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Teacher training perspectives for virtual exchange: Initial actions from the E-LIVE European project

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Abstract

The E-LIVE project (Engaging Languages in Intercultural Virtual Exchange) is a three-year project funded by Erasmus+ Cooperation partnerships in school education (KA220-SCH). In this short paper, we report on two of the project's initial teacher training actions. Firstly, a training needs analysis conducted via questionnaire and focus groups with 39 in-service L2 teachers from associate partner schools (nine primary and 30 secondary). We report on felt needs and anticipated training needs and three key project actions that the needs analysis informed: teacher voices workshops, expert webinars, and virtual exchange coaching. Secondly, we describe a virtual exchange conducted between trainee teachers enrolled in French, Dutch, and Colombian teacher training institutions. The pedagogical design of the virtual exchange is detailed and two of the final task productions showcased. Post-virtual exchange questionnaire and focus group data allow us to report on the trainee teachers' perceptions of the virtual exchange activities. The paper concludes with a discussion of how to ensure the success of future virtual exchange initiatives based on the analysis of the questionnaire and focus group data.

Keywords: *virtual exchange, school education, teacher training, European projects, needs analysis.*

1. Introduction

Virtual Exchange (VE) is a linguacultural learning-teaching practice that fosters meaningful exchanges between learners in geographically distant locations and from diverse linguacultural backgrounds through internet-based tools and innovative online pedagogies (O'Dowd, 2018). Telecollaboration or virtual exchange projects have gained significant prominence in the field of education since the onset of the 21st century, as demonstrated by the European projects summarized in Appendix A. Notably, a significant portion of these initiatives has concerned university-level education. E-LIVE (Engaging Languages in Intercultural Virtual Exchange) is a three-year project (2021-2024) funded by the Erasmus+ Cooperation partnerships in school education (KA220-SCH) involving a team of specialists in TELL and 32 associate partner schools and teacher training institutions (E-LIVE, 2022). In line with the Digital Education Action Plan (DG EAC, 2021), the key project objectives are to:

- enrich language teacher training programmes in higher education to develop digital literacy skills and organisational, pedagogical, and intercultural competences of trainee-teachers by mainstreaming VE within teacher-training programmes; and

- make L2 teaching programmes at primary and secondary schools more meaningful by offering learners opportunities to engage in VEs.

This paper reports on two of the project's initial teacher training actions: a training needs analysis conducted with in-service L2 teachers from the associate partner schools and a VE conducted between French, Dutch, and Colombian teacher training institutions.

2. Teacher training needs

At the project outset in the Summer of 2022, a questionnaire and a series of focus groups were conducted to better understand the teaching beliefs, experiences, conditions, and training needs (related to VE pedagogy, digital literacy skills, and intercultural mediation) of a heterogeneous group of 39 language teachers from five European countries collaborating with the E-LIVE project as associate partner schools, and who would partake in VEs in Summer-Autumn 2023. Nine primary-level educators responded to the questionnaire and 30 teachers at secondary-level. Twenty participants went on to partake in focus groups.

The full needs analysis is detailed in Clavel-Arroitia et al. (2023). Due to space limitations, we summarise emerging themes.

The needs analysis underlined current teaching challenges including integrating multilingual pupils in the L2 classroom and teaching for different competence levels within the same class. These challenges, or felt needs, were irrespective of teaching level, differences in student population, or teaching experience. On a five-point scale, ranging from 1 'not at all challenging' to 5 'extremely challenging', 50% of all participants ranked 'coping with differences in student population and enhancing inclusion' at 4 or above, and 14/30 secondary school teachers and 5/9 primary teachers ranked 'enhancing meaningful communication processes' at 4 and above (see Appendix B). In comparison, 33% of secondary school teachers ranked 'addressing cultural issues, developing intercultural competences and European citizenship' as very challenging (7/30) or extremely challenging (3/30), and 33% of primary teachers as very challenging (3/9).

