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## TRAINING NEEDS OF IN-SERVICE PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION TEACHERS WHEN IMPLEMENTING INTERCULTURAL VIRTUAL EXCHANGES

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### ABSTRACT

Over the last few years, following a global pandemic which resulted in the rise of communicative technologies and on-line learning, researchers have advocated for virtual exchanges, or telecollaboration, to become more mainstream in education. With little available research on intercultural virtual exchanges being conducted by primary and secondary education teachers, an online questionnaire and focus group interviews addressed to these cohorts were completed to attempt to understand the barriers towards implementing IVE in their schools and the training needs to mitigate any reported challenges. A needs analysis was conducted with the data collected from in-service primary and secondary school teachers' questionnaire and interview feedback. Our findings show that both cohorts struggled with designing intercultural virtual exchange (IVE) materials especially for larger classes and how to structure the exchange over several months. While both also reported needing training with digital tools and platforms, secondary school teachers in particular cited needing support to link these to pedagogical tasks. We believe that the needs of these two groups of teachers can be met through coaching by experienced in-service teachers, a service offered by the E-LIVE project.

### ABSTRACT SECOND LANGUAGE

En los últimos años, tras una pandemia mundial que dio lugar al auge de las tecnologías comunicativas y el aprendizaje, los investigadores han abogado por que los intercambios virtuales, o telecolaboración, se generalicen en la educación. Dada la escasez de estudios sobre intercambios virtuales interculturales realizados por profesores de primaria y secundaria, se realizó un cuestionario en línea y entrevistas a grupos de discusión de estas cohortes para conocer los obstáculos que dificultan la aplicación de los Intercambios Virtuales Interculturales (IVI) en sus centros y las necesidades de formación para mitigar las dificultades señaladas. Se llevó a cabo un análisis de las necesidades con los datos recogidos de los profesores de primaria y secundaria en activo en un cuestionario y entrevistas focales en grupo empleados. Nuestras conclusiones muestran que ambas cohortes tuvieron dificultades para diseñar materiales de IVI, especialmente para clases numerosas, y para estructurar el intercambio a lo largo de varios meses. Aunque ambos grupos señalaron que necesitaban formación sobre las herramientas y plataformas digitales, los profesores de secundaria, en particular, indicaron que necesitaban apoyo para vincularlas a las tareas pedagógicas. Las necesidades de estos dos grupos de profesores pueden satisfacerse con el asesoramiento de profesores en activo con experiencia, un servicio que ofrece el proyecto E-LIVE.

## 1. Intercultural Virtual Exchange



## 1.1 What is IVE?

Intercultural virtual exchange (IVE), or Telecollaboration, has been referred to as “virtual intercultural interaction and exchange projects between classes of learners in geographically distant locations” (O’Dowd, 2013). While several benefits are reported regarding IVEs, the most noteworthy have been providing students with the opportunity to learn about their partner’s culture via a lingua franca. A brief history of the development of VE includes:

- Early 1990s: Promoting semi-authentic opportunities for students to practise language learning (Warschauer, 1995);
- Late 1990s: Projects involving schools in other countries can help debunk cultural stereotypes (Furstenberg & Shoggy, 2000);
- 2000s: IVEs expose students to learning intercultural and sociocultural aspects of language learning (Thorne, 2010);
- Late 2000s: IVEs are increasingly integrated into higher education language programmes.

While this timeline illustrates that IVEs have broken into tertiary education language programmes, several researchers have highlighted the need for IVEs to be incorporated into secondary and primary schools (Dooly & Vinagre, 2022; Pennock-Speck & Clavel-Arroitia, 2022). These limited studies are presented in the next two subsections along with their findings.

