



HAL
open science

**GETTING OUT OF THEIR COMFORT ZONE:
SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS'
PARTICIPATION IN A FRENCH AS A LINGUA
FRANCA VIRTUAL EXCHANGE**

Cathryn Bennett, Catherine Brady

► **To cite this version:**

Cathryn Bennett, Catherine Brady. GETTING OUT OF THEIR COMFORT ZONE: SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN A FRENCH AS A LINGUA FRANCA VIRTUAL EXCHANGE. 2024. hal-04882849

HAL Id: hal-04882849

<https://hal.science/hal-04882849v1>

Submitted on 13 Jan 2025

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - ShareAlike 4.0 International License



GETTING OUT OF THEIR COMFORT ZONE: SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN A FRENCH AS A LINGUA FRANCA VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

Cathryn Bennett, Université Clermont Auvergne, France

Catherine Brady, Manchester Metropolitan University, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Although virtual exchange has grown in popularity, few virtual exchanges have been conducted in secondary schools (Clavel-Arroitia & Pennock-Speck, 2015), prompting our case study. Students in secondary schools in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands participated in a virtual exchange using French as a lingua franca. Data was collected from focus group discussions with learners in the United Kingdom and questionnaire data from both partner schools. Our analysis reveals several pedagogical recommendations for future VE implementation and task design including learner training and the temporal aspects of asynchronous VE task design.

ABSTRACT SECOND LANGUAGE

Bien que les échanges virtuels gagnent en popularité, peu de dispositifs de ce type réunissent des établissements secondaires (Clavel-Arroitia & Pennock-Speck, 2015), ce qui a motivé notre étude de cas. Des élèves du secondaire au Royaume-Uni et aux Pays-Bas ont participé à un échange virtuel en français comme lingua franca. Les données ont été recueillies à partir d'entretiens de groupe avec des apprenants au Royaume-Uni et de questionnaires. Notre analyse met en évidence plusieurs enseignements importants pour la mise en œuvre future des échanges virtuels et la conception des tâches, notamment la formation des apprenants et la prise en compte de temporalités plus rythmiques dans la conception des tâches asynchrones.

1. Introduction

This case study examines learner motivation towards an asynchronous virtual exchange (VE) in French as a lingua franca conducted between two classes at secondary schools in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. Specifically, we set out, through focus groups, to better understand how secondary learners felt about participating in an asynchronous lingua franca VE prior to the project and then following the project, through questionnaires to understand students' attitudes towards the project and their motivation to continue with future VE projects.

1.1 Motivation for L2 learning

Motivation is widely recognised as a critical factor in second language learning success. Defined as the driving force behind goal-oriented behaviour, motivation determines the effort, persistence, and strategies learners employ in acquiring the target language. Different theoretical frameworks have explored the multifaceted nature of motivation in L2 learning. Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model distinguished between integrative motivation—a learner's desire to connect with the culture and community of the target language—and instrumental motivation, which is driven by practical benefits including academic success. His work emphasized the role of attitudes towards the learning situation and linguistic self-confidence in shaping motivation. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) provided a framework for understanding motivation along a continuum of autonomy. It categorises motivation into intrinsic motivation, whereby learners engage in L2 learning for personal satisfaction and interest, and extrinsic motivation, influenced by external rewards or pressures i.e., being goal-driven and focusing on tangible outcomes. Dörnyei's (2001) L2 Motivational Self System



redefined motivation through a future-oriented perspective. It comprises three components: the Ideal L2 Self, which represents the learner's vision of themselves as a proficient language user; the Ought-to L2 Self, reflecting perceived obligations or responsibilities; and the Learning Experience, which encompasses the immediate environment and experiences in the language learning process.

Many factors can influence learners' motivation for L2 learning. These include individual or internal factors, for example, personality traits, self-efficacy and prior experiences. Higher self-efficacy has been shown to be associated with greater persistence and effort in language learning whilst learners with positive prior experiences may be more likely to maintain motivation over time. The learning environment, teacher role, and teaching approach play a crucial role in shaping motivation. Supportive teachers who provide constructive feedback and create and foster a positive classroom atmosphere may help to enhance learners' motivation. Task-based approaches and culturally relevant materials have been shown to engage learners effectively. Sociocultural influences, such as societal attitudes towards the target language and opportunities for authentic interaction, also impact motivation. Learners in contexts where the target language has high social prestige or practical utility are often more motivated. Additionally, access to native speakers strengthens integrative motivation. Recent research has thus looked at motivation as a complex and dynamic system looking both at the situated complexity of L2 motivation and its interaction with other individual/internal, social, and contextual factors to take into account the broader complexities of language learning and language use in an increasingly globalised world.

