

*The design of a blended learning course to develop
conference presentation skills for postgraduate
students in medicine*

John Corbett

Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International College
(BNU-HKBU UIC)

Abstract: The predominance of English as a scientific lingua franca and the pressure to raise the international ranking of Brazilian universities have increased the demand for support in developing a range of academic literacies in English, for example in areas such as presenting one's research at international conferences. The challenges to delivering targeted support for the development of such literacies include limited space in the curriculum, negotiating regular meeting times for busy students and instructors, and the fact that large institutions often have geographically dispersed campuses. Blended learning offers a possible means of addressing these challenges in the flexibility afforded by course delivery that is partly face-to-face and partly online and asynchronous. This paper reports on the design, delivery and evaluation of two editions of a course in conference presentation skills, delivered to postgraduate students in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Sao Paulo in 2018-19. The paper discusses the affordances, limitations and continuing challenges of blended learning in support of academic literacies designed to enhance medical students' presentational skills in English.

Keywords: Academic Literacies. Blended Learning. Conference Presentation Skills. Pronunciation Teaching. English as a Lingua Franca.

1. Introduction

The early decades of this century have witnessed a marked increase in pressure on university researchers in Brazil to participate in events that increase the international profile of their institutions (cf. BAUMVOL, 2018; FINARDI; ROJO, 2015; JORDÃO, 2016). Such activities include the presentation of research at international conferences, via the medium of English. Younger researchers, in particular, therefore require targeted support to raise their levels of competence and confidence in the oral delivery of highly technical material to an audience of their seniors and peers in a conference format. Whereas in earlier generations, novice researchers might have been expected to acquire knowledge and skills about conference presentation through observation, experience, trial and error, in the current educational climate, greater central support is often given by institutions. It has been argued that effective training in the development of academic literacies, such as conference presentation and research writing skills, should take account of discipline specificity and the genres drawn upon by members of given discourse communities (e.g. BASTALICH; BEHREND; BLOOMFIELD, 2014).

The demand for preparatory training in academic literacies in English has led a number of institutions, such as the University of São Paulo (USP) to establish units dedicated to supporting and researching EAP and academic practices (e.g. FERREIRA; LOUSADA, 2016; FERREIRA; STELLA, 2018; FERREIRA; LOUSADA, forthcoming). However, particularly in large institutions, there remain logistical difficulties in offering highly specialized support, particularly to students on satellite campuses, who often have limited time to attend centrally scheduled workshops or presentations. One way of addressing the needs of such students is to design and deliver blended courses, that is, courses that combine a small number of face-to-face sessions with online instruction that can be accessed from multiple locations at different times. This article describes the design, delivery, and evaluation of a blended learning course in the preparation and presentation of conference papers in English. The course was developed at USP to address the needs of postgraduate researchers in the Faculty of Medicine (FM), and it was offered twice, in 2018 and 2019. The outline of the article is as follows: the educational context is described; there is a discussion of the design principles, which draw upon pedagogical research into blended learning, as well as a systematic review paper that surveys

prescriptive expert recommendations on the generic characteristics of highly-regarded medical conference presentations, alongside a particular technique for improving pronunciation. Sample materials are illustrated and the process of course delivery is outlined. There is then some discussion of the impact of pedagogical approaches to understanding English as a lingua franca on the assessment of student performance. Finally, there is an evaluation of the courses by the instructor and participants. The course principles, design, mode of delivery and evaluation are presented in the hope that they will guide and inform future practice in this area.

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2. The educational context

The University of São Paulo (USP) is a public university, and, at the time of writing, it is the highest ranking institution of higher education in Brazil (251st-300th in the THES World Rankings 2020). Founded in 1934 through a merger of existing institutions, it now comprises of 11 campuses, four of which are in the state capital, São Paulo, while the others are distributed among smaller centres. One of the highest-ranking units within USP, the Faculty of Medicine is not located on the main university campus at Cidade Universitária. FM, which is 82nd in the Times Higher Education 2020 world rankings for Clinical, Pre-Clinical and Health, is based at the Hospital das Clínicas in the Cerqueira César district of São Paulo. Recognizing the importance of the provision of academic literacies in English to busy graduate students on satellite campuses, in 2017, the Brazilian higher educational agency, CAPES, provided funding for 30 months to an International Fellow who was responsible for the design and piloting of blended learning courses in English to support a range of academic literacies. After negotiation with teaching and research staff from FM, the International Fellow agreed to design, deliver and evaluate pilot blended courses in the areas of research article writing in English, conference presentation in English, and international grant application writing in English. FM assigned credit to these courses as electives, and they were offered in the academic sessions 2018 and 2019. The present article focuses on the blended course that was designed to teach conference presentation skills in English.

