language skills that were previously acquired, and, on the other hand, at promoting activities that are similar to students' future professional contexts, according to the level B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). By the end of this CU, which is built around four main sections — 1. Communication; 2. Intercultural communication; 3. Intercultural sensitivity in business communication; 4. Business communication: telephoning and socializing (both in general and in cross-cultural contexts) —, students are expected to:

- a) describe various types of communication and recognise the contextual variation of the language;
- b) produce oral and written texts, consistent and appropriate to different contexts of business communication;
- c) identify dysfunctional communicative situations in intercultural contexts;
- d) develop research in the field of intercultural communication;
- e) present and critically analyse the results of this research;
- f) optimise the production of oral and written statements in a business context through the use of online tools.

Similarly to every other SL course taught to OMBC students, ED also aims at consolidating the previously acquired communicative competences and at introducing hands-on activities with application to real work life situations, mostly through task-based and problem-based strategies. By the end of this CU, which is built around three main sections — 1. Technological changes; 2. Business written communication; 3. Official and administrative documentation —, students are expected to:

- a) recognise the role of functional texts in contexts of communication for specific purposes;
- b) correctly apply the procedures inherent to the different stages in the production of administrative and official documentation;
- c) plan and prepare, with linguistic and discursive as well as with graphic and formal correctness, appropriate documents to different situations of communication;
- d) select the proper tools to produce documentation for specific purposes.

Conducting research is not only an important component for the development of scientific thinking but also a very relevant skill in any business-related context [10]. Considering the broad skillset it requires [11], both proposed activities are, in its nature, research-based projects. The detailed description of the tasks developed within each of these CUs and the obtained results, as well as students' perceptions of the proposed activities, are presented in the following sections.

## 3 PRESENTATION OF THE ACTIVITIES

In the following paragraphs, the project-works developed by OMBC 2<sup>nd</sup> year students within the CUs English Language and Business Communication (ELBC) and English Documentation (ED) shall be described.

### 3.1 Project 1: Profiling national cultures

The 22 students enrolled in ELBC were asked to work in pairs and conduct research on the cultural specificities of a country of their choice. Afterwards, the findings of their study should be presented in the form of a scientific poster. It should follow the template provided by the teacher, which included the following fields: title, authors' affiliation, abstract, keywords, introduction, main body, conclusion and references (APA 6<sup>th</sup> edition style).

With the aim of helping students focus their attention on specific aspects of the given theme, each group was given some guidance in terms of relevant topics to research and develop. Table 2

summarises this information and Fig. 1 showcases the provided template, already in the form of two completed posters. The theoretical framework that supports topics 1.2. and 1.3. — Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions model and Edward Hall's high and low-context cultural framework — is part of the CU's syllabus and was extensively discussed in class.

Table 2. Profiling national cultures: list of suggested/targeted topics

<p><b>1. Country's presentation</b></p> <p>1.1. General info, geographic and demographic data          1.2. Analysis through G. Hofstede's 6-D model          1.3. Allocation to E. Hall's high and low-context cultures          1.4. Major challenges to Portuguese international companies</p>
<p><b>2. Business etiquette: most relevant specific characteristics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Greetings, introductions and business cards</li> <li>Eye-contact, personal space and touch</li> <li>Time</li> <li>Socialising</li> <li>Gift-giving</li> <li>Gestures and other nonverbal communication</li> <li>Dress and appearance</li> <li>Cultural attitudes and behaviours</li> <li>Dining and tipping customs</li> <li>Conversational customs and manners</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. Official entities where additional information can be found</b></p>

1st CYCLE DEGREE IN OFFICE MANAGEMENT AND BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

English Language and Business Communication

**Papua New Guinea  
Unity in Diversity**

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**Abstract**  
The main goal of this study is to better understand Papua New Guinea's culture. We chose this country because we wanted to bring light to its rich and diverse culture. To fulfil our goal, we analyse the country's culture through Hofstede's 6-D Model and Hall's High/Low-Context Culture. We present the major challenges faced by Portuguese international companies as well as specific characteristics of the society of Papua New Guinea (PNG). We concluded that PNG has a High context culture and that they are organized in kin groups. Despite some differences with our culture, PNG shares similarities with us.