### 1.1.1 IVE studies and projects in secondary schools

Several studies have investigated the IVE implementation such as:

- Teachers’ focus on task organisation, resolving issues with technology and monitoring student behaviour (Clavel-Arroitia & Pennock-Speck, 2015)
- Students’ react positively to IVE despite some technological challenges (Jauregi & Melchor-Couto, 2014)
- Teachers’ feel cautiously optimistic about IVEs as a teaching tool, depending on school constraints (Ware & Kessler, 2016)

The findings of these studies support the number of projects which have been launched in the European Union to foster IVE growth in secondary schools such as the Telecollaboration for Intercultural Language Acquisition (TILA) project<sup>1</sup>, the Pedagogical Differentiation through Telecollaboration and Gaming for Intercultural and Content Integrated Language Teaching project (TeCoLA)<sup>2</sup> and the Engaging Languages in Intercultural Virtual Exchange project (E-LIVE)<sup>3</sup>. The E-LIVE project also includes the participation of primary school teachers.

### 1.1.2 IVE students and projects in primary schools

The benefits of IVE have also been reported in studies with primary school teachers and students. In particular, studies have stated that meaning-focused tasks promote the development of digital skills and interpersonal relationships amongst students (Austin, Hampel & Kukulska-Hulme, 2017). IVE also accommodates different teaching styles allowing teachers the flexibility to focus on the specific needs of their learners while completing tasks with their international partner (Pennock-Speck & Clavel-Arroitia, 2022).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.tilaproject.eu/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://sites.google.com/site/tecolaproject/>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://sites.google.com/view/eliveproject>



### 1.1.3 Teacher training/professional development for pre- and in-service teachers

A unique aspect of implementing an IVE is that both students and teachers reap similar benefits. For example, teachers who participate in IVEs have reported benefits including learning about new pedagogical tools and practising digital literacy (Lawrence & Spector-Cohen, 2018); becoming more autonomous (Kramsch, A’Ness & Lam, 2000), and learning about new cultures (Godwin-Jones, 2019). Further, teachers report feeling more ‘internationalised’ in their teaching due to collaborating with teachers in other countries (Jager et al., 2019); increased networking (Creelman & Lowe, 2019) and having the opportunity to teach using innovative approaches (O’Dowd & Dooly, 2021).

### 1.2 Competences of the IVE teacher

O’Dowd (2015) provides an extensive list of competences required of teachers when implementing IVEs. These competences are grouped into four categories. They have been ranked according to the most frequent competencies to the least ones as shown in table 1.

**Table 1:** Competences of IVE teachers (O’Dowd, 2015, p. 202-4)

Type of competency	No. of competences
Organisational	14
ICT/Digital	10
Pedagogical	9
Attitudes and beliefs	6

Not surprisingly, IVE requires substantial organisational skills. Organisational competences include “can apply his/her knowledge of the educational context in which the partner class is working in order to structure the exchange and avoid problems” and “can use online networks and his/her own professional contacts to locate possible partner-teachers in distant locations” (p. 202). O’Dowd (2015) also ranks teachers’ ICT/digital skills as being of the utmost importance. In terms of pedagogical skills, O’Dowd (2015, p. 203) states that teachers should be able to “integrate seamlessly and effectively the content and themes of the telecollaborative exchange into his/her contact classes (when they exist) before, during and after the exchange itself” and “can identify tasks for the online exchange which meet at least some of the objectives of the participating classes’ curricula”. Perhaps more surprising are the relatively fewer competences mentioned that pertain to attitudes and beliefs given the degree of enthusiasm reported by teachers who participate in IVEs.

A more streamlined version of these competences has been published by Nissen and Kurek (2020) who outline 12 abilities required of teachers when implementing IVE in their classrooms. These include competences which centre on structuring the IVE, designing tasks that suit students’ interests and the learning objectives and factoring in appropriate feedback and assessment of the class. With these competences in mind, we sought to compare these to primary and secondary teachers’ needs as reported in our questionnaire and focus group interviews. Needs analysis has been an effective method for investigating challenges which we elaborate on next.



### **1.2.1 Needs analysis in teacher training**

Leigh et al. (2000) have conducted a review of the means of assessing and analysing needs in the fields of instructional design, curriculum and organisational development. Given that our focus was smaller groups (focus groups made up of teachers also being a form of data collection), we used Burton and Merrill's (1991) method of needs analysis which includes six categories such as teachers' current challenges (their 'felt needs') and critical occurrences in the classroom that indicate potential future needs. Burton and Merrill (ibid) suggest that questionnaires can be designed to draw out teachers' needs and thus the goals of a training programme. Further, they recommend that questionnaires when coupled with interviews help researchers to understand teachers' priorities.