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3.Principles of blended learning

The pedagogical discussion of the pros and cons of blending face-to-face and online instruction has resulted in a substantial literature. In an influential text, Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes and Garrison (2013) outline a framework for blended learning that attends to the specific roles adopted by students and their instructor, and argues that the most effective blended courses explicitly seek to integrate all participants into a cohesive ‘community of inquiry’ (CoI). Although they engage with the online materials at different times and in different locations, the members of the CoI, both instructor and students, are unified by sharing their responses to activities that bind them in a common purpose.

The main elements of the CoI framework, as presented by Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes and Garrison (2013, p.12), are ‘teaching presence’, which describes the instructor’s design and organization of the course; ‘cognitive presence’ which shifts the perspective to how the students make sense of and engage with the course materials; and ‘social presence’, which attends to the establishment of a group dynamic, even among individual CoI members who are largely working asynchronously online. The value of the framework to course designers is that it directs attention to the kinds of activity that are best presented face-to-face; to the particular affordances of online instruction; and to the continuing necessity to sustain the supportively *social* element of the pedagogical process. The course content should ideally enable students to extend and enhance skills and knowledge they already possess, and the online platform should allow them not only to interact with the instructor but to share insights amongst themselves, thus acting as models for each other’s learning development.

The CoI framework is flexible enough to be adapted to diverse educational contexts; for example, Zhang (2020) discusses her use of the framework in the design of blended materials to teach academic English to students of Agriculture and Forestry in China. In context of FM at USP, a series of short (6-8 week) blended courses in academic literacies were developed. In the conference presentation skills course, the ‘teaching presence’ consisted in the instructor’s delivery of content that explained the generic structure of the ‘good’ medical conference paper, and in the design of activities that encouraged postgraduate students, in stages, to write and present their own conference paper. The ‘cognitive presence’ consisted in the ways in which the students made sense of the content delivered and used the activities to extend

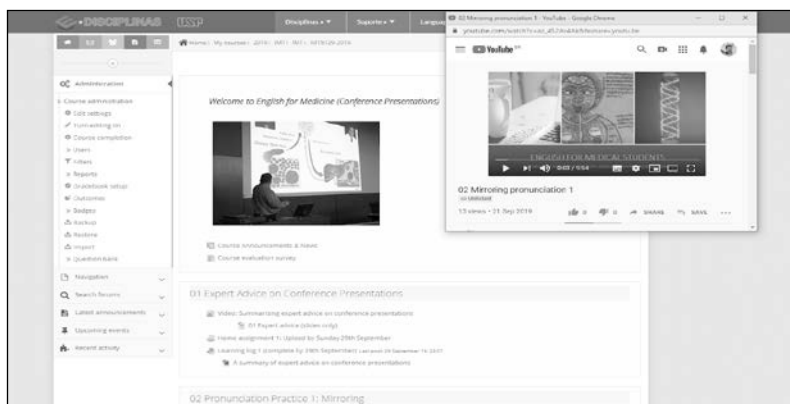
their individual linguistic and academic competences; and the ‘social presence’ consisted in the ways in which they shared their developing oral performances and learned from each other.

Since it is unreasonable to expect students in a 6-8 week period to become expert oral presenters of medical research, the course was also designed to give the participants methods by which they could continue to improve their performances autonomously, if they so wished, once the period of instruction was over. To that end, the blended course began with a face-to-face session that explained the course objectives, and gave a summary of what experts in the medical research community regard as a ‘good’ conference paper. After that, students were given weekly assignments on the Moodle virtual learning environment (VLE), for up to five weeks. Each weekly assignment was introduced by a short video presentation by the instructor (see Figure 1).