Regarding anticipated training needs, primary educators strongly expressed needs related to the technical aspects of VE both in terms of choosing digital tools and technical support during exchanges. Secondary teachers expressed insufficient knowledge concerning the pedagogical integration of digital tools in language education as the barrier to integrating VE in their programmes. Three sub-themes appeared: the logistics of setting up VE, task design, and technical aspects. Regarding preferred training formats, a focus on learning from other colleagues experienced in VE emerged with suggestions for novices to 'job-shadow' more experienced colleagues during VEs and peer discussions focusing on good practice. Indeed, several teachers described a need for a "shared space" in which to meet and exchange with other practitioners, potentially more experienced in VE:

What works is the teaching community – we can have others contribute from time to time but in our day-to-day professional lives it's our colleagues who influence us [...] asking questions to another more experienced teacher: Do you think this could work? What do you think if I did this? How many sessions ahead should I do this? etc. (Participant3, Focus groupFR1)

The outcomes of the needs analysis were taken into account to organise online 'teacher voices workshops' (E-LIVE, 2022b), in which experienced VE practitioners showcased different VE school projects. These workshops focused on motivation and engagement in VE, new technologies for VE include Frame VR, and addressing diversity and differentiation in VE. The needs analysis also informed the choice of themes covered during expert webinars held in Autumn 2022- Spring 2023, namely differentiation and lingua franca exchanges. For VEs that are set up between associate partner schools and in which the needs analysis participants will participate, E-LIVE has also adopted a coaching approach (cf. Jauregi & Melchor-Couto, 2017). Coaches work alongside the teachers to prepare, plan, carry out, and evaluate exchanges in their language courses in a collaborative manner. A questionnaire in Summer 2023 will evaluate the effectiveness of this approach.

3. Teacher training virtual exchange project

An initial VE teacher-training project brought together trainee teachers (n=48) of foreign languages (English, Dutch, French, German, Spanish) from Utrecht University (NL), Université Clermont Auvergne (FR), and Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (CO). At Utrecht University, the virtual exchange was integrated into the Master’s course, ‘Language Curriculum’. At Université Clermont Auvergne, an 18-hour course entitled ‘Training for pedagogical innovation - telecollaboration’ was created within the didactics module of a Master’s in English language teaching. Participants from Pontificia Universidad Javeriana were graduates within the Teacher education programme. The VE ran over a period of six weeks in Autumn 2022. The overall aim was to introduce VE and VE task design. After theoretical introductions in each institution in which cohorts interacted with training materials produced in the E-LIVE project relating to digitalisation and language education, engaging pedagogies for VE and task design, and intercultural communication (Jauregi-Ondarra & Canto, 2023), the VE was organised around three tasks (see Figure 1).

The exchange was organised around three tasks that utilised the affordances of both synchronous and asynchronous tools (Flip [a video discussion and sharing app: <https://info.flip.com/>], Moodle, BigBlueButton videoconferencing, Genial.ly [app to design interactive content: <https://genial.ly/>], and Padlet [interactive multimodal board: <https://padlet.com/>]) to introduce virtual exchange and virtual exchange task design to the trainee teachers.