## **2. How we collected the data (our study context)**

In the present study, we designed a questionnaire and conducted focus group interviews with primary and secondary school teachers. The questionnaire was administered online, while focus groups were conducted in person with the researchers (either face-to-face or via videoconference).

39 teachers participated in the questionnaire, 30 secondary and 9 primary school teachers. Respondents were asked about their prior experience in participating in an IVE, with approximately half of the teachers in both groups reporting prior experience teaching in an IVE. 39 teachers completed the online questionnaire. 20 were chosen to participate in the follow-up focus group taking into account factors such as the age of their students and the country where they worked. The questionnaire contained both close- and open-ended questions. Data from the questionnaire were analysed descriptively in Excel, while transcripts of the recorded focus groups were analysed using content analysis (Stemler, 2001). Transcripts were coded into themes which were identified across all focus groups and agreed on by all researchers. Quotations which represent recurring themes by teachers are provided for personalisation of the findings.

## **3. Results**

Secondary and primary school teachers' responses were analysed according to Burton and Merrill's (1991) method of needs analysis. Specifically, teachers' felt and anticipated needs as well as critical incidents they experienced were highlighted. Additionally, teachers' training format preferences were provided.

### **3.1 Teachers' felt and anticipated needs in face to face teaching**

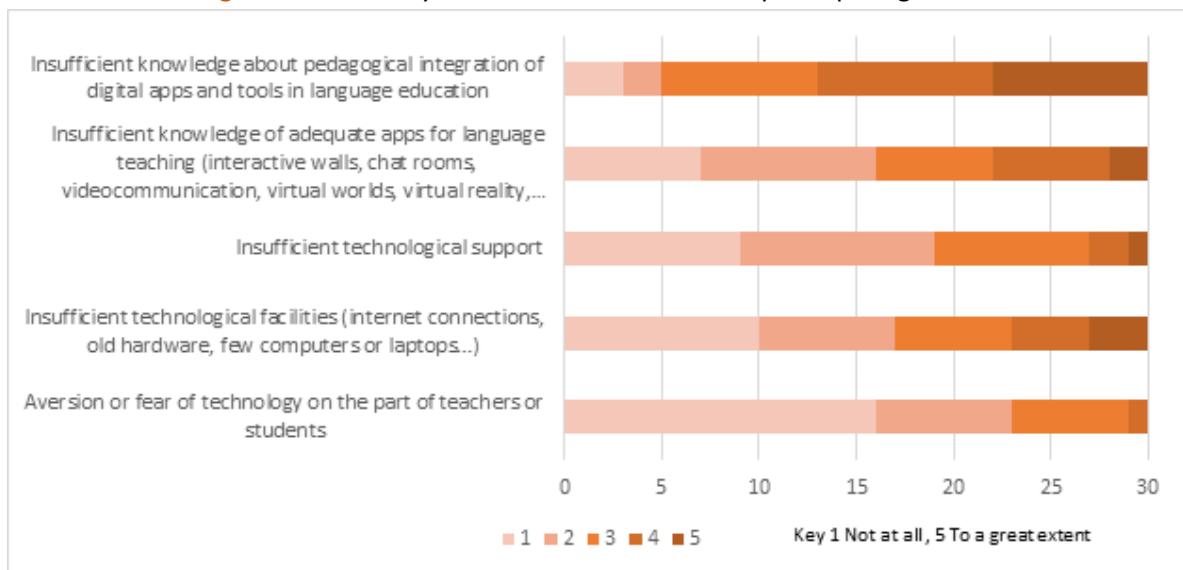
Concerning teachers' felt needs, 50% of respondents ranked 'coping with differences in student population and enhancing inclusion' as challenges they faced. This is reflected in a comment that one of the secondary teachers made in one of the focus group interviews, suggesting that IVE tasks which can accommodate larger classes and diversity in the classroom are desired by teachers.

In comparison, primary school teachers expressed a need for authentic interactive and attractive language learning tasks in their classrooms that were interesting regarding the students.