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Figure 1. Screenshot of Moodle VLE for the blended course, with YouTube link



Source: Elaborated by the author

The course instructor gave individual feedback to each participant on a weekly basis. Blended learning courses are, despite what some administrators might like to believe, demanding on instructors’ time: the first edition of the course in 2018 had 28 enrolled postgraduate medical students, but the second edition in 2019 had only eight. The smaller number of students in the 2019 intake allowed for more individualized work, and also permitted a ‘mock’ conference that involved all the course participants on the final day, and thus

intensified the degree of ‘social presence’ among the participants. For a blended course of this kind, 8-10 students seems an ideal number, and, as we shall see, student satisfaction rates, though positive throughout, were higher for the smaller cohort.

After planning an outline of their own conference presentation, students were given two online ‘mirroring’ activities, explained below (Section 5), to focus their attention on aspects of their pronunciation and oral performance in English. After completing these tasks, the students were given the task of writing and rehearsing, in stages, a full presentation of their own paper, and uploading their rehearsals to the online platform. These video rehearsals were accessible to both the other course members and the instructor, and the latter gave advice and feedback. At the end of the 2019 course, students came back together in a lecture theatre and, face-to-face, presented a 20-minute research paper in its entirety, took questions, and received final feedback from the instructor.

The remainder of this article gives further details of the different stages of the course: the explanation of the ‘good’ conference paper, the ‘mirroring’ techniques to improve pronunciation and oral performance; the rehearsal and final presentation of the students’ own research papers. The delivery of the blended course, over the two academic sessions, raised pertinent issues about attitudes to the pronunciation of English as a scientific lingua franca, and their impact on the assessment of oral presentations. These issues are also discussed below, before a summary is given of the course evaluation.

4. The generic features of ‘good’ medical conference presentations in English

The initial course meeting was face-to-face. At this meeting, the course structure and requirements were explained by the instructor, who answered any student queries about them. The initial session also discussed the features of a ‘good’ conference presentation. The instructor first elicited students’ perceptions of good conference presentations (or even lectures) that they had attended, before the instructor reported on expert findings from the medical community.

There have been, in the medical research community, numerous papers (e.g. HELLER III; SILVA III, 2019; SAGEL; RAMSEY, 1991; WELLSTEAD; WHITEHURST, GUNDOGAN; AGHA, 2017) that attempt to characterise the features of the ‘good’ medical conference presentation

from the perspective of discourse community ‘insiders.’ While these prescriptive recommendations are not the fruits of ethnographic study or discourse analysis, such expert opinion has a role to play in genre descriptions. (cf. CORBETT, 2006; HYLAND, 2004; HYON, 2017; SWALES, 1990; 2004). A synthesis of 679 expert recommendations found in no fewer than 91 English language medical research articles, published between January 1975 and July 2015, that have attempted to characterise the characteristics of ‘good’ medical presentations (BLOME; SONDERMAN; AUGUSTIN, 2017), offers predictable advice on the most valued features of this genre. Most of this ‘expert’ advice seems common sense, and many of the points in the expert recommendations were indeed elicited in discussion with the students before revealing the expert advice. The apparent obviousness of much of the published advice indicates a tension between ‘generic skills’ (e.g. ‘speak clearly’) and the subject specific skills (such as epistemological assumptions and preferred methodologies) that tend to be absent in such expert advice, possibly because they are taken for granted by experts.

As Blome, Sondermann and Augustin’s (2017) synthesis of the advice given to medical students shows, much of the professional concern lies in the style of presentation, and the three most frequently raised points can be summarised as follows:

- 1) Keep your slides simple
- 2) Think about your audience
- 3) Rehearse your talk