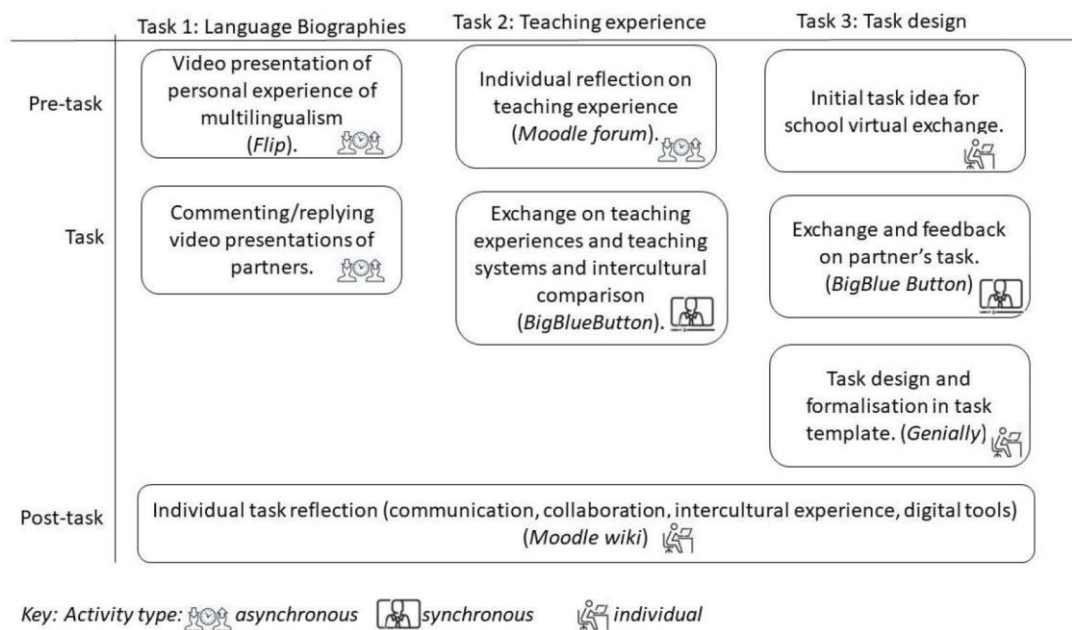


Figure 1. Pedagogical design of VE.

The final task (task 3) involved the trainees co-designing virtual exchange tasks that could be used for a class in their current teaching placement context (secondary schools). Trainees were asked to consider the learning objectives, environments and tools to be used, interaction patterns, and learner organisation as well as the expected production or outcome. These tasks were formalised using the E-LIVE task template in Genially and are currently being published within the project taskbank as open-access resources for other teachers interested in VE.

An example task produced, for a bilingual teletandem model of VE (Brammerts, 2002), was for learners to initially present one of their favourite cities then to research their VE partner’s favourite city as regards accommodation, restaurant, and activity possibilities before exchanging these ideas with a partner and receiving feedback on which options they should choose before producing a written travel plan for which the L1 peer would provide linguistic feedback (see Figure 2).

VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

Task overview
Pre-task
Main task
Post-task
Differention

MAIN TASK

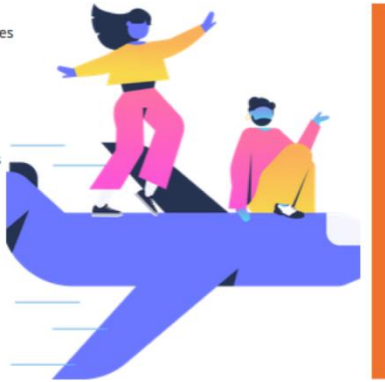
DESCRIPTION
 In this session, students will have to discuss the possibilities to eat, to sleep and to visit places (3 possibilities for each place). They should have notes about it.

Objectives
 - Can follow clearly articulated speech, though will sometimes have to ask for repetition of particular words phrases. (linguistic)
 - Can start up a conversation and help keep it going by asking people relatively spontaneous questions , expressing reactions and opinions. (communicative)