Regarding their anticipated needs, primary school teachers commented on being unaware of what technological tools or platforms were available for IVE task design, especially ones which adhere to data protection guidelines for young learners. On the other hand, more than half of the secondary school teachers reported in the questionnaire that their biggest impediment towards implementing IVEs in their classroom as having insufficient knowledge concerning how to link digital applications with lesson aims/objectives as shown in figure 1.



Figure 1: Secondary teachers' barriers towards participating in IVEs



Another challenge reported by secondary education teachers, on this occasion, in the focus group interviews, was being uncertain about how to adapt existing IVE tasks for mixed-level classes because adapting the activity for the level that suits the majority of students would still result in some higher-level students possibly being bored. Flexibility in IVE tasks and training in how to adapt tasks is a critical need expressed by secondary school teachers.

### 3.2 Critical incidents reported by teachers with previous IVE teaching experience

Critical incidents were identified via open-ended questions in the questionnaire which asked about the challenges teachers experienced. Three themes emerged:

- Setting up exchanges
- Aligning the IVE with their curricula
- Issues with technology (unstable wifi, lack of webcams)
- 

The second of these themes was elaborated on by a primary school teacher in one of the focus group interviews. She commented that the low level of young learners complicates implementing IVEs because their vocabulary is limited or their understanding of what is happening if the activity is not designed well.

One of the secondary school teachers commented that the most important challenge when attempting virtual exchange research was uncertainty of how to start a virtual exchange when the IVE partners have timetables that do not match. This comment speaks volumes of the need for teachers to have a space where they can meet and discuss these issues with experienced IVE teachers.

### 3.3 Teachers' preferred training formats and approaches

One critical aspect of the questionnaire also sought to understand teachers' preferred training formats and whether these differed by group. As table 3 outlines, while all teachers expressed an interest in a training format that allowed for discussions with experienced IVE teachers and/or job shadowing, their answers related to length of session, and training focus were not so homogenous.



**Table 3:** Teachers’ training preferences

Questionnaire item	Primary teachers	Secondary teachers
Teachers’ preferred method of training	Face to face workshops	Interactive materials
Teachers’ preferred format of training	Meeting with a teacher who has taught IVEs before; Job shadowing	Meeting with a teacher who has taught IVEs before
When training could take place	April – May	(not specified)
Ideal training length	1-hour sessions, per week	2 hours per month
Aim of the training	Technical (integrating IVEs into curricula)	Technical (platforms available for IVEs) and Pedagogical (how to adapt materials for IVEs)

While primary teachers preferred face-to-face workshops, shorter training sessions and training that focused on technical aspects for integrating IVEs, secondary teachers preferred interactive materials that could be shared online, longer sessions but which were further apart in frequency and training sessions which focused on both technical and pedagogical aspects especially on how to adapt existing IVE tasks found online for students. Specifically, one secondary teacher stated in the follow-up focus group interview that knowing the technology they will use in the activity “perfectly” is critical if they are to feel confident enough to use it with their students, including how to adapt the tool for different student levels.

As both primary and secondary teachers agreed on the training format, a clear call for a ‘shared space’ where novice or aspiring IVE teachers could discuss with experienced IVE teachers was evident in the data we collected and analysed. One primary teacher mentioned the need for a “teaching community” so that teachers would feel able to reach out when they had questions and learn from experienced IVE teachers by sharing knowledge. Collaboration and professional development have been cited as common benefits by teachers who engage in IVE, therefore this is not a surprising request.

## 4. Discussion and conclusion

### 4.1 Common training needs: Technical and pedagogical support

In terms of where they align, both secondary and primary school teachers expressed being uncertain about what digital platforms to use with secondary school teachers while also requesting pedagogical training to connect IVE tasks with their curricula. They also commented on the difficulties of the logistical side of IVE, namely how to start planning an IVE for their students. These needs align with the competences of ICT/digital, organisational and pedagogical competencies as outlined by O’Dowd (2015) as well as Nissen and Kurek’s (2020) competences relating to designing meaningful tasks to inspire communication and collaboration amongst students carrying out an IVE. Although there are studies which involve many types of technologies used in IVEs (Emir & Yangin-Ekşi, 2024; Zhang & Zhou, 2023), these platforms are in constant flux. With the constant creation of new technologies, it is not surprising that teachers may not be aware of what digital tools to use when teaching IVEs.