None of these points is particularly surprising, but each is worth reflecting upon with students at the outset of the course. Regarding the first point, many experts complain about over-packed PowerPoint slides, and some recommend the ‘five by five’ rule, namely, to have no more than five bullet points on a slide, and no more than five words per bullet point. Text on slides should not be too small (experts recommend a font size of 24), and the slide design should be unfussy and consistent. Visuals were recommended as an alternative to text, so long as their content was clean and clear. Presenters were also invited to consider the audience, taking into account what the members of the audience already know, their expectations of the presentation, and their own likely interests. The importance of making eye contact with the audience was stressed, rather than standing with head down, reading

from a prepared text. In this respect, qualified English instructors might share their own training advice about continually ‘sweeping the room’ with their eyes in order to make everyone in the audience feel included. Finally, novice presenters were advised to rehearse their talks, checking timings to ensure that they did not overrun the allotted time (on average 20 minutes). New presenters were advised to think about one key objective of their talk that is, to identify one important ‘take home message’ for the audience. They were also advised to prepare for questions from the floor (a topic that is dealt with at greater length below), and, on the day of the conference, to check the venue and, if possible, any equipment that is to be used.

Other points arise naturally from these basic pieces of advice, and, again, the face-to-face presentation is a good place to elicit students’ own experience as members of an audience. Although it might seem like common sense, it is still useful to remind new presenters to face their audience, not simply to read from their slides or a typed manuscript, not to overload their slides with text (to try to use only key words in bullet points), and not to exceed, say, one slide per minute of the presentation. In terms of oral delivery, presenters can be reminded to vary their intonation patterns, not to speak too fast, to convey through their delivery their enthusiasm and energy for the topic, and to conclude their presentation with a summary. They can also be advised to try to appear calm and confident, not to hide behind a podium or computer, to remember to pause and breathe, to identify and avoid any personal mannerisms and tics, and to encourage at least the semblance of interactivity with members of the audience, for example by asking rhetorical questions. Other markers of interactivity include thanking the audience explicitly for their attention at the conclusion of the presentation, and then inviting genuine, rather than rhetorical, questions. If a question is asked from the floor, a useful technique is to repeat it for the sake of the others in the audience – this also gives the presenter time to think of an appropriate response. Answers to questions should be kept short; a common technique for dealing with awkward questions is to praise them (‘Thank you, that’s an excellent question’) and, if it cannot immediately be answered, to assure the questioner that the presenter will consider it going forward in the research project (‘I don’t have an answer for that right now, but we will certainly take that point into consideration as we develop the project’).

While most, if not all, of these pieces of advice seem so obvious as to be banal, a face-to-face discussion with postgraduate students can quickly reveal horror stories about times when presenters did not follow them. Sharing anecdotes of good and poor presentational style in an initial face-to-face session has the advantage of beginning to bond the group into a unified community of practice, and to turn students' minds towards a consideration of how they might implement this advice in their own presentations. The constraints of the 'five by five' rule for slide presentations, for example, turned out to be particularly hard for the students (and instructor!) to follow.

One piece of advice in the expert recommendations was for presenters to be 'clear, simple and logical', which, by itself, is rather like advising a chef that an apple pie or *moqueca* should be tasty. What is meant and understood by clarity, simplicity and logic varies, of course, from context to context, genre to genre. In the context of a medical conference paper, clarity, simplicity and logic may reside in the presenter explicitly following the conventional generic pattern that the discipline has evolved in order to share and discuss research findings. In its expansive, written form, this generic pattern finds expression in the medical research article (cf NWOGU, 1997). The clear, simple and logical medical conference presentation, which often previews or recycles the content of a related research article, is a compressed distillation of this generic structure, and it is often characterized by the following 'moves':

- Opening slide: Title, authors, institution, date
- Background of study
- Aims of study
- Methods used in the study
- Findings
- Discussion of findings, including strengths and weaknesses of the research
- Conclusions, e.g. claiming significance, anticipating further work
- References
- Question and answer

While not all branches of medical research will follow exactly this pattern of delivery (for example, it is more suited to empirical research than to discussions of public health policy), it serves as a useful template for novice presenters. 'Logic' lies in following a conventional argument

structure, and ‘clarity’ lies partly in the presenter signalling explicitly when she or he is shifting from one move to another, e.g. signalling the conclusion by saying something like ‘to sum up’ or ‘to conclude’. Obviously, the students will need to have the linguistic resources to signal each move.