In line with Dörnyei's (2001) framework of motivational strategies organised around four key phases of the teaching-learning process (creating the basic motivational conditions, generating initial motivation, maintaining and teaching motivation and encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation), virtual exchange can support motivation for L2 learning. Indeed, contact with the L1 speaker community or with another community via the L1 can make the language classes interesting, topics can be adopted to personalise the learning process and introduce the target language culture, a task-based approach can be introduced to increase the learner's goal-orientedness, the learners' abilities to recognise that they are proficient enough to communicate in the target language with someone who does not share their L1 can increase the learners' linguistic self-confidence. Our case study discusses some aspects of asynchronous VE related to these strategies.

2. Asynchronous virtual exchange

VE in secondary schools remains a relatively under-researched area, despite its potential to enrich language learning curricula. Studies such as those by Clavel-Arroitia and Pennock-Speck (2015) indicate that secondary school learners benefit significantly from VE in terms of motivation and cultural awareness. However, logistical challenges, such as aligning curricula, managing timetabling, and teacher workloads, often impede implementation. Asynchronous exchanges in this context, characterized by delayed communication through tools like discussion forums, email, or online collaborative documents, provide a practical solution, allowing for integration into existing classroom schedules. Such exchanges offer flexibility and time for reflection, making them particularly suitable for language learners who may need additional time to process and produce language (see Jaramillo Cherez & Nadolny, 2023). However, the lack of immediacy in communication may limit the development of spontaneous language skills, the sense of connection between participants, and learner motivation towards the exchange.

In light of the above, this case study, thus set out to explore two guiding research questions :

1. How do secondary school students feel about participating in an asynchronous lingua franca virtual exchange?



2. How motivated are students in continuing with future VE exchanges?

The context was the Erasmus+ project E-LIVE (Engaging Languages in Intercultural Virtual Exchange) that ran between 2021 and 2024 and offered learners opportunities to engage in VEs with peers from other cultures.

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

During the 2023-24 school year, 18 students from a secondary school in the United Kingdom and 26 students from a secondary school in the Netherlands participated in a VE for which French was the lingua franca. Learners were of an A2-B1 CEFR level of French. The UK learners were in Year 11 (ages 15-16) and were preparing for their GCSE French exam. The learners in the Netherlands were in VWO5: the 5th year of an educational route that prepares learners for University studies (16-17 year olds).

3.2 Pedagogical design

The VE was designed around two asynchronous tasks due to difficulties in aligning school timetables. A summary of the asynchronous tasks used in the exchange is given below however detailed task plans are available on the E-LIVE website (E-LIVE, 2024). Task 1 was conducted in October-November 2023, while Task 2 was conducted between late January and March 2024. In between the two tasks, in December 2023, learners met for one short informal videoconferencing session (15 minutes) during which they exchanged end-of-year season greetings.

Task 1: Getting to know your English/Dutch partners

Small groups work together on writing an introduction and recording a short introduction video. After they upload it onto the video forum Flip, learners view the partner group's video and write comments and comment on it. They then answer any questions/ comments left about their own video.

Task 2: 'Ecole verte'

Students take pictures around their school to highlight sustainable development. In a short video, small groups talk about the photos they took and upload the video to the video forum Flip. Learners comment on their group's video. The final task comprised writing an email to the headteacher of the partner school to give suggestions on how to make environmental improvements at the partner school.

3.3 Data collection & instruments

Informed consent was obtained from participants according to the ethics committee at the UK university where the second researcher is currently a PhD candidate and from Utrecht University within the framework of the E-LIVE project. Students' names have been given pseudonyms for anonymity purposes.

3.3.1 Focus groups

The students based in the United Kingdom participated in focus groups (n=10) where they were asked questions by the researcher (author 2 of this case study). The aim of the interviews was to gauge students' existing methods of practising French in their respective schools.



3.3.2 Post-VE Questionnaires

A post-VE questionnaire was distributed online using Microsoft Forms to participants. The aim of the questionnaire was to understand students' attitudes towards the asynchronous exchange and thus were collected after the exchange had been completed.

The questionnaire structured 19 questions into eight short sections: overall impressions of the exchange, language learning and self-efficacy, intercultural awareness, personal experience of the project, technologies, tasks, learning, and overall evaluation. It comprised 12 closed questions and 7 open questions. 35 participants responded to the questionnaire. 12 responses were collected from students in the United Kingdom and 23 responses from students in the Netherlands.

4. Results

In this section, we present our analysis by data instrument.

4.1 Qualitative results: Focus groups

When asked about students' previous classroom experiences with speaking French, participants spoke about using French on rare occasions including reading aloud, in response to a question their teacher had asked, and/or in a game.