Environments and tools
 - BBB, Google Earth, Google Docs

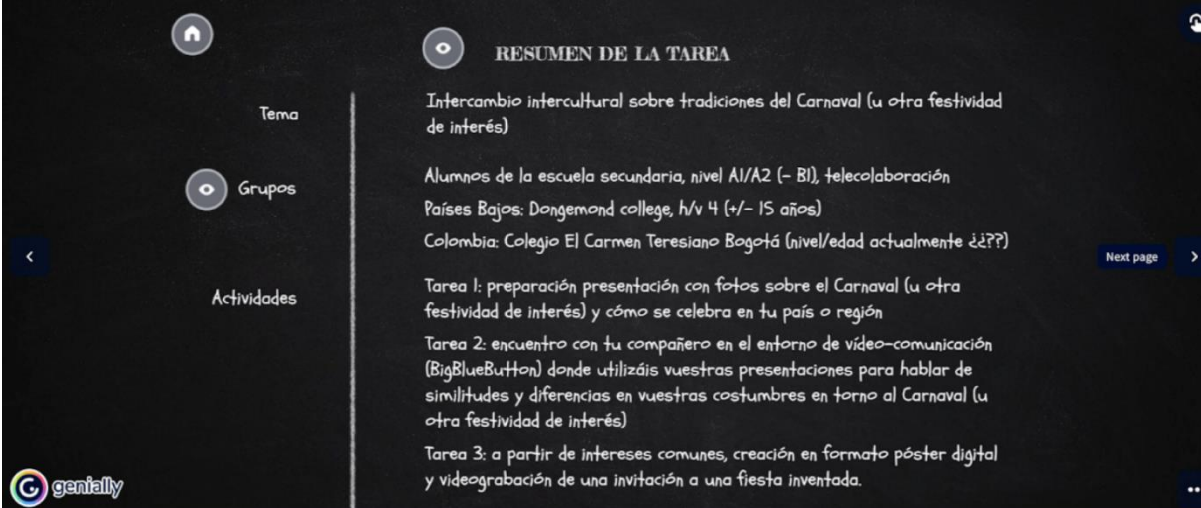
Form and organisation of virtual exchange
 It will be a pair work.

Expected outcomes
 They should have all the information to create their travel plan.



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Figure 2. Sample task production 1.



RESUMEN DE LA TAREA

Intercambio intercultural sobre tradiciones del Carnaval (u otra festividad de interés)

Alumnos de la escuela secundaria, nivel A1/A2 (- B1), telecolaboración
 Países Bajos: Dongemond college, h/v 4 (+/- 15 años)
 Colombia: Colegio El Carmen Teresiano Bogotá (nivel/edad actualmente ¿¿??)

Tarea 1: preparación presentación con fotos sobre el Carnaval (u otra festividad de interés) y cómo se celebra en tu país o región
 Tarea 2: encuentro con tu compañero en el entorno de video-comunicación (BigBlueButton) donde utilizáis vuestras presentaciones para hablar de similitudes y diferencias en vuestras costumbres en torno al Carnaval (u otra festividad de interés)
 Tarea 3: a partir de intereses comunes, creación en formato póster digital y videograbación de una invitación a una fiesta inventada.

Figure 3. Sample task production 2.

In this VE task designed by trainee teachers from the Netherlands and Colombia, their students at secondary schools were prompted to engage in an intercultural exchange focusing on the traditions of Carnival (or any other festival of interest concrete learners might embrace). The task consists of three activities (see Figure 3). In the first one, students are required to prepare a presentation with photos about Carnival (or another festival) celebrated in their respective countries or regions. They need to showcase how the festival is celebrated, highlighting its customs and traditions. For the second activity, students have a video communication session where they are expected to share their presentations with their assigned partners and engage in a conversation about the similarities and differences in their customs related to Carnival or the chosen festival. In the third activity, students are tasked with creating jointly a digital poster and recording a video invitation for an imaginary party. The theme of the party should be based on common interests identified during the previous tasks. This activity encourages creativity and collaboration as students work together to design an appealing invitation that reflects elements of their cultures and shared interests.

The study investigated participants' perceptions of VE activities¹, and the results consistently demonstrated positive feedback across various aspects of the experience, as shown in Appendix C. Both Flip and the BigBlueButton (BBB) video-communication environment were considered easy to use, with mean ratings of 4.0 (SD = 1.0) and 3.9 (SD = 1.1), respectively. Additionally, participants reported high satisfaction with the sound quality in BBB, which received a mean rating of 4.1 (SD = 0.7). Regarding interaction, participants expressed enjoyment in meeting students from other countries (Mean = 4.3, SD = 0.8) and engaging in tasks with their partners (Mean = 3.7, SD = 0.9). They also felt comfortable during the sessions (Mean = 4.2, SD = 0.7) and enjoyed communicating with their international counterparts (Mean = 4.5, SD = 0.6). The VE sessions were perceived as valuable for discovering new perspectives and insights (Mean = 4.5, SD = 0.5), and fostering active participation and interaction (Mean = 4.6, SD = 0.5). The international dimension, involving interaction with students from other countries, was particularly interesting to participants (Mean = 4.4, SD = 0.8). Furthermore, participants expressed a strong desire to incorporate VE activities into their future teaching practices (Mean = 4.1, SD = 1.0).

