Delivering Training and Coaching to Enable Teachers to Successfully Engage in Virtual Exchange

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Abstract

In this paper we embark on an exploration of the E-LIVE project (Engaging Languages in Intercultural Virtual Exchange), a dynamic three-year initiative funded by Erasmus+ Cooperation partnerships in school education (KA220-SCH). We present a glimpse into the project's central objectives, with a primary focus on the teacher training actions. This manuscript presents a comprehensive analysis of teacher training initiatives, employing questionnaires and focus groups to investigate the necessary training requirements. The studies carried out involved in-service L2 educators and also a virtual exchange program among trainee educators. With the data gathered, we aim to provide a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the practical aspects and potential benefits of the implementation of intercultural virtual exchanges. Moreover, this paper presents the initial results of virtual exchanges within the E-LIVE project implemented in secondary school settings. The analysis offers valuable insights into the effects of these virtual exchanges in the context of secondary education. Through a comprehensive examination of the various aspects of implementing virtual exchanges, this paper aims to offer a thorough analysis. This includes identifying the key training requirements for teachers and determining effective methods for delivering training. The purpose is to outline a framework for the strategic growth and advancement of virtual exchange initiatives. The studies here presented, carried out with an exploratory methodology, aim to enhance current academic discussions on virtual exchange by providing fresh perspectives and forward-looking insights.

Keywords: *intercultural virtual exchange, teacher training requirements*

1. Introduction

Virtual Exchange (VE) has garnered recognition as a pivotal educational tool, enhancing intercultural communicative competence across diverse learners through digital pedagogies, particularly within higher education. Despite its increasing significance, explorations into VE's efficacy in primary and secondary contexts remain nascent. The Erasmus+ supported E-LIVE project (2021-2024) collaborates with 32 associate partner schools and teacher training institutions to, firstly, weave VE into higher education language teacher training, aiming to elevate trainee-teachers' competencies in various domains, and secondly, to enrich L2 teaching at primary and secondary levels through VE experiences. This paper delineates initial training actions and preliminary results from VEs executed in secondary schools within E-LIVE. It aims to investigate strategic VE implementations and scrutinize the educational, pedagogical, and infrastructural prerequisites and obstacles encountered by educators when incorporating VE, aspiring to spur an informed dialogue regarding VE's potentials and challenges in primary and secondary education.

2. Virtual exchange in educational contexts

Since the 1990s internet boom, VE has promoted collaborative online learning among students from different countries and cultures. Belz (2003) [1] defined this shift as prioritizing intercultural awareness, communicative skills, and language skills. Along with the growing use of communication technology to

connect language learners, there has been a movement to consolidate the pedagogical foundations for this type of exchange and establish VE as a pedagogical approach (O'Dowd, 2018) [2].

Although VE has traditionally focused on tertiary education, its relevance and implementation in secondary education have grown. Early European projects like TILA revealed the needs and challenges of implementing VE at the secondary level, revealing educators' positive attitudes toward technology and the urgent need for more investments to strengthen VE in Europe (Jauregi, Melchor-Couto, & Vilar-Beltran, 2013) [3]. Scholars have also studied educators' roles in telecollaborative projects, focusing on task organization, technical problem solving, and student behavior monitoring (Clavel-Arroitia & Pennock-Speck, 2015) [4]. Despite extensive literature, a gap remains, especially in primary education, requiring more empirical studies to understand how VE affects learning outcomes and determine the best teacher training and VE implementation strategies.

VE offers a unique way to improve learners' intercultural communicative competence by providing a subjective view of cultural knowledge that differs from foreign language textbooks (O'Dowd, 2018) [2]. However, while VE teacher training and professional development may improve digital literacy and intercultural awareness, it remains understudied (O'Dowd, 2007) [5]. VE's course integration, task design, technology/tool selection, online coordination, and assessment require educators and facilitators to receive dedicated training, coaching, and resources. It can be concluded that VE is a powerful tool for intercultural understanding and learning across diverse social dimensions, but its success depends on careful planning, structured implementation, and strong training paradigms.

3. E-LIVE teacher training initiatives

3.1 In-service teachers

In the first study, aimed at discerning in-service teachers' profiles and training requirements, questionnaires and focus groups were used to scrutinize their felt, anticipated, and critical incident needs concerning VE. Insights from 39 participants shed light on the existing teaching scenarios and perceived self-proficiency in VE, thereby informing the forthcoming training program's format and content. In the traditional educational landscape, primary teachers encountered challenges in establishing authentic communication and designing structured language lessons that catered to a diverse array of student interests and linguistic backgrounds. Meanwhile, secondary educators, especially from Spain and the Netherlands, underscored the significant barrier presented by large class sizes, associating it with issues like students' reluctance towards public speaking and complexities in catalyzing student-centered learning.

A dichotomy revealed itself regarding VE integration between primary and secondary educators. Primary teachers emphasized the imperative of technical understanding and support, while secondary educators spotlighted the necessity for knowledge related to efficiently integrating digital tools into language education. Secondary teachers discussed logistical issues from prior VE experiences, such as timetable alignments and slow partner responses, coupled with task design difficulties, and technical issues like unreliable Wi-Fi. In contrast, primary educators pondered over managing incompatible timetables and linguistic limitations among younger students, while all acknowledged the merits of VE, noting its capability to enhance student engagement and facilitate interactive experiences that boost linguistic, intercultural, and digital skill development. In terms of training delivery preferences, primary school teachers slightly favored in-person workshops, whereas secondary teachers inclined towards interactive materials and online sessions. Half of the secondary educators expressed a desire to learn from VE-experienced peers through diverse formats such as job-shadowing and peer discussions, while primary educators indicated a preference for experience-sharing training courses, potentially condensed into shorter sessions. Regardless, all highlighted the imperative of receiving practical, technical, and pedagogical training concerning VE.