#### **4.2 Specific training needs: Primary school teachers**

When teachers were asked about more specific challenges they faced, primary school teachers commented that they needed tasks that would be meaningful, authentic and accommodate students with limited linguistic abilities. With much of IVE research being conducted with students in higher education, the need for more research to showcase how IVEs can be implemented in secondary and specially primary schools is critical. Several studies on IVE in primary schools have reported on students having positive experiences (García-Martínez and Gracia-Téllez, 2018; Ligorio & Van Veen, 2006). However, more research is needed in demonstrating to primary school teachers how IVEs can suit lower-level students. Concerning technical applications/platforms, primary school teachers discussed needing to know which digital tools would keep young students' data secure.

#### **4.3 Specific training needs: Secondary school teachers**

Secondary school teachers vocalised several specific training needs to us which align with the competences of IVE teachers presented by O'Dowd (2015) and Nissen and Kurek (2020). These needs were: IVE tasks that recognised the diverse backgrounds often found in language classrooms, understanding how to structure IVE tasks over a number of months, finding time in their teaching schedule to give training to their students so that they could obtain benefits from IVE, how to design IVE tasks for mixed ability and/or large class sizes. This list of needs is no easy feat for teachers who may be teaching approximately 25 hours per week in their school leaving little time to learn innovative teaching approaches. It should be noted that some secondary school teachers also reported technology challenges in implementing IVE such as an inadequate number of webcams or unstable wifi in their schools. For IVE to become a part of mainstream language education, these issues must be resolved. As Jauregi-Ondarra (2015) reports, the relevance and effectiveness of telecollaborative tasks can only be met when technological preconditions exist in the classroom.

#### **4.4 Moving forward**

To address the specific needs of primary and secondary education teachers, the E-LIVE project decided to implement a coaching approach whereby a teacher trainer experienced in IVE personally accompanied IVE partnerships through the design, implementation and project evaluation phases. E-LIVE also organised 'teacher voices' webinars during which school teachers who had previously experienced IVE shared their experience from organisational, pedagogical and technological points of view. The project also designed and tested tasks, including those for beginner language learners, in which possibilities for individual learner differentiation were considered. The webinars and tasks are available on the E-LIVE project website. The needs analysis was instrumental in helping the E-LIVE project decide upon these project objectives in the hope that materials produced would align as closely as possible with in-service teachers' needs and expectations.





## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What benefits do you think your students could receive from talking with a student in another country?
2. How do your students currently learn about new cultures?
3. What tips would you have for a teacher who was struggling to design activities with large class sizes and/or mixed ability classes?
4. Concerning O'Dowd's (2015) 4 competences of telecollaborative teachers, which category (organisational, digital, pedagogical or attitudes/beliefs) would you need help with? Why?
5. Would you have any difficulties obtaining technical equipment (webcams) or having stable wifi in your school?
6. What professional development are you involved in?
7. How up-to-date are you with new online platforms and/or tools for language teaching?
8. Do you agree that bringing together teachers who are experienced in IVE and those who are not should be a useful component of IVE training?
9. How often do you collaborate with other teachers?

## FURTHER READING

This case study was adapted from the scientific publication:

Wigham, C., and Clavel-Arroitia, B. (in press). The training needs of primary and secondary in-service school teachers in intercultural virtual exchange. *Journal of Virtual Exchange*.

