

**VIRTUAL MOBILITY AND LSP PEDAGOGY: DESIGNING A BUSINESS
FRENCH COURSE IN A EUROPEAN ALLIANCE**

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Résumé

Cet article présente la conception d'un cours de français des affaires en ligne, élaboré dans le cadre de l'alliance européenne UNITA pour promouvoir la mobilité virtuelle. S'appuyant sur les théories de la motivation et de l'apprentissage en ligne (Deci, & Ryan, 2000 ; Keller, 2008 ; Garrison et al., 2000), il introduit un « triangle de la motivation » articulant compétence perçue, variété méthodologique et communication. Ces dimensions ont orienté la conception pédagogique et la posture de l'enseignante comme facilitatrice. L'analyse montre comment la communication, la rétroaction et la collaboration entre pairs ont soutenu l'engagement et comment une mobilité virtuelle bien conçue peut compléter la mobilité physique dans l'enseignement supérieur européen.

Abstract

This article presents the design of a Business French course developed within the UNITA European alliance as part of a virtual mobility initiative. Drawing on theories of motivation and online learning (Deci, & Ryan, 2000; Keller, 2008; Garrison et al., 2000), the study introduces a *motivation triangle* linking perceived competence, methodological variety, and communication. These dimensions guided the pedagogical design and the teacher's posture as facilitator in a fully online environment. The analysis shows how motivation manifested differently among bachelor and master students and how communication, feedback, and peer collaboration supported engagement. Results suggest that well-structured virtual mobility can complement physical mobility by fostering digital literacy, learner autonomy, and intercultural competence within European higher education.

Introduction

The HES-SO is the largest university of applied sciences in western Switzerland and has more than 20,000 students across five locations throughout French-speaking Switzerland. Students can complete bachelor's and master's degrees in six different programs.

The HES-SO has been a member of the European university network Universitas Montium, or Unita for short, since 2023.

Unita universities, located in five different countries whose national languages are Romance languages, are united by their decentralized and rural geographical location as well as an aim to create a multinational and innovative learning environment. In addition, other aspects such as the cultural heritage of the respective countries, sustainability in various areas, and digital transformation in the diverse range of courses on offer are also taken into account. The added value of participating as the only university of applied sciences in this European university alliance lies in the HES-SO Valais-Wallis Language Center's expertise in language-for-specific-purposes teaching, which meaningfully complements the alliance's extensive range of virtual courses.

In this context, there are numerous innovative hybrid course concepts such as COILs or BIPs on diverse topics, including language courses.

According to the Erasmus+ program, all students, staff, and lecturers have the right to participate in a mobility program, and the program encourages all higher education institutions to increase their mobility rates. Mobility can deepen awareness and understanding at the sociocultural and linguistic levels, promote exchange at the educational level, and enable the comparison of different working methods.

In the framework of the Unita alliance, "virtual mobility" refers to cross-institutional online access to existing university courses offered by partner institutions. It enables students to attend classes remotely without physical exchange while promoting internationalization and multilingual learning in a sustainable way.

For these reasons, Unita has launched the "Virtual Mobility" program. As part of this program, the Language Center of HES-SO Valais-Wallis, a new Unita member, offered a business French course in the 2024/25 academic year held entirely online.

In the fall semester of 2024/25, there was a course at B1/B2 level and in the spring semester of 2025 at B2/C1 level.

To analyze how motivation and engagement developed in this fully online learning environment, the article draws on established frameworks of motivation and online pedagogy, which inform the heuristic model of the *motivation triangle* presented below.

1. Covid and online teaching – an educational challenge for lecturers worldwide

When tertiary education moved online in the spring semester of 2020 due to the Covid pandemic, the question of the didactic and pedagogical value of online teaching was not an issue; lecturers across Europe had no other option than to rethink and adapt their teaching methods. As a consequence, extensive research and analysis among experts on the challenges and quality of online teaching during the pandemic, which varied from country to country, has been conducted. Numerous articles indicate that the abrupt transition from face-to-face to online formats overwhelmed many lecturers (Lo, 2023; Klimova, 2021).