The opening face-to-face presentation in the blended course cannot, by itself, teach students how to give ‘good’ presentations. Its function is to raise to consciousness some of the more obvious aspects of conference presentation as advice against which students can ‘benchmark’ their own and others’ performance later in the course. It also offers a possible generic template for the organization of their presentation. The first online assignment of the blended course, then, is for students, by following the generic template above, to produce 10 slides as a skeleton of a possible conference presentation, keeping as much as possible to the ‘five-by-five’ rule of five bullet points per slide, with five words per bullet point. Clear visuals can also be used in the 10 slides. While the students are producing this outline, based on their own research, past or present, the online assignments begin to focus on improving students’ pronunciation and oral delivery.

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5. ‘Mirroring’ techniques to improve oral performance

It is a challenging pedagogical task to teach, in an interesting and motivating way, strategies to improve pronunciation and oral performance, in a short blended course that is directed at adults who are pressed for time. There is at least one, good general text book on ‘accent levelling’ written particularly for Brazilian students (i.e. GODOY; GONTOW; MARCELINO, 2006); however, its content is difficult to adapt for asynchronous online learning, and its avowed aim, namely ‘foreign accent reduction’ on an American English model, may not be entirely appropriate for conference presentations (see, further, the discussion of English as a lingua franca below, in Section 7). In addition, the instructor wanted to introduce students to a technique that they could use beyond the course itself.

For these reasons, among others, the instructor decided to adapt a technique for the improvement of oral performance known as ‘mirroring’ (e.g. MEYERS, 2016; TARONE; MEYERS, 2018). For ‘mirroring’ or ‘shadowing’, students are invited to choose for themselves a video recording of a ‘good’ presentation in English. TED talks are an obvious

source of good presentations on medical and other topics, and many have the advantage of having a transcript available. The point is that students should choose a presenter, male or female, native speaker or proficient non-native speaker, to serve as a model for their own performance. Having chosen a recording, they are invited to do the following:

- 1) Watch around 3 minutes of the video of your model with the sound off. Pay attention to the gestures, facial expressions and other features of non-verbal communication.
- 2) Look at the transcript of the video as it is playing, and divide the sentences into 'thought groups', with primary stresses marked.
- 3) Perform the 3 minutes of the presentation along with the speaker, paying attention to pace, thought groups, stress, intonation, body language, emotion, etc. Repeat until you can mimic the speaker closely.
- 4) Practise and practise until you have memorised the 3 minutes of the talk. If you struggle to memorise it accurately – improvise.
- 5) Record a trial version of your own performance, looking at the camera as much as possible. If possible, get feedback from your friends.
- 6) When you are happy with the recording of your performance, upload it to the YouTube playlist: the website is given in the class virtual learning environment. It will be shared with others in your class. Watch the other performances.

The attractions of 'mirroring' are several. The students find a model that they are comfortable with, who must be intelligible and expressive but need not be a native speaker of English. There are, for example, numerous non-native speakers of English in the TED talk database who are excellent presenters. Having chosen a model, the students mimic the presenter as closely as possible, paying particular attention to the 'holistic' features of oral performance that are highly valued in the experts' recommendations (Section 4 above), namely pace, intonation, energy and enthusiasm..

The online assignment, then, required students to rehearse their 3 minute 'mirroring' of an extract from the recorded presentation, and then record it and upload a version that they were happy with. The instructor created a private YouTube playlist that could only be

accessed by course participants and linked that playlist to the dedicated Moodle virtual learning environment course. The students could then watch and compare their performances. The instructor also watched each performance and gave written feedback to individual students, feedback that was again available for all to view. Of all the features of oral performance, the students, particularly the more nervous ones, found pace and volume the most challenging; their tendency was to talk fast and quietly, which reduced intelligibility. Mirroring encouraged them to slow down and enunciate clearly.

The mirroring task was repeated two or three times in the blended course. It cannot be expected that lower proficiency students achieve a highly proficient presentational style in a few iterations of the mirroring activity. Any improvement in student performance during the time-span of the course was evident only in major areas, e.g. pace, volume, gesture and degree of eye contact with the audience. However, the task is not an onerous one, most students found it enjoyable, and it was a technique that they could certainly continue to use, by themselves, if they wished to practise further beyond the conclusion of the course.