Therefore, when the English students were informed they would be participating in a VE with a Dutch school to practice French, they were asked about their level of interest. One student said,

“[It’s] cool talking to other people ... in a language that isn’t anyone’s first language. We can understand the struggle that we are all going through trying to communicate.”

Other students commented on the challenge it could be, only having French to communicate, but they felt that it would help them to prioritise using French which would also help them practise for their French-speaking GCSE exams in school.

Prior to the VE starting, students discussed their feelings. We noted a general feeling both of excitement and nervousness concerning the exchange. Students acknowledged that the opportunity for L2 speaking practice might help them prepare for their exams but also were apprehensive about not being able to communicate. Interestingly, we saw that participants were keen to personalise their exchanges and talk about subjects that were of individual interest to them as shown in the focus group transcript below.

Samantha: “Erm.. I am happy (hesitates) excited... I feel nervous.”

Charlotte: “I hope to improve my pronunciation with speaking to them.”

Denis: “I’m excited to meet our partners as it will be interesting to see what they have to say. They will help me learn key words better to be able to achieve level 9 GCSE.”

Jackie: “Me too! I’m excited to speak to the French kids because it will help me with my French exam.”

Andy: “I feel like I won’t be able to communicate these things [laughter]. I wanna talk



about the football team PSG.”

Grace: “I think It’ll be awkward because we won’t actually communicate to each other!”

Eddie: “I think it will be awkward because I will speak in a different language... but I will probably speak to the about life in France and football.”

Camilla: “I’m very excited to speak with the French people because I am excited to learn new words and how their culture is. But I am a bit scared I wouldn't know how to reply back to them or I don’t understand.”

After the first asynchronous task with their Dutch partners, students were questioned about their feelings during the task. Their responses would also help to determine if any changes should be made.

Samantha: “We was talking to actual people – I think that’s made people realise that you have...have to speak French rather than putting English words in.”

Archie: “Cos it is people that you don’t know - you get nervous - So they don’t want to admit that ... you are speaking a completely different language. People in a different country are judging you.”

Fiona: “We know how much of a struggle it is to understand them.”

Samantha: “Their language is close to French anyway - like latin. Here, we have completely different words for lots of things. If they were from someone else...”

Jessica: “Some words are similar (italian) not all of them. Some words are nearly the same so I can try and guess what it is.”

Lisa: “I don’t really like them ... Can you imagine some foreign people - we have no clue what they are saying.”

Ellen: “Made it more enjoyable. Something to go home and talk to your parents about.”

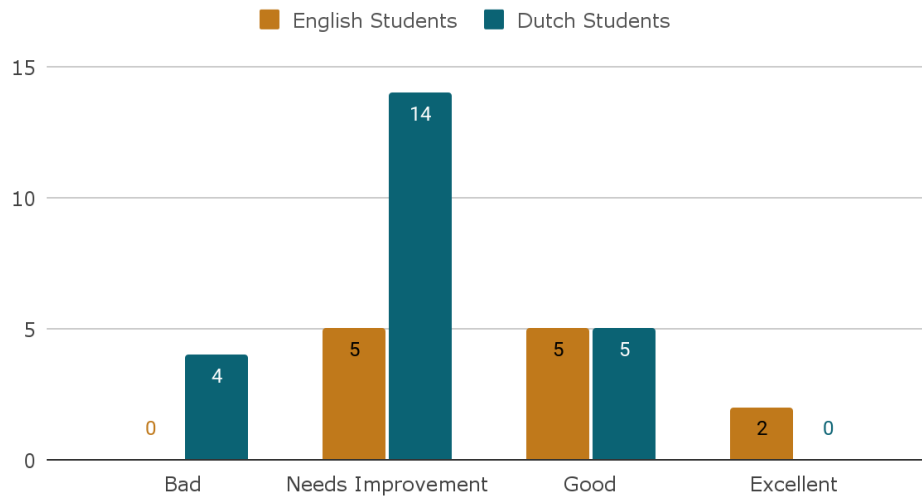
Students’ feelings about the first meeting reflected a mixture of emotions with some being concerned that they were being judged by their partners (Archie) or being worried that they were speaking ill of them in a language they didn’t understand (Lisa). Some students felt more positive saying that the exchange made practising speaking French ‘more enjoyable’ (Ellen) and that not having an option to speak English, mirrored conditions of ‘talking to actual people’ (Samantha), recognising the authentic nature of the exchange. The last comment by Ellen is particularly interesting showing how she wants to share the experience beyond the classroom with her family.

4.2 Quantitative results: Post-VE questionnaire

To begin, students were asked about their overall impression of the VE (figure 1).



