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Using Intercultural Virtual Exchange to Promote Critical Pedagogy

Practices of English Language Teachers

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1. Background

The project Valiant – Virtual Innovation and Support Networks for Teachers – aimed at strengthening teacher training and education by using new technologies (e.g. videoconference, collaborative digital tools) for online collaboration around real-world educational issues (e.g. integrating technology in the foreign language classroom, supporting teachers of Ukrainian refugees, learning during teaching practice).¹ It gathered in-service teachers from all over Europe who responded to different online calls (Autumn 2021, Spring 2022 and Autumn 2022) to participate in virtual exchanges that included both other in-service teachers and also pre-service teachers and teacher trainers from the universities in the project consortium. The contents and development of the different virtual exchanges were varied; our focus in this chapter will be on the virtual exchange (VE) on “Diversity and Inclusion in our Classrooms,” a co-learning experience involving

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only in-service teachers that was carried out in English in three editions, one after each call from 2021 to 2022.² Although registration was open to in-service teachers of all profiles, within the 37 participants there was a predominance of foreign language teachers (51.3 per cent in the first two rounds) and teachers of both foreign language and content areas typical of bilingual education based on CLIL such as Social Sciences or Arts (24.3 per cent).

Unlike other VEs in the Valiant project devoted to ELT methods or tools (e.g. gamification, CLIL materials), this VE attempted to raise the participants' critical awareness about the manifold shapes that diversity can take in our classrooms and the contextual factors (social, political, cultural) that may affect the teachers' capacity to address it. This falls in line with the *Profile for Inclusive Teachers* of the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, which features criticality within its core value "Valuing Learner Diversity" (2012: 11): criticality is understood here as "the ability to deconstruct educational history to understand current situations and contexts" and the skill of "critically examining one's own beliefs and attitudes and the impact these have on actions," aspects the VE aimed at fostering through its content and tasks.

A third component, "modelling respect in social relationships," was developed by the widely-recognized potential of virtual exchange/telecollaboration for improving intercultural communicative competence (O'Dowd 2021; Üzümlü, Akayoglu, and Yazan 2020), a further aim of this VE. During a VE, teachers temporarily create an intercultural community of practice "who share a concern [...], and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger et al., qtd. in Karavas

² Data refer to the Autumn 2021 and Spring 2022 VEs, since at the time of writing this chapter, the Autumn 2022 round had not been carried out yet.

and Papadopoulou 2014: 185). Such interaction entails and promotes a series of intercultural skills such as “interest in discovering other perspectives on interpretation of familiar and unfamiliar phenomena both in one’s own and in other cultures and cultural practices,” “use in real-time [of] knowledge, skills and attitudes for mediation between interlocutors of one’s own and a foreign culture,” and what Byram denominates “Critical cultural awareness/political education: An ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries” (1997: 50–3). By taking part in this VE, participants could thus develop their profile as inclusive teachers and improve their intercultural competence as a first step to becoming more reflecting practitioners.

2. Description of the activity

During the VE, teachers collaborated synchronously and asynchronously for seven weeks (Fig. 1). With the guidance of several facilitators, they shared five ninety-minute videoconferences over Zoom (in Weeks 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7) and progressed in groups along a series of tasks available on a Moodle Learning Management System.

[Fig. 1 here]