6. Online rehearsals for a ‘mock’ conference

There is, of course, an assumption on the part of the instructor that any improvement in intelligibility in the mirroring activities will transfer to students’ own presentations. The next stage in the course was to invite students to return to the outline of their own research, as summarised in the 10 slides they composed earlier, and use that outline as the basis of a presentation of their own. In this presentation, they were explicitly reminded to think about the features of the ‘good’ performance that they identified in their chosen speaker, e.g. good pace of delivery, expressive intonation, supportive body language, engagement with the audience through rhetorical questions, etc. The students’ presentation was split into two phases, the first of which consisted of rehearsals of the opening and then the closing of the presentation. These were practised at home, and a version of each was uploaded to further private YouTube playlists via the course VLE. These recordings were only accessible by class members and the instructor, who again gave feedback on the performance, feedback that consisted largely of encouragement to build confidence, and broad suggestions for improvement. A detail of a screenshot of one student presentation is shown, with permission,

below (Figure 2). For the blended course design, it was important for these rehearsals to be available to all course participants, while being unavailable to the wider public. This availability was to give a sense of 'social presence', that is, the students were able to watch each other's recordings, learn from others' strengths and weaknesses, and improve as a group, not only as a collection of individuals.

Figure 2: Screenshot (detail) of YouTube recording of student rehearsing the closing sections of her presentation (reproduced with permission)



Source: Elaborated by the author

In the second year of the course (2019), the degree of social presence was further increased by having the final face-to-face session as a 'mock conference' as well as general feedback. In other words, having developed and rehearsed their presentations, uploading recordings of 10-minute sections for feedback online, the students gathered together physically to give a full 20-minute presentation to each other, with a question and answer session. This took place in a FM lecture theatre, with slide projection facilities and it replicated, as far as possible given the constraints of the course, a conference setting. Having reflected on experts' recommendations for 'good' conference presentations, having found and mirrored their own choice of a good presenter, and having written and rehearsed their own paper, the students were ready to present it 'live'.

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7. ELF and the assessment of oral performance

Although the blended course was a credit-bearing elective, student performance in the 2018-19 pilot editions was simply assessed as pass/fail on the basis of participation and completion of the course. Other forms of assessment, during the course, took the form of formative feedback, delivered to individual students. The course, however, raises interesting questions for the perhaps more rigorous assessment of such courses in future. Again, the course aims were for a holistic improvement in the students' ability to deliver a conference presentation – giving confidence through supported practice was as much an aim as was specific guidance in, say, the principles of articulatory phonetics. To that end, the course departed from the assumptions of Godoy, Gontow and Marcelino (2006, p.7) who argue that learners of English 'want to go **beyond intelligibility** as most people want to sound as native-like as possible' (original emphasis). Rather, the course followed, in broad terms, the propositions first fully laid out in Jenkins (2000), namely, that second language speakers in the 21st century are more likely to be using English as a *lingua franca* with other second language speakers than with native-speakers of English. It is certainly the case that in medical conferences, presenters will be addressing audiences that have a high proportion of second-language English speakers among them. It therefore made sense for the formative feedback and any proposed summative assessment of pronunciation features, to focus on elements of what Jenkins (2000) describes as the 'lingua franca core', that is, those elements that are likely to cause problems of intelligibility to fellow second language English speakers.

To that end, to give a few examples, the instructor pointed out, but did not spend much time 'correcting,' common substitutions such as /t/ for /θ/ or /d/ for /ð/. Arguably, these substitutions do not affect intelligibility as much as other features, such as the lack of distinction between long and short vowels, like /ɪ/ versus /i:/. In certain combinations, certainly in medical contexts, there might be confusion, as in the phrase 'a little/lethal injection', but the assumption is that in most cases, the context will disambiguate. More problematical were the extra unstressed syllables that make it difficult for listeners to decide when a speaker is saying 'eight/eighty,' health/healthy,' 'fat/fatty', and so on. Other pronunciation features might be more controversial, at least amongst English teachers: the tendency by Brazilians to fully articulate practically all regular past tense inflections as /ɪd/, e.g. in 'watched', 'distilled' and so on, might irritate native English speakers, but the full articulation of such grammatical

features might actually support intelligibility for second language speakers in a conference audience. In this respect Brazilian speakers of English might in fact be *more* intelligible to a second language audience than native speakers. For these reasons, the assessment of pronunciation features that did not compromise intelligibility was relatively liberal, more attention being paid to performance aspects like pace, intonation, and expression.