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## Appendix A: O'Dowd's (2015) Competences of the telecollaborative teacher (p. 202-4)

### Organisational Competences

- Can use online networks and his/her own professional contacts to locate possible partner-teachers in distant locations
- Can establish and explain clearly to possible partner-teachers his/her plans and expectations related to a possible exchange
- Can design the structure of an exchange (i.e. aims, minimum participation requirements, language use) which reflects the interests, L2 proficiency and level of electronic literacy of his/her own students
- Can negotiate effectively with the partner-teacher the structure and organisational technicalities of the exchange which take into account both institutional contexts (calendars etc.) as well as the needs and interests of both sets of participants
- Can employ various strategies to 'match' learners from the different institutions and to create effective partnerships and exchange groups
- Can maintain a good working relationship with the partner-teacher throughout the exchange, identifying problems as they arise
- Can alter the logistics of the exchange to adapt to developments and problems as they arise (e.g. low levels of participation, access to technology problems etc.)
- Can articulate to his/her virtual partner-teachers the learning objectives and pedagogical beliefs that lie behind his/her proposed tasks
- Can apply his/her experiences of previous online exchanges in order to avoid repeating mistakes and to innovate his/her practice
- Can apply his/her knowledge of the educational context in which the partner class is working in order to structure the exchange and avoid problems
- Has knowledge of the common causes of organisational and intercultural problems in online exchanges and can apply a series of techniques and strategies to deal with these problems
- Is aware of action research methodology in order to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of his/her online exchange
- Is aware of measures to ensure that the exchange receives appropriate academic recognition within the home institution
- Can successfully articulate the relevance and the added pedagogical value of telecollaborative exchanges to colleagues and superiors in order to support their use throughout the institution

### Pedagogical competences

- Can identify tasks for the online exchange which meet at least some of the objectives of the participating classes' curricula
- Can support students in discerning and reflecting upon culturally contingent patterns of interaction in follow-up classroom discussions
- Can apply his/her knowledge of the culture and language of the partner class to organise culturally and linguistically rich tasks for the exchange
- Can design tasks which are attractive and relevant for students and which serve to develop culturally and linguistically rich interaction
- Can design tasks which support the activities of collaborative inquiry and the construction of knowledge
- Can integrate appropriate assessment procedures and rubrics which accurately reflect the activities which students carried out during their exchange



- Can explain clearly to students what is expected from them during an exchange – deadlines, performance objectives, learning outcomes etc.
- Can integrate seamlessly and effectively the content and themes of the telecollaborative exchange into his/her contact classes (when they exist) before, during and after the exchange itself
- Can provide learning support for learners either through scaffolded guidance (in the classroom or in online tutorials) or through the provision of reflective tools, such as learning logs or journals.

### **ICT/Digital competences**

- Can choose the appropriate online communication tools (e.g. email, blogs, wikis, Skype) to fit both the everyday online practices of the students as well as the project's aims.
- Has a basic working knowledge of current (e.g. Web 2.0) communication tools and their pedagogic affordances and constraints.
- Can explain the use of the chosen tools to his/her students or can provide them with online or third party support for learning how to use them.
- Has a basic working knowledge of web management systems (e.g. Moodle) or exchange platforms (e.g. ePals, eTwinning) in order to locate and run his/her online exchanges.
- Can organise and structure real-time student interaction taking into account the particular affordances and technicalities of synchronous tools such as videoconferencing, chat etc.
- Can interact appropriately online with his/her partner-teacher and, if necessary, with the participating students, attending to online communication norms (e.g. responding to emails in a timely manner, using appropriate register etc.)
- Can organise the online exchange in a manner which protects students' safety and respects privacy issues related to students' work.
- Can model social presence and online identity for his/her students and help to create an online community of trust and learning.
- Can instruct learners on how to use online tools autonomously – tools which help them resolve language difficulties (e.g. online dictionaries, Google translator, multimedia authoring tools).
- Can develop in students a critical understanding of online tools – the interests they serve, the type of communication they promote etc.

### **Attitudes and beliefs**

- A belief that culture plays an intrinsic role in FL education and online communication
- An openness to partner-teachers' alternative pedagogical beliefs and aims
- A willingness to look for compromise with the partner-teacher in relation to task design, exchange structure and other issues
- An interest in trying out new telecollaborative tasks and new online tools which may be proposed by students or partner-teachers
- A willingness to deal with new messages, texts and questions in contact classes or tutorials as they emerge during the online exchange
- A willingness to accept that the teacher is not the sole authority on the target culture and language interest in learning with students about new aspects of L2 language use and cultural products and practices from their exchange partners