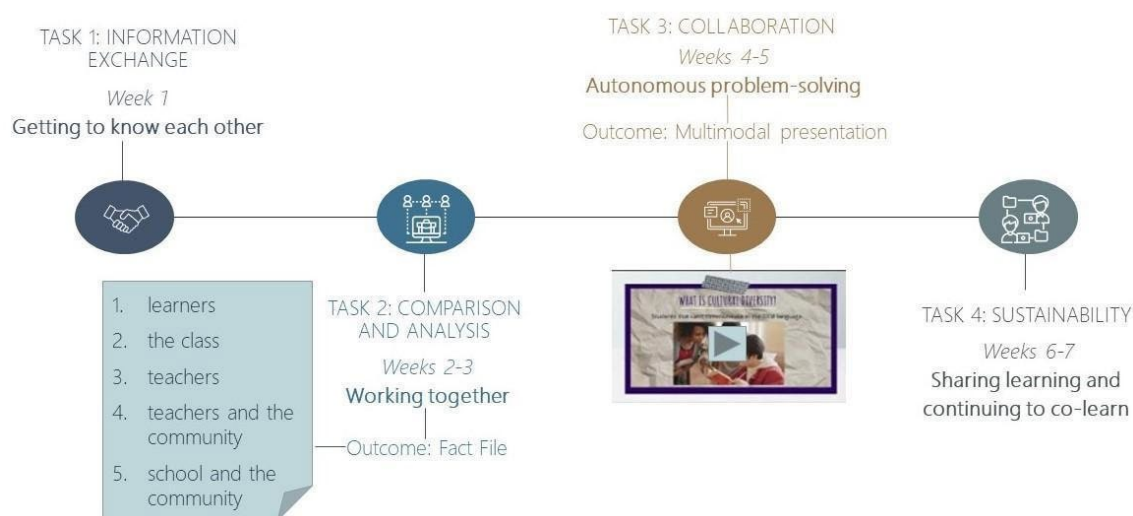


Figure 1. Virtual Exchange *Diversity and Inclusion in Our Classrooms* – tasks and timeline.

Created by the authors.

The tasks followed O'Dowd and Ware's (2009) Progressive Exchange Model: information exchange, comparisons and analysis, and collaboration. The information exchange consisted of a short video or text on Padlet with the participants' personal introduction and description of their teaching context, including one social issue or problem related to diversity or inclusion of their concern (e.g. integrating immigrant students, teaching students with learning disabilities, motivating hard-to-reach students). The teachers were encouraged to watch/read other participants' presentations so that the first videoconference could be devoted to meeting each other and commenting on the similarities or differences of one's own experience, context, school, etc. with those presented in the introductions. Considering the most repeated topics raised in the presentations, and the results of a survey where more topics were offered for selection (e.g. supporting gifted students or socioeconomically-deprived ones), the most relevant thematic blocks were gathered on a Google Jamboard. Teachers then signed up for the topic/s of their interest, forming thus the work groups that would remain stable for the whole VE. Some of these thematic groups created in the two rounds of VEs dealt with topics such as teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students, teaching mixed-level classes, motivating hard-to-reach students, or improving students' social relations and good behavior.

The comparison and analysis stage continued the second week, when groups started their co-learning process by distributing roles for group work, deciding their communication channels, and working together on a fact file on their selected topic. A *fact file* or sheet is a concise document (usually one page) containing the main information

about a subject; in this case, the facilitators provided each group with a series of questions that could raise their awareness of the needs and responsibilities of all the stakeholders involved in their topic within their different contexts:

1. learners:

- a. What are the main needs of learners [in relation to your topic]?
- b. Can you give examples of best practice on how to deal with those needs?

2. the class:

- a. What are the perceived threats [caused by your topic] to the learning environment, e.g. to other learners?
- b. Can you give examples of best practice on how to deal with those threats?

3. teachers:

- a. What are the main needs of teachers?
- b. What are the main responsibilities and/or limitations of teachers for addressing the topic?

4. teachers and the community:

- a. What are the school guidelines?
- b. Can you give examples of best practice on how to deal with the topic?

5. school and community:

- a. What are the main needs of parents?
- b. Can you give examples of best practice on how to deal with the topic?

Collaboration continued with groups giving feedback on each other's fact files, followed by two weeks of asynchronous work to organize their own workflow in order to

turn the fact files into a multimodal presentation with recommendations valid for other teachers that may experience similar problems/issues within their topic. After having reflected on the diverse barriers and leeway in attending to diversity in their settings with the questions above, their focus should now lie on possible solutions that were transversally affordable in different contexts. Sample presentations on YouTube were offered as models, especially those created by groups in previous VE editions, such as [*Cultural diversity in the classroom: A challenge for teachers*](#), [*Motivating students in sociocultural diversity*](#), or [*Teaching mixed-level classrooms*](#) (links in References).

The last meetings were devoted to sharing and offering feedback on the presentations, evaluating the experience of co-learning as teacher training, and devising ways to create interest groups that could reproduce and sustain the type of community of practice created for this VE.