Future iterations of the course, or similar courses, might take advantage of the recently revised achievement scales for ‘Overall Spoken Production’, as presented in the *Companion* volume to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment* (NORTH; GOODIER; PICCARDO 2018, p. 69). The scales from B1 to C2 are shown below (Figure 3). The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) scales propose a set of benchmarks for competent presentations that can be adapted to the specific needs of medical presentations and used to give students a sense of their own developing proficiency. For example, the ‘effective logical structure’ noted in the C2 descriptor can be linked to the explicit signalling of each stage of the full generic structure of medical conference presentations, described above in Section 4. The emphasis on a good concluding section is a feature of the C1 descriptor, while B2 focuses on distinguishing between main points and examples. The B1 descriptor of more limited competence indicates that the speaker is still restricted to presenting the paper as a series of key points, with little argumentative development, illustration, or cohesive support.

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Figure 3. CEFR Descriptors for Overall Spoken Production, B1-C2

Spoken Production	
Overall Spoken Production	
C2	Can produce clear, smoothly flowing well-structured speech with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points.
C1	Can give clear, detailed descriptions and presentations on complex subjects, integrating sub themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.
B2	Can give clear, systematically developed descriptions and presentations, with appropriate highlighting of significant points, and relevant supporting detail.
	Can give clear, detailed descriptions and presentations on a wide range of subjects related to his/her field of interest, expanding and supporting ideas with subsidiary points and relevant examples.
B1	Can reasonably fluently sustain a straightforward description of one of a variety of subjects within his/her field of interest, presenting it as a linear sequence of points.

Source: Elaborated by the author

The CEFR descriptors are perhaps best used as a diagnostic tool in support of self and peer evaluation, rather than as a strict instrument for summative assessment. The blended course is, after all, designed to support students who will increasingly be required to present in English at conferences, whether at home or abroad. Assessment in this context should be used to support the growth of participants' self-awareness and confidence, rather than to brand them as either successes or failures. A short blended language course can only be the start of a learning journey.

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8. Course evaluation: learning logs and student survey

There were two forms of student evaluation on the course. First, all students were encouraged to keep an optional weekly 'learning log' of their feelings as they progressed through the course activities. Each of these logs had 'prompts' of topics that might be discussed that week. Each student's log was accessible by all students and again contributed to a sense of 'social presence'; for example, students wished each other good luck in activities and encouraged each other. The log was also useful in monitoring student responses to aspects of the course that were pedagogically unfamiliar to them, such as the 'mirroring' activities. In 2018 the instructor illustrated the mirroring process using a videoclip of an actor in a classic film, telling a joke. While this had appealed to him as an interesting exercise in presentation and timing, its relevance was questioned by some students. In 2019, therefore, the instructor replaced the illustration with a TED talk on a medical topic, the direct relevance of which did seem to appeal more strongly to the students. However, although the instructor switched to a more 'relevant' topic in 2019, it is interesting to note that at least one student from the second cohort then chose to mirror a model from popular culture:

I was having trouble choosing a monologue that I wanted to reproduce... then I started watching a speech from Conan O'Brien (I must say, initially just for fun), but I enjoyed how comfortably he was able to speak long and difficult sentences without even looking at his notes, and how he managed to go from funny to serious, when he needed. So, I tried hard to mirror him, as well as his expressions, and truly enjoyed this activity.

The moral from this experience seems to be that if the instructor chooses a ‘mirroring’ model from the specialised domain as an illustration, some students will then feel free to choose their own models from a wider range of topics, but if the instructor chooses a less obviously relevant model, then at least some students might well consider the task irrelevant.