Results of the needs analysis had a substantial impact on subsequent initiatives, particularly in the organization of online workshops focused on enhancing the voices of teachers. The workshop participants, who were experienced in the field of VE, emphasized various VE school projects during these sessions. These workshops were specifically designed to focus on important topics such as motivation and engagement, the integration of emerging technologies, and strategies for effectively addressing diversity and differentiation within VE. The thematic focus of the expert webinars (Autumn 2022 - Spring 2023) was influenced by the insights derived from the needs analysis. The webinars addressed themes such as differentiation and lingua franca exchanges, aligning with the identified needs and concerns of educators during the analysis phase. In addition, the E-LIVE team adopted a coaching methodology, specifically for VEs conducted among associate partner schools, consisting of a close partnership between coaches and teachers throughout all stages of the exchange activities. The effectiveness of this approach is currently being evaluated.

3.2 Trainee teachers

In a six-week VE teacher-training collaboration conducted in Autumn 2022, 48 trainee language teachers from different universities were introduced to VE and VE task design across different courses embedded in their Master courses. Utilizing various digital tools for synchronous and asynchronous activities, the VE was structured around three tasks, with the final task requiring trainees to co-design VE tasks for their current teaching placements in secondary schools, considering various teaching aspects like learning objectives, environments, and interaction patterns.

The feedback from the participants (gathered with a questionnaire) indicated positive perceptions of the VE activities, with technological ease of use and sound quality rated highly, as well as interaction enjoyment, comfort during sessions, communication enjoyment, and the perception of value in discovering new perspectives and fostering active participation. Participants also expressed a strong intention to incorporate VE into their future teaching. Although challenges like time constraints and technical difficulties were encountered, the overall perception was that the VE experience was enriching and provided valuable insights into the integration of VE in future language teaching endeavors, highlighting its potential for facilitating intercultural learning and promoting engagement. One important observation derived from the study is the need of equipping trainee teachers with fundamental pedagogical, intercultural, and digital competencies in order to effectively navigate a technologically advanced society. The study identifies a demand for extensive training and support for teachers in VE's technical aspects and effective digital tool integration, with clear instructions and streamlined communication being crucial for VE success. It acknowledges teachers and students' time constraints, emphasizing the necessity of aligning project objectives with existing workloads. Despite these challenges, many trainee teachers found VE experiences to be enriching, enjoyable, and valuable, appreciating the international connections, cultural exposures, and collaborative projects.

4. VE experiences in secondary schools

A study was conducted to investigate the use of VE in secondary school language programs. The study included three distinct educational institutions, where different approaches were implemented to accommodate the distinctive demographics and objectives of each school. VEs were consistently employed as a means of enhancing linguistic abilities, fostering cultural understanding, and promoting collaborative learning. One institution focused on building immediate and collaborative communication among 14/15-year-old students with a B1 level in English language proficiency. Another school aimed to promote genuine interactions, self-confidence, and intercultural exchanges among its 13/14-year-old students who had English proficiency ranging from A2 to B1. Lastly, a third institution focused on both linguistic and cultural goals for its students aged 15/16, who were proficient at an English B1/Spanish A2 competence level. This school used different digital platforms to enhance discussions and reflections regarding cultural stereotypes and facts.

The results of the VEs conducted in these schools primarily demonstrate a positive level of engagement and noticeable educational experiences in cultural and linguistic domains. The students generally expressed their enjoyment in participating in the exchanges and placed a high value on the international dimension it brought to their learning experiences. From a linguistic communication standpoint, a significant number of students exhibited capabilities to effectively communicate and understand their counterparts, spotlighting practical language application. Differences in emotional reactions to the interactions were observed, with one group reporting feelings of security and absence of nervousness, while another group encountered significant technical difficulties. The central subject of cultural learnings was also observed, although the reported learnings varied in terms of depth and specificity. The students expressed their acquisition of knowledge regarding diverse school days, lifestyles, habits, and cuisine in foreign nations. However, the extent of this comprehension exhibited variation, as some participants acknowledged nuanced discoveries pertaining to preferences, aversions, and everyday routines, whereas others indicated a limited acquisition of knowledge. One notable result was the rapid spread of students' VE experiences to their non-participating peers at a particular school, suggesting a transfer of the interest and enthusiasm generated by the VEs. The exchanges showcased a wide-ranging influence on student engagement, communication abilities, emotional reactions, and cultural understandings, which were influenced by the unique implementations and contexts of each educational institution.

5. Conclusions

By combining the findings from the studies here presented, it becomes evident that the incorporation of VEs into language education presents a complex array of possibilities and challenges, particularly in the domains of pedagogy, technology, and intercultural competence development. Educators have highlighted the crucial role of adequate professional development and resource allocation in ensuring successful implementation of VE, since they have significant intrinsic worth in promoting intercultural interactions and exchanges. Significantly, despite the expressed concerns of teachers regarding the design of tasks in the context of diverse educational backgrounds and the integration of digital tools, the experiences and outcomes within the project suggest a significant positive influence and potential for transformation through the use of VE in language education. Further undertakings in this field would benefit from drawing on these observations, enhancing the synergy between technological, pedagogical, and intercultural aspects to shape more effective and fulfilling VE experiences in the field of language education.

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