3. Critical Reflections

To provide a comprehensive overview of the affordances and challenges of this virtual co-learning experience, participants shared their perspectives about its advantages and disadvantages on Tricider and Padlet, which are online interactive platforms for collecting and discussing ideas. Also, they completed Valiant's general surveys (pre- and post-VE) to gain insights into the opportunities and challenges in the project. The qualitative analysis of responses from Tricider and Padlet revealed that the in-service teachers reported an awareness and cognizance of diversity in their virtual exchange experiences. Specifically, they emphasized their increased sense of tolerance and flexibility towards each other in the VE, e.g. being more patient when listening to other varieties of English. This correlates with the advancement in Intercultural Competence (IC) revealed by their answers to Valiant's survey (completed by 22 of them before and after the VE): items such as "I change my verbal behavior (e.g., accent, tone) when intercultural interaction

requires it” and “I try to look at everybody’s side of a disagreement before I make a decision,” with the greatest improvement in the post-test survey, show an increased awareness of conflict resolution, negotiation skills, and the ICC skills by Byram above.

The teachers also reflected upon professional benefits such as the development of new technological, communicative, and emotional benefits and competences: discovering new online tools, gaining new insights and experiences, and improving their teaching skills. They underlined that the VE experience enabled them to interact with their colleagues and share universal experiences about their concerns and challenges across geographic boundaries, with affective benefits such as feeling supported and sharing common worries and concerns through engagement with peers. On their part, the facilitators also responded to an online survey, in which they highlighted affordances including increased recognition of co-learning among participants with diverse backgrounds, cooperation, interaction, diversity, inclusiveness and contextual awareness. They emphasized the role of human agency in facilitating the group discussions, enabling active participation, and sustaining the motivation of the teachers during the VE.

Besides these benefits, the multistage, dynamic, cross-cultural, technology-enhanced nature of the VE also offered challenges to both teachers and facilitators. The teachers realized challenges related to diversity, digital divide, and inclusiveness during the VE, like setting too high expectations for their students and forgetting their differences and special needs. They further reflected on realizing their difficulties in leading students to gender equality in their classrooms. As regards their own participation in the VE, they reported experiencing challenges about time management, English language proficiency, local contextual constraints such as lack of access to internet connection, and confusions stemming from the dynamic and interactive nature of group discussions and the idiosyncratic features of group members and their geographical location. The facilitators,

for their part, highlighted challenges such as time management, low commitment or even absence of participants during the VE (failure to fulfill the requirements of a module, unwillingness to provide their self-presence in team work, missing videoconferences), sociocultural and work-style differences, and management of group dynamics. Focusing basically on establishing clearer initial procedures, the facilitators noted ways to overcome the aforementioned obstacles, such as helping participants brainstorm rules, devoting more time to prepare group work, engaging the participants actively, and having individual contact with participants.

In conclusion, the proposed VE model on “Diversity and Inclusion in our Classrooms” has transformative potential for teachers and teacher trainers, enhancing their intercultural communicative competence and triggering their awareness about linguistic and cultural diversities through collaborating in videoconferences, co-learning experiences, discussions, and multimodal presentations. This model provides a platform for promoting critical reflection and engagement with ways to make their classroom inclusive, and raising awareness of their contextual variables. Moreover, especially for foreign language teaching where telecollaboration is now a widespread activity thanks to eTwinning (Licht, Pateraki, and Scimeca 2020), this co-learning experience provides language teachers with a first-hand experience of the types of tasks, challenges and learnings that their own students may undergo in their own VE projects, preparing them to plan and facilitate them better. We suggest that applying critically-oriented virtual exchanges offers a promising experiential co-learning practice for teachers and trainers to acknowledge, analyze and support diversity and inclusion in their classes, as well as to develop their intercultural competence and critical awareness.

4. References

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LINKS TO SAMPLE PRESENTATIONS:

[Cultural diversity in the classroom: A challenge for teachers:](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1rY0EqNHsw)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1rY0EqNHsw>

Motivating students in sociocultural diversity:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERrS6qvv_Ms

Teaching mixed-level classrooms:

<https://view.genial.ly/628f0f96d82e5300189cf75e/presentation-teaching-mixed-level-classrooms>