Long before the pandemic, Lebrun (2011) conducted in-depth research into the implementation of information and communication technologies (ICT) – specifically in hybrid learning environments – and their impact on student learning and the professional development of teachers.

In his article, he highlights three aspects that lecturers perceive as obstacles to effective teaching in an online learning setting:

- Online Teaching in 2007 involved an increased time commitment or more than 40% of lecturers,
- Lack of technical support. A subsequent decrease in the reporting of a lack of support more than 30% between 2001 and 2007, suggests either increased skill levels and more resources have been allocated.
- Lecturers perceived their own lack of skills – although this figure was only 10% in 2007 – as an obstacle to teaching online.

As both the quality and the number of online offerings has increased significantly between 2007 and 2020, these figures should be viewed in this context, but they are still valid as an indication of concerns that still exist today regarding an online setting.

This article aims to show that high-quality language teaching can be provided online at the tertiary level. On the one hand, digitization and e-learning have always been a pillar of teaching at the HES-SO, and lecturers have always been able to choose from a wide range of pedagogical and didactic training courses to improve their skills in a variety of areas. Individual professional development is available to all lecturers, and further personal development in this

area can be discussed with supervisors during annual reviews. On the other hand, continuing education courses on information technology are also offered. For example, Microsoft Teams was introduced at HES-SO several months before the first lockdown, and targeted workshops helped teachers transition smoothly to online formats. These resources allowed teachers at HES-SO to feel well prepared, both technically and pedagogically, to teach in virtual settings.

As such the author's experience of language teaching during the pandemic was positive, and it was an exciting opportunity to develop an online course concept for a European academic audience, as is the case with Unita x HES-SO.

Just a few years after the pandemic, a rather skeptical attitude toward online teaching persists in many places, and the majority of courses at the tertiary level within the HES-SO are taught in a face-to-face format.

This article argues that high-quality language teaching can indeed be achieved online at tertiary level when supported by adequate training, methodological diversity, and continuous communication. The following sections introduce and analyze the concept of the Unita x HES-SO Business French course, discussing the main advantages and challenges of virtual language teaching, and the adjustments required to ensure the success of learners and teachers.

2. Theoretical framework: The Motivation Triangle

Motivation is a decisive factor in the success of online language learning and teaching. Existing research highlights that learners' and teachers' engagement in digital environments depends on a complex interplay between self-perception, instructional design, and communication (Deci, & Ryan, 2000; Keller, 2008; Garrison, et al., 2000). Building on these frameworks, the present article approaches motivation as a dynamic system in which three dimensions interact continuously: perceived competence, methodological variety, and communication. Together, they form a *motivation triangle* that served as a heuristic model for the design and reflection of the virtual mobility course.

The first dimension, perceived competence, relates to teachers' and learners' sense of self-efficacy in online contexts. According to Self-Determination Theory (Deci, & Ryan, 2000), competence is a basic psychological need that fosters intrinsic motivation when individuals feel capable of mastering a task and achieving desired outcomes. In the context of higher education, this perspective can be complemented by Rege Colet and Berthiaume (2013), who conceptualize perceived competence as the outcome of an interaction between knowledge,

skills, and contextual conditions that either support or hinder teaching and learning. For teachers, this involves confidence in their pedagogical and technological abilities when transitioning from face-to-face to virtual teaching. For learners, it refers to understanding the course structure, mastering digital tools, and experiencing progress in language proficiency.

Therefore, a strong perception of competence functions as a motivational anchor for both parties.

The second dimension, methodological variety, connects to Keller's (2008) "first principles of motivation to learn", which emphasize the importance of maintaining learners' attention and perceived relevance through diverse and stimulating tasks. In online environments, variation in task types, digital tools, and interaction formats counteracts monotony and fosters engagement. For this course, integrating synchronous discussions, asynchronous activities, interactive tools, and reflective moments responded to students' different learning preferences and helped sustain motivation over time.

The third dimension, communication, draws on the *Community of Inquiry* framework (Garrison et al., 2000), particularly the notions of "social" and "teaching presence". Effective communication in online learning supports immediacy, feedback, and trust, all of which are central to sustained motivation. It also mitigates the "transactional distance" often described in distance education literature by fostering interaction and a sense of belonging. In the virtual mobility course, regular feedback, peer exchange, and personal contact moments were key to maintaining this social dimension.