Moving beyond the choice of model, the students found the techniques used in the mirroring activity to be useful, e.g. the breaking down of the text of a presentation into phrases that represented ‘thought groups’ and attending to the intonation of those groups:

I found that the “thought groups” were really helpful in planning the speech and I would definitely use this technique from now on. I usually care about intonation (and its variation pattern) when performing for an audience because I find it really annoying when the speaker uses the same voice tone during the whole presentation - and this also makes me fall asleep!

By the time students came to begin their own presentations, there is evidence that they were consciously transferring the skills from the mirroring activities to their own presentations:

I was able to set up the presentation and the previous activities helped me a lot in the memorization and intonation using the thought groups. I still have quite a hard time in the pronunciation, but I believe that is a most practical issue that I will develop more from now on. I am very happy with the opportunity to do this discipline that has given me various insights and because I can see a progress, even if slow.

In 2019, the final learning logs were uploaded to the VLE before the ‘mock’ conference presentations, by which time the students were using self-assessment of their own video rehearsals to identify their own strengths and weaknesses, and giving their own advice about a good presentation. Extracts from three different learning logs are given below:

This time I tried to correct some accent problems, but it is hard to pay attention to the script and to my accent! I enjoyed this training so much. It is clear to me not only that the more you practice, the better

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it goes... but also that looking at myself presenting (in my own videos) is an incredible feedback of my performance. I will try to keep doing this when preparing for other presentations. It was also interesting to notice that it is clear in the last video that I was reading the script all the time... which means that perhaps I could have practiced more, so I wouldn't need the script all that much.

[...]

I think I was able to manage my anxiety and slow down! I breathed and talked with pauses - something that I usually don't do. Hope you all understood the message I wanted to deliver. I still feel a little bit shy, but hope that this will improve over time and with practice.

[...]

Hello guys!

Here are my 5 pieces of advice:

- speak slowly and breathe*
- pay attention to pronunciation and clarity*
- hand gestures are important, but don't exaggerate*
- shift your voice tone, so that the lecture doesn't become boring*
- feel confident!*

See you all at the mock conference!

At the end of each course, a course evaluation survey was administered to the students. The key findings for the two cohorts, 2018 and 2019 are shown in Figures 4 and 5 below. Given the small numbers of participants who responded to the course survey (20 in total), the statistics are suggestive rather than significant, but over the two editions of the course, there is positive evidence that most students found the blended course useful in the ways that the course designer and instructor had hoped: the flexibility of the blended format suited the needs of geographically distant students with full timetables, and the online activities raised their awareness of the challenges of presenting orally in English but also gave them some enduring strategies for improvement (e.g. paying critical attention to competent presenters, mirroring good models, and using video as a self-assessment strategy). They began to use these strategies in the presentations they devised for the course, and there are indications that they will continue to use them in order to improve their presentation skills in future.

Figure 4. Evaluation survey administered to Inglês para Comunicação em Ciências da Saúde: apresentação em conferências (2018)

	Level of improvement (%)					N
	None	Some	Good	Great	Don't know	
As a result of this course, how much did you improve your awareness of pronunciation issues?	0	18	76	6	0	17
As a result of this course, how much did you improve your knowledge of techniques that will help you work on your pronunciation independently?	0	12	47	41	0	17
As a result of this course, did your confidence improve with regard to preparing conference presentations in English?	0	12	59	29	0	17

Source: Elaborated by the author

Figure 5: Evaluation survey administered to Inglês para Comunicação em Ciências da Saúde: apresentação em conferências (2019)

	Level of improvement					N
	None	Some	Good	Great	Don't know	
As a result of this course, how much did you improve your awareness of pronunciation issues?	0	0	33%	67%	0	3
As a result of this course, how much did you improve your knowledge of techniques that will help you work on your pronunciation independently?	0	0	0	100%	0	3
As a result of this course, did your confidence improve with regard to preparing conference presentations in English?	0	0	33%	67%	0	3

Source: Elaborated by the author

The experience of the pilot courses overall provides encouraging evidence that it is possible to use blended learning as a means of providing institutional support in academic literacies to students who might otherwise not be supported, namely, students on remote campuses, whose scheduling commitments make attendance at regular classes difficult. Even in such cases it is possible to develop effective instruction that attends to their immediate needs, and, most importantly, gives them strategies to continue learning autonomously.

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