Trainee teachers expressed their enjoyment and satisfaction with various aspects of the VE experience, including connecting with international partners, learning about different cultures, and collaborating on projects. The utilisation of new technologies and software tools was also well-received. Participants valued the exchanges with their partners, the insights into different educational systems, and the personal connections formed during the collaboration. However, trainee teachers did encounter some challenges during their participation in the VE project, such as time constraints, technical difficulties with platforms and tools, and occasional communication challenges.

Overall, the participants found the VE experience enriching, enjoyable, and informative. Their feedback highlights the benefits of VE, with one participant expressing, "*I liked meeting new people, having discussions with them, and learning about our different approaches to our future profession.*"

These findings underscore the positive impact of VE activities in facilitating intercultural learning experiences, promoting engagement, and enhancing participants' awareness of the pedagogical value of VE for their future careers as language teachers. The study suggests that incorporating VE into language teaching practices can be a beneficial and rewarding approach.

4. Conclusions and perspectives

The conclusions drawn from this study serve as a critical reflection on the E-LIVE project, shedding light on both the opportunities and challenges associated with VE in language education. The E-LIVE project's primary objective is to enhance language teacher training programs and L2 teaching at primary and secondary schools through the integration of VE. While our conclusions may echo some well-established principles, they underscore the crucial role of VE in addressing specific challenges faced by language teachers. These challenges include the integration of multilingual pupils and the effective incorporation of digital tools in language education.

One key takeaway is the pivotal importance of equipping trainee teachers with the pedagogical, intercultural, and digital skills necessary to navigate the complexities of a digital world successfully. While this may align with established best practices, our project's pedagogical design showcases the innovative potential of VE. Through a variety of digital tools and platforms, trainee teachers designed tasks that promote collaboration, intercultural exchange, and authentic language use. This practical demonstration underscores the transformative possibilities of VE in language education. Moreover, the study recognizes the need for comprehensive training and support for teachers in the technical aspects of VE and the effective integration of digital tools. Clear instructions and well-organised communication channels are essential components of a successful VE experience. Additionally, the study acknowledges the time constraints that both teachers and students face, emphasizing the importance of balancing project objectives with existing workloads.

¹ The survey was validated in previous projects (TILA & TeCoLa) and adapted to the specific educational context.

Despite these challenges, it is worth noting that many trainee teachers found the VE experience enriching, enjoyable, and valuable. The connections made with international partners, exposure to different cultures, and collaborative projects were highly appreciated. These positive aspects reaffirm the potential and benefits of virtual exchanges in language education.

In essence, the E-LIVE project serves as a valuable learning experience, highlighting the evolving landscape of language education through VEs. While some findings may resonate with established principles, they reinforce the significance of VE in addressing specific challenges and fostering innovation in language teacher training. By considering the feedback and insights from trainee teachers and acknowledging both the opportunities and challenges, future projects can build upon this foundation to create even more impactful and rewarding learning experiences through VEs.

Acknowledgements

The E-LIVE project is financed by Erasmus+ KA220-SCH Cooperation partnerships in school education. We are grateful to the associate partner schools and trainee teachers who participated in the initial project actions.