Taken together, these three components – competence, variety, and communication – create a dynamic equilibrium in which motivation is co-constructed by teachers and learners. While the "motivation triangle" introduced here is heuristic rather than theoretical, it provides a useful lens for understanding how different motivational factors reinforce one another in online language learning. It also offers a conceptual bridge between teacher posture, course design, and learner engagement in virtual mobility contexts.

3. Course concept

The virtual mobility course was designed with a clear emphasis on self-directed learning, structured guidance, and interaction. It aimed to strengthen both student and teacher competence by combining flexibility with pedagogical support. Before the start of the course, participants received a detailed course description, technical instructions, and access to the

online learning platform. This preparatory phase was intended to reduce uncertainty, build confidence in the use of digital tools, and ensure that students understood the expectations and workflow of the online format. Similarly, the instructor benefited from previous institutional training in ICT and online pedagogy, which reinforced perceived teaching competence and facilitated a smooth transition to virtual delivery.

Both courses (B1/B2 and B2/C1) integrated synchronous and asynchronous learning to sustain motivation through methodological variety. During synchronous sessions on Microsoft Teams, the focus was on oral communication, collaborative problem-solving, and peer interaction. These live sessions alternated with asynchronous phases in which students worked independently on a digital platform, engaging with interactive exercises, short videos, podcasts, and quizzes (e.g., Kahoot [<https://kahoot.com/fr/>], Wooclap [<https://www.wooclap.com/fr/>]).

For instance, one learning sequence addressed the phenomenon of “*réunionite*”—the tendency toward excessive meetings in professional contexts. Students first listened to a short podcast on this topic and completed comprehension and vocabulary tasks related to workplace communication. They then met in small groups within dedicated Teams channels to discuss the cultural and professional implications of the phenomenon, before returning to the plenary session for a short synthesis discussion. One of the peer activities was inspired by the well-known Think–Pair–Share method, which encourages individual reflection, peer exchange, and collective discussion. It also allowed learners to activate new vocabulary, share perspectives, and practice analytical reasoning in a professional register while benefiting from the flexibility of the online format.

Such methodological diversity responded to different learning preferences and reflected Keller’s (2008) principle of sustaining motivation through changing modalities and cognitive challenges. The alternation of formats further encouraged learners to take ownership of their learning process, reinforcing autonomy and engagement.

To counteract the potential isolation of online learning, the course design emphasized continuous communication between students and the instructor. Teams channels functioned as interactive spaces for group work and informal exchanges, while the Class Notebook served as a shared workspace for written submissions and feedback. Short personalized messages and timely comments were used to foster immediacy and trust, corresponding to the concepts of *social* and *teaching presence* (Garrison et al., 2000). Students later reported that these regular touchpoints contributed significantly to their sense of connection and motivation,

confirming that structured communication is a central dimension of the virtual learning experience.

By aligning the course design with the three dimensions of the motivation triangle—competence, variety, and communication—the virtual mobility project sought to create a balanced learning environment combining structure and flexibility, autonomy and interaction. The following sections analyze how these elements unfolded in practice at both course levels and how learners perceived their experience within the framework of virtual mobility.

4. Target audience and challenges - Bachelor's vs. Master's students

As students start courses in fall, more bachelor students needed guidance and support, especially in using Microsoft Teams and the learning platform. This support was less important before the start of the spring semester, as the course was mainly attended by master students who have more experience in self-directed, autonomous learning. This diversity provided valuable insights into how different levels of academic maturity and self-regulation influenced motivation and engagement in an online environment.

In the questionnaire the Language Center created (March 2025), some students said that the concept of virtual mobility was a first-time experience for them. However, students also mentioned in personal conversations that they were affected to varying degrees by online teaching during the pandemic and that their experiences then were generally less positive. This issue is discussed in some papers in more detail (Klimova, 2021). To strengthen their perceived competence, clear instructions, visual guides, and short video tutorials were provided before the first session. These measures reduced anxiety and promoted a sense of preparedness, addressing the first dimension of the *motivation triangle*—competence. The instructor also made use of the first synchronous meeting to test essential tools and communication channels, thereby creating a low-pressure environment where students could experiment safely and build confidence.