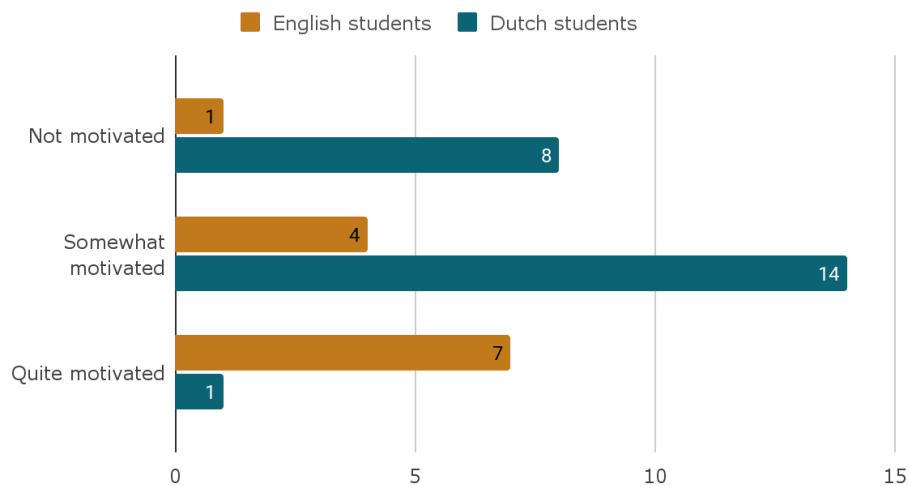
Figure 1: Students' impressions of the VE



In Figure 1, we see many of the English students rated the project more favourably than their Dutch counterparts. The Dutch participants reported that the VE project needed improvement. We present their suggestions for improvements to the VE in the following section.

Given the excitement that the English students expressed in their focus group interviews, we looked to triangulate this with the post-VE questionnaire responses (figure 2).

Figure 2: Students' motivation during the VE project



In Figure 2 we see a notable difference in response between the two groups. While many of the English participants reported being 'quite' or 'somewhat' motivated, their Dutch peers reported mainly being 'somewhat' or 'not' motivated during the exchange.

To understand this difference more clearly, we looked at participants' responses about their motivation. For example, many of the English students cited being motivated because they were speaking with new people and it was an opportunity to practise French in a new way. While the Dutch students agreed that speaking was a motivation, they commented that the infrequency of exchanging videos in the asynchronous tasks resulted in a loss in their motivation. Both groups reported being curious to hear their peers' French accents.



Tables 1-3 provide participants' responses on a 5-point Likert scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Table 1 explains participants' views towards the VE project in terms of whether they found speaking to a peer in another country interesting and mentioned it to others outside of the exchange, i.e., family and other classmates in school.

Table 1: Participants' questionnaire responses relating to the VE project

Statement: To what extent do you agree with the following:	Response options	English students' (n=12)	Dutch students' (n=23)
The international dimension made the interaction more interesting.	SA:	3	1
	A:	5 (42%)	9
	N:	4	10 (43%)
	D:	0	2
	SD:	0	1
I talked about the exchange project with my family and friends outside of my class.	SA:	1	0
	A:	6 (50%)	10 (43%)
	N:	2	4
	D:	0	3
	SD:	3	6

Concerning students' interest when talking with a peer in another country, some (42%) of the UK students agreed that the VE was interesting because they were speaking with a student in another country, however, the Dutch students viewed this experience more neutrally.

When asked if they discussed the VE project with family and friends not involved in the exchange, both groups of students commented that they did, 50% and 43% respectively. This could support students' comments about being motivated before the VE began and could be a result of the novelty of the exchange when compared with traditional classroom speaking practice.

In Table 2, participants were asked if they felt the VE project contributed towards learning French, the target language of the exchange.



Table 2: Questionnaire responses related to language learning

Statement: To what extent do you agree with the following:	Response options	English students' (n=12)	Dutch students' (n=23)
The project was useful for language learning.	SA:	5 (42%)	0
	A:	4	0
	N:	2	10 (43%)
	D:	1	10 (43%)
	SD:	0	3

As shown in Table 2, while some of the UK students agreed, most of the Dutch students were less convinced this was true with 86% expressing uncertainty and disagreement with this statement. Many of the Dutch students reported that they did not receive linguistic gains from the VE project.

When asked in an open question what participants had learned in terms of language during the VE, they commented on:

- learning new vocabulary related to recycling and the environment;
- speaking spontaneously.

Table 3 presents participants' views towards intercultural learning, both of their partner's culture and whether in learning about another's culture, they may have reflected on their own.

Table 3: Questionnaire responses related to intercultural learning

Statement: To what extent do you agree with the following:	Response options	English students' (n=12)	Dutch students' (n=23)
I