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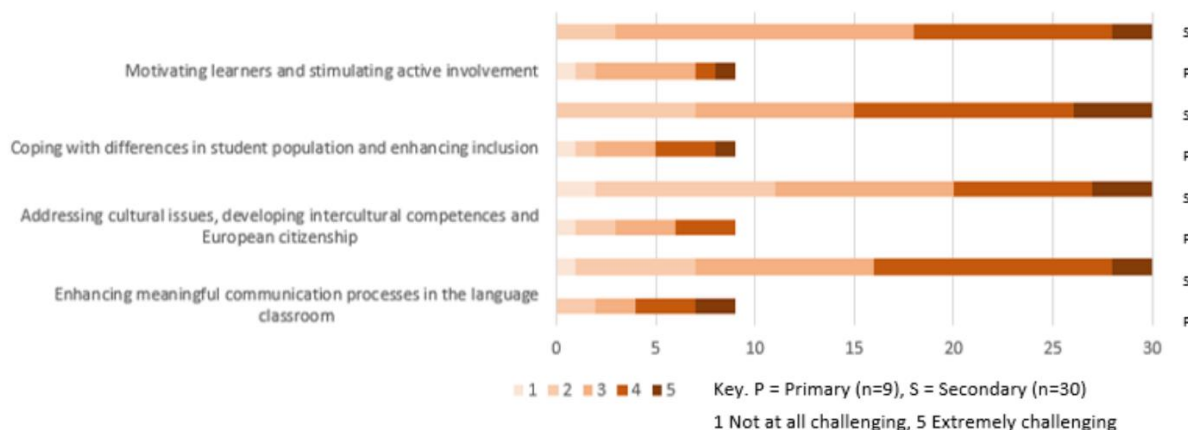
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Appendices

Appendix A: European-funded projects on telecollaborative practices

Project name	Educational level	Targeted languages	Resources	Website
E-LIVE Engaging Languages in Intercultural Virtual Exchange (2022-2024)	Primary, secondary, and vocational education. Teacher education institutions	English, French, German, Spanish	Teacher education modules for pre- and in-service teachers. Telecollaboration tasks for trainee teachers and school students. Case studies & participants' voices.	elive.project.eu
EVOLVE Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange (2018-2020)	University	General, ELF	Monitoring study on awareness and use of VE in HEIs. Evolve report on impact of VE on teacher competences and development. Case studies research report.	evolve-erasmus.eu
EVALUATE Evaluating and Upscaling Telecollaborative Teacher Education (2017-2019)	University	General, ELF		Information available via Uni-collaboration
NIFLAR Networked Interaction for Foreign Language Acquisition and research (2009-2011)	University (Pilots at secondary schools)	Dutch, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Valencian	Tasks Best practices Research results	niflar.eu
TeCoLa Pedagogical differentiation through telecollaboration and gamification for intercultural and content integrated language learning (2016-2019)	Primary, secondary, and vocational education	English, French, German, Spanish	Tasks Teacher training materials Case studies Teachers' and students' experiences	tecola.eu
TILA Telecollaboration for Intercultural Language Acquisition (2013-2015)	Secondary schools	English, French, German, Spanish	Telecollaboration tasks in different languages Teacher training materials Case studies Best practices	tila.eu
Uni-Collaboration	University	General, ELF	Teacher networking	unicollaboration.org
VALIANT Virtual Innovation and Support Networks (2021-2024)	Secondary education in rural areas		Training and mentoring teachers	valiantproject.eu

Appendix B: Pedagogical Challenges in the current teaching situation



Appendix C: Trainee teachers’ perceptions of VE activities (n=22) (5-point Likert-Scale: 1 Totally disagree, 5 Totally agree) (SD: Standard Deviation)

Item	Mean	SD
It was easy to use Flip.	4.0	1.0
It was easy to use the BBB environment in Moodle.	3.9	1.1
Sound was good in BBB.	4.1	0.7
I like to meet students from other countries in this environment.	4.3	0.8
I liked the tasks I carried out with my partner.	3.7	0.9
I felt comfortable during the sessions	4.2	0.7
I enjoyed communicating with a student from another country.	4.5	0.6
The VE sessions helped me discover new things about other people’s views, another culture, another educational system.	4.5	0.5
I did my best to keep the interaction going during the virtual exchanges.	4.6	0.5
The international dimension (the interaction with students from another country) made the sessions more interesting.	4.4	0.8
I would like to use virtual exchange activities with my students.	4.1	1.0