In contrast, the spring cohort of master's students demonstrated a higher degree of autonomy and technical ease from the outset. For this group, the challenge lay less in digital adaptation and more in sustaining motivation throughout asynchronous phases. Here, methodological variety played a crucial role. Advanced learners were encouraged to explore authentic materials, such as professional reports or podcasts on artificial intelligence, linguistic diversity, and intercultural communication. Alternating individual tasks with collaborative synthesis sessions maintained engagement and mirrored professional communication practices. The

variety of modalities thus reinforced the second dimension of the triangle by keeping learning relevant and stimulating.

Across both groups, communication proved to be a decisive motivational factor. Regular feedback, short check-in messages, and informal interactions on Teams fostered a sense of belonging and accountability. Bachelor students in particular reported that these exchanges helped them stay focused, while master students valued the intellectual dialogue and peer learning opportunities. The results of the post-course questionnaire confirmed that structured communication and feedback were among the strongest motivators, aligning with the “social” and “teaching presence” dimensions described by Garrison et al. (2000).

Overall, the contrast between the two cohorts highlights how the three dimensions of the *motivation triangle* interact dynamically: bachelor students primarily benefited from measures that enhanced competence and communication, while master students responded most strongly to methodological variety and intellectual exchange. Understanding these patterns provides useful guidance for adapting virtual mobility courses to different learner profiles and experience levels

5. Course content

The course content was organized around professional and academic communication themes that reflected real-world situations and linguistic diversity in the Francophone business environment. Each learning sequence combined language development with domain-specific knowledge, supporting both linguistic competence and intercultural awareness—two key goals of the Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) approach.

The B1/ B2 course covered the social and technological challenges of the current working world, different forms of work, and job hunting in a multilingual environment. As a final evaluation, course participants were asked to create an application video and also had to attend a short job interview, based on original job advertisements found on www.jobscout.ch.

Only electronic resources were used, and the various activities were supported in phases with the help of videos, podcasts, audio files, and quizzes (Kahoot, Wooclap). The final evaluation required students to record a short application video and participate in a simulated job interview, allowing them to mobilize both linguistic accuracy and professional self-presentation skills. This task design promoted perceived competence by linking grammatical control to tangible communicative outcomes.

Business meetings and conferences were held during the B2/ C1 course. Appropriate specialized vocabulary was developed and practiced and consolidated through various

exercises. Specific linguistic phenomena such as Anglicisms in French, paronyms, homonyms, and false friends were also addressed.

Course materials included videos and podcasts from France, Switzerland, and Quebec to reflect linguistic diversity, as well as excerpts from studies and newspaper articles from various French-speaking regions.

Overarching topics such as the role and influence of AI in various areas of academic and economic life, linguistic and cultural diversity, and plurilingualism were covered in several lesson sequences.

The focus in synchronous environments was on oral communication. However, the topic of meeting minutes was also addressed—in addition to the topic of business meetings—in order to familiarize students with customs and certain expressions used in the French working world.

The integration of varied materials, authentic contexts, and guided reflection thus exemplified how the *motivation triangle* was applied throughout the learning process—linking competence, variety, and communication in a coherent pedagogical design.

As digital tools are always available in a virtual course, it has been decided to set fewer writing assignments, as there was a high likelihood that they would have to correct texts written by AI tools. However, few texts appeared to have been created largely without AI, even if this is only a subjective assessment. This assumption is supported by the attitude toward AI in education in European countries and by the high motivation level among course participants. The HES-SO, on the other hand, has a different approach and aims to enable its students to use AI in an ethically responsible manner through schools and awareness-raising (HES-SO, 2025).

5.1. Communication about working methods

Clear communication about working methods played a crucial role in establishing trust and predictability in the online environment. It reduced uncertainty, strengthened students' sense of competence, and confirmed the importance of communication as a motivational driver within the *motivation triangle*.