**1.1. Geographic and demographic data**  
The Independent State of Papua New Guinea, as its official name, is an Oceanian country, composed of 800 islands. With its capital in Port Moresby, PNG is the 54th largest country in the world with 853 indigenous languages registered. However, its official languages are Tok Pisin, English, Hiri Motu and PNG Sign Language.

**1.2. Analysis through Hofstede's 6-D Model**  

- Large Power Distance - they accept the hierarchical order of society.
- Collectivism - they share their life and take care of others with unconditional loyalty (inside the kin).
- Masculinity - society is ruled by men and women are supposed to serve them.
- Strong Uncertainty Avoidance - they follow rules and procedures systems and find it hard to implement change.
- Short-Term Orientation - they respect the traditions and norms while viewing societal changes with skepticism.
- Indulgence vs. Restraint - they enjoy life and have fun, however they have some restrictions on sex.

**1.3. Allocation to E. Hall's high and low-context cultures**  
PNG represents a high-context culture, which means that they rely most on the context of nonverbal communication. Regarding decision making, they care for the details and believe that spending time on small concerns is a mark of good faith. In such concerns, problem solving, they avoid personal/interpersonal methods, because the relationship can be harmed when trying to persuade them. It is important to use their title and last full name. It is also recommended to have various business cards to distribute and treat with respect the ones that are given.

**1.4. Major challenges to Portuguese international companies**  

- The country's concern for personal approval has inhibited progress from travelling on the mainland.
- The number of people that can perform skilled work is very limited, so they need to come from other countries.
- The coverage and quality of government services is poor.
- Due to the lack of infrastructure, it's hard to access computers or the Internet.
- Business deals are based on English but members of the Commonwealth are not members of the Commonwealth.
- Business meetings involve cultural characteristics.

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1st CYCLE DEGREE IN OFFICE MANAGEMENT AND BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

English Language and Business Communication

**Profiling national cultures:  
China**

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**Abstract**  
In a business context, knowing the target country's culture increases the chances of success. Being aware of this, the main goal of this academic work is that to inform, in order to make the adaptation to the Chinese culture easier.

**Keywords:** China, Culture, Business Context

**Other facts and numbers**  
 China is a vast country with a population of 1.4 billion people. It is the world's most populous country. It is a socialist country with a one-party system. It is a developing country with a rapidly growing economy. It is a major global power and a member of the G20.

**Hofstede's 6-D model analysis**  
 In order to "measure" the culture of different people on a global level, Geert Hofstede created the 6-D Model. In the case of China, it presents us the following results:

- Power Distance (98) - Chinese society accepts inequality.
- Individualism (20) - People share a collective culture and tend to act in the interests of the group. Additionally, personal relationships take precedence over tasks or the company.
- Masculinity (66) - China is success oriented and driven. Many Chinese choose to sacrifice family or leisure to work, by moving far for a better job or working until late at night. This extends to the students, where the exam scores and ranking are important criteria for families.
- Uncertainty Avoidance (39) - The Chinese are comfortable with ambiguity. The adherence to rules and laws may be flexible to suit the situation of hand. However, truth and rules remain extremely important in their social circles.
- Long-Term Orientation (87) - China's culture is very pragmatic. Making their citizens, highly adaptable and persistent.
- Indulgence (24) - Having a restrained society besides tending to the cynical and pessimistic, the Chinese control the gratification of their desires and do not place a lot of emphasis on leisure (hobbies, sports, etc.).

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 Travel Experts (2013, December 27). Population of China Retrieved from: <https://www.travel-experts.com/china/>

Figure 1. Project 1: examples of submitted posters

This project, which resulted in 11 research posters that focused on the countries/cultures lined up in Table 3, was developed between September and December 2018. During the semester, additional support and feedback on the on-going work were provided by the teacher.

*Table 3. National cultures studied in Project 1*

Group 1	China
Group 2	Italy
Group 3	Japan
Group 4	Colombia
Group 5	India
Group 6	Germany
Group 7	Thailand
Group 8	Papua New-Guinea
Group 9	Saudi-Arabia
Group 10	Morocco
Group 11	Arab Emirates

At the end of the semester, posters were printed and displayed in the classroom. Simulating a conference setting, every group was granted 15 minutes, followed by a period of questions, to present their findings to the class.

A quantitative grade (from 1 to 20), which weighted 60% in the overall grade of the course, was attributed to the project-work (poster + oral presentation). The following partial scores were defined for each criterion:

- a) Materials > content and accuracy: 7 points, if poster is fully compliant with the topic, well organised and error-free, with complete, creative and relevant information/perspectives, also if formatting, word limit and references are as defined.
- b) Fluency: 4 points, if speech is effortless and smooth, with only rare repetition or self-correction, if topics are fully and appropriately developed, also if the student uses appropriate vocabulary and expresses ideas eloquently.
- c) Pronunciation: 4 points, if there are no obvious mispronunciations and when intonation reinforces communication.
- d) Accuracy: 3 points, if the student uses a full range of structures naturally and accurately, maybe only with rare minor 'slips' that do not break down communication.
- e) Body language: 2 points, if the student maintains eye-contact and is relaxed and engaged.

The score for criterion a) is the same for both group members; the scores for criteria b), c), d) and e) depend on each student's individual performance. Moreover, a table with the adopted criteria was presented to students in their first class and published in the CU's work area of UA's eLearning platform at the beginning of the semester.

### **3.2 Project 2: The impact of digital transformation on organisations**

As alluded before, all OMBC language courses are applied to professional contexts, and the English 4<sup>th</sup> semester CU, English Documentation, is no exception.

The ever more rising prevalence of technology in our lives today, digital transformation, the 4th industrial revolution, and the impact of these technological changes on careers are topics debated within the CU's first unit. Students are, therefore, stimulated to reflect upon how digital transformation has led to changes at both social and economic levels, challenging organisations to rethink their management, communication, and leadership models. How it has also led to the development of digital networks and services, which require adaptation to new business models and forms of relationship with the various publics, flexibility in processes, as well as the adoption of technologies that favour a global and multicultural performance.

In their second project-work, 20 students were challenged to organize themselves in groups of two or three and conduct research on the impact of digital transformation on organizations, with a special focus on the areas of secretarial studies and business communication. The results of their study should be again displayed in a research poster format, which would account for 20% of their final grade (no mandatory oral presentation was requested).

This time around, no targeted guidelines were provided by the teacher. Students had to more autonomously develop their own work plan and find the best approach to the proposed theme, which required them to discuss, debate, and negotiate within the group in a more consequential fashion.

Students were motivated to strongly invest in this assignment, since there was a higher stake setting involved: the best assignment(s) would be submitted to a real scientific event, to the Conference “Digital Transformation: Practices, Challenges and Solutions”, which will take place at ESTGA-UA, on May 29, 2019. The opportunity to participate and present their work in a real event is more than an enriching extracurricular initiative; due to the inherent sense of purpose underlying the project-work, this initiative also reveals the real-world impact of their academic assignments.

The task resulted in 8 posters, which were assessed in terms of a) Adequacy (6 points out of 20, if the text is fully compliant with the topic, is very complete, creative and presents relevant information/perspectives, also if formatting, word limit and referencing are as defined); b) Organisation (4 points out of 20, if students produce a clear and cohesive text, which is very well organised, with elements of phrase binding, well-defined and organised paragraphs and clear and direct presentation of ideas); c) Language accuracy (10 points out of 20, if students consistently produce a full range of elaborate, correct and appropriate structures).

Three groups, whose assignments were particularly interesting, innovative and well-developed (Table 4), were invited to send their proposals to the organizing committee of the above-mentioned Conference.

*Table 4: English Documentation students' participating posters*

Poster 1	The future is now. The impact of digital transformation on business models and corporate communication.
Poster 2	Communicating in a mobile, connected world: the impact of digital transformation on the University of Aveiro.
Poster 3	AdRA and Prokura: two Portuguese companies on the path to digital transformation.

The submitted proposals, which were subject to a blind peer review process by reviewers that are experts in the areas of Secretarial Studies and Business Communication, were unconditionally accepted by the scientific committee. Based on criteria such as originality, relevance and adequacy to the *Call for Papers*, methodological adequacy and compliance with the defined norms, each proposal received very positive responses from the respective revisors.

Currently, and under the supervision of their ED teacher, students involved in this initiative are preparing the final drafts of their posters, which shall be included in the proceedings eBook and presented to the Conference fellow participants and general public later this month.

#### **4 STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE ACTIVITIES**

After having completed Project-work 2, students were invited to reflect upon the two research activities developed within ELBC (1<sup>st</sup> semester) and ED (2<sup>nd</sup> semester) and answer a short online questionnaire, which was anonymous and included questions related to the development of their competences. Answering the questionnaire was not mandatory and data from the 20 students enrolled in ED was collected.

A Likert-like scale from 1 to 5 was used. Data analysis shows that, on average, students consider the accomplishment of both project-works as being very positive. As can be observed in Fig. 2, cognitive and functional competences are assessed with mean values above 3.9. General vocabulary expansion/enrichment (4.1), academic writing skills (4.05), English communications skills (4.0), and business English terminology (4.0) are, according to students' perception, the mostly developed competences.



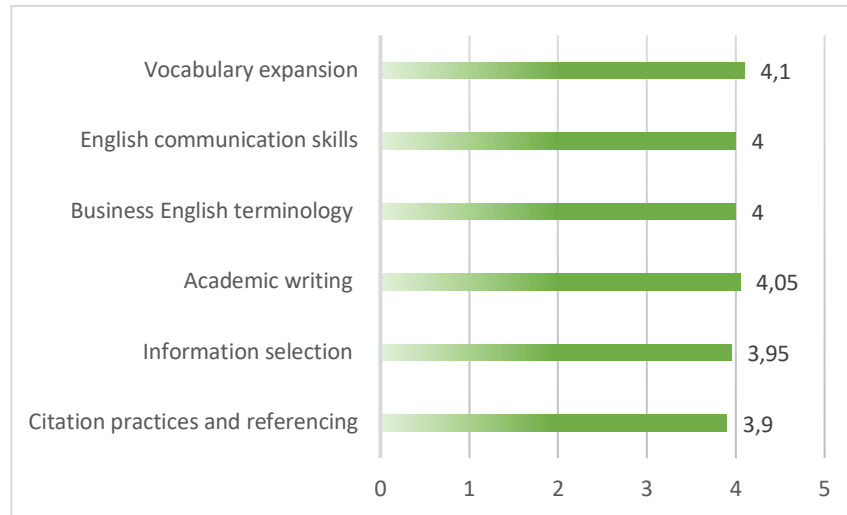


Figure 2. Developed cognitive and functional skills: students' perception (mean values)

As shown in Table 5, Information selection skills (standard-deviation 0.7) and Citation practices and referencing (standard-deviation 0.6) are the items were opinions most diverged. Nevertheless, overall results are quite consistent with all minimum and maximum values between 3.0 and 5.0.

Table 5: Cognitive and functional skills: mean, standard-deviation, minimum and maximum, mode and median values

	Vocabulary expansion	English communication skills	Business English terminology	Academic writing skills	Information selection skills	Citation practices and referencing
Mean	4.1	4.0	4.0	4.1	4.0	3.9
Standard-deviation	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.7	0.6
Minimum	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0
Maximum	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0
Mode	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0
Median	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0

These results also demonstrate that, in terms of relevant information selection and citation styles and practices, additional efforts need to be made to help students surmount some of the experienced difficulties (not necessarily within SL courses, though).

With regards to the self-assessment of the developed interpersonal and social skills, teamwork skills (4.05) and autonomy development (4.0) received two of the most positive ratings (see Fig. 3). The most developed/consolidated competence is the item cultural sensitivity (4.5), i.e., awareness of the impact of cultural differences on global business, with 60% of the respondents giving it a score of 5. As shown in Table 6, its mode is 5.0, with a standard-deviation of 0.7.

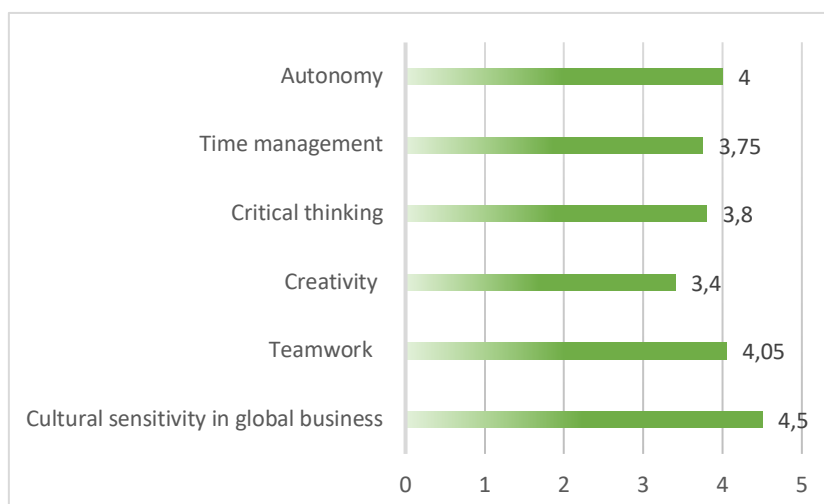


Figure 3. Developed interpersonal and social skills: students' perception (mean values)

A comparison between the two sets of skills reveals a certain discrepancy. Whereas the results obtained for the cognitive and functional skillset are consistent, with relatively low standard-deviations and minimum and maximum values between 3.0 and 5.0, a different pattern can be observed in the development of interpersonal and social skills, in which data is more spread out. This dispersion is particularly noticeable in competences such as creativity (standard-deviation 1.1 and minimum and maximum values between 1.0 and 5.0), development of critical thinking (standard-deviation 0.9 and minimum and maximum values between 1.0 and 5.0), and teamwork skills (standard-deviation 1.0 and minimum and maximum values between 2.0 and 5.0).

Table 6: Interpersonal and social skills: mean, standard-deviation, minimum and maximum, mode and median values

	Autonomy	Time management	Development of critical thinking	Creativity	Teamwork skills	Cultural sensitivity
Mean	4.0	3.8	3.8	3.4	4.1	4.5
Standard-deviation	0.7	0.8	0.9	1.1	1.0	0.7
Minimum	3.0	2.0	1.0	1.0	2.0	3.0
Maximum	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0
Mode	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	5.0
Median	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.0	4.0	5.0

The lowest score was attributed to creativity (mean value 3.4 and median 3.0). The teacher's own perception is that students, who weren't yet acquainted with the usually mandatory use of pre-defined poster templates in scientific encounters, didn't quite appreciate the fact they were not allowed to freely use their own preferred styles or colour pallets. Time management (mean value 3.75 and minimum and maximum values between 2.0 and 5.0) also seemed difficult to navigate effectively, which demonstrates that more assignments of this nature are necessary in order to more adequately prepare students for the demands of the current workplace, where not rarely professionals are asked to work under tight deadlines and also strive under stress.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

Considering the positive products of both projects, as well as students' perceptions of the developed activities, it can be concluded these student-centred activities were effective, with a beneficial impact in terms of academic achievement and personal growth. On the one hand, students' business English skills and intercultural competence were successfully addressed and developed; on the other hand,



the proposed tasks gave students the opportunity to create a “product” through research, teamwork and collaboration, and then to present it to an audience, which gives real-world relevance for learning and contributes to the development of a broader set of knowledge and competences — namely, communication and interaction skills, organisation skills, problem-solving techniques, or negotiation and conflict resolution skills, which can all be transferred to real-world scenarios. By assuming an active rather than passive role in the learning process, the chance to enter the workforce with experiences in the areas of research, team cooperation, critical thinking or even project management will constitute a significant advantage for these students.

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