Schwinger, Markgraf and Blumentritt (2022) presented the structure of a distance learning course as a 4-component system (“didactic square”). Based on the teaching materials, the teachers put together various asynchronous learning elements that form a thematically coherent learning unit. Students work on these elements independently and at their own pace. Built-in learning progress checks provide immediate feedback on individual learning progress. Control questions and tasks are designed in such a way that learners can actively contribute their own questions and problems to the learning process. If anything is unclear or if learners

wish to exchange ideas, the learning environment offers various communication options with teachers and fellow students – both asynchronously and synchronously, individually or in groups.

The “didactic square” ensures clarity in content and communication, vital in a purely digital learning environment.

Communication frequency also plays a role in ensuring students are not overwhelmed by information, which could lead to boredom or a decline in motivation.

For the sake of clarity, the structure of the team course remained simple:

1. Multiple channels for group activities during synchronous courses
2. Class Notebook as a place to submit written work
3. The General area for video calls during synchronous joint phases and general communication between the instructor and the students
4. The Files area as a library with the course material. Each course folder contained two subfolders: course material for the course and work material for the next course

At the beginning of the first synchronous course, all course participants were made aware of these functions/ locations so that the synchronous phases ran smoothly.

5.2. Profile of the teacher for an online setting

The experience also raised questions about the evolving profile of teachers in online environments, where technical competence, empathy, and pedagogical flexibility become equally central to sustaining learner motivation and engagement.

Schwinger et al. (2022) also discuss the necessary skills of teachers who teach in distance learning in their article. Compared to face-to-face learning, there is a greater focus on the subject-specific and didactic skills of teachers in an online setting.

This is also confirmed by the survey conducted in the spring semester of 2025 among participants in one or both of the online Business French courses (Survey of HES-SO Valais-Wallis Language Center, March 2025). Ten from 13 participants completed the survey. Who confirmed the highest motivation was technical and, above all, didactic skills.

One question asked which skills of the teacher contribute to motivating students in an online setting.

What motivated all students who took part in the survey the most was the variety of methods and activities, creativity, and interaction with the teacher and other course participants. Lebrun (2011) also concluded in his article that the more diverse the tools and their uses, the higher the perceived learning effectiveness among students.

Teacher motivation was ranked second. Karsenti and Bugmann (2017) also emphasized that sensitivity in contact with learners, as well as commitment and enthusiasm, were important. Appreciative feedback was confirmed as one of the most effective criteria for the perception of one's own competence and social presence.

Mastery and variation in the selection of tools followed directly thereafter. Lebrun (2011) also concludes that the use of tools in a hybrid learning environment alone is no guarantee of learning effectiveness among students, but that their pedagogical integration is the key to efficient learning.

The profile of the teacher goes hand in hand with the new role that teachers take on in an online course. According to Schwinger et al. (2022), teachers take on the role of organizer and moderator, as well as curator of the learning elements, which is seen as separate from the actual implementation. Schwinger discusses how the roles of teachers are distinguished from one another, with some tending to increase and others to decrease in the form of a circular diagram. Decrease in importance as they move away from the center of the circle. While the “knowledge mediator,” “role model,” and “motivator” are located more toward the outer edge, the ‘moderator’ and “learning guide” are at the center of the circle.

“Knowledge transmitter” and “role model” could therefore be assigned more to a pedagogical area of competence, supporting the thesis that in an online setting, this area of competence is reduced in favor of the subject-specific and didactic competencies of teachers.

6. Creating a supportive and motivating learning environment

In a course designed purely for online interaction, it is particularly important to get to know each other and create a supportive working environment. To compensate for a lack of physical contact, it is important to create closeness through virtual means, as Karsenti & Bugmann (2017) emphasize. They go so far as to emphasize that this promotes a reflective process that has an impact on the development of professional competencies. Even in a virtual course, students should feel that they are being heard and can express themselves without fear.

In the chapter dedicated to communication with students in an online setting, Karsenti & Bugmann (2017) explicitly address the dimension of physical distance, which is associated with psychological distance. Both Karsenti and Bugmann (2017) and Jézégou (2007) refer to

Moore's concept of transactional distance, which interprets the concept of “distance” not in geographical or temporal terms, but in psychological and communicative terms.

This transactional distance can be reduced through an open structure, strengthened dialogue, and a wider range of technical options. In a purely online setting such as the HES-SO x Unita virtual mobility program, this could be implemented by organizing regular synchronous sessions, ensuring active asynchronous communication, and integrating peer feedback and group work, as was done in my example in the channels created specifically for this purpose.

In her article, Jézégou (2007) draws on three different types of presence (Garrison, & Anderson, 2003), tested her model in a supervised distance learning program at master's level. While cognitive presence was considered a stumbling block, she attributes great importance to pedagogical and social presence for student motivation.

Cognitive presence should be supported by e-portfolios or reflection questions. In the case of the Business French courses, this was done regularly in combination with a Wooclap, in which students were asked for a take-home message at the end of a synchronous course.

Social and cognitive presence (Jézégou, 2007) can be strengthened through emotional closeness and empathy; this could be achieved by greeting course participants personally or by consistently introducing and applying appreciative communication.

In addition to clear communication – or, according to Jézégou (2007), pedagogical presence – understanding and goodwill on the part of the teacher are also part of a promising model in an online setting. The teacher's experience has also shown that it is very beneficial for the learning environment if teachers present themselves as approachable. Even brief “visits” to the channels during group work can be helpful.

Schwinger et al. (2022) addresses the question of students' expectations of teachers in distance learning. For example, students noted that “prompt responses” and “feedback within a reasonable time frame” (p. 355) were important, as students are, at times, on their own and have to work out and understand certain things for themselves. Students emphasized that an auditory communication channel is better than written communication. This may be true in longer asynchronous phases; in the case of the virtual mobility Business French course, there were maximum two-week asynchronous phases, and the work assignments seemed to have been so clear that there were hardly any queries. The B1/ B2- learners were less independent, so short video calls were offered to clarify any questions. Karsenti & Bugmann (2017) also postulate that feedback must be provided as quickly and promptly as possible in order to be perceived as effective by students. They recommend that teachers adhere to the communicated deadlines and find a good balance between intervention and non-intervention.

Teacher availability has a positive effect on the upcoming course activities in a synchronous phase and also on a supportive learning environment. Karsenti and Bugmann (2017) confirm its great importance. The goal should be to keep psychological distance as low as possible and to be respectful and stimulating in interactions with students.

Teacher posture thus becomes both a didactic and an ethical stance. It encompasses the willingness to adapt one's methods, maintain openness to student input, and recognize the affective dimension of learning. In this sense, motivation in virtual settings cannot be designed solely through materials or tools—it is co-constructed through interaction, feedback, and presence. The experience of the virtual mobility course demonstrates that when online teaching integrates empathy, structure, and professional authenticity, it can foster a learning environment that is both human and academically rigorous.

Conclusion and recommendations

The virtual mobility course presented in this article illustrates how online language learning can effectively combine structure, flexibility, and human connection. By grounding the design in three interrelated motivational dimensions—competence, methodological variety, and communication—the course transformed virtual constraints into pedagogical opportunities. The heuristic model of the *motivation triangle* offered a practical framework for aligning didactic decisions with learner engagement and teacher reflection.

Beyond its immediate outcomes, the project emphasizes the significance of teacher behavior as a key factor in online learning environments. As this experience shows, motivation does not simply emerge from digital tools or course design, but is co-constructed through empathy, responsiveness and professional authenticity. These qualities are vital for maintaining learner confidence and instructor satisfaction in the long term.

At a broader level, this case contributes to the evolving understanding of virtual mobility within European higher education. While such initiatives may appear modest in scope, they demonstrate how accessible, well-designed online courses can operationalize the ideals of internationalization and inclusivity embedded in the Erasmus+ and UNITA frameworks. By strengthening digital literacy, intercultural awareness, and reflective teaching practices, virtual mobility can serve as a meaningful complement—not a substitute—to physical mobility, extending the reach of multilingual and intercultural learning opportunities across institutional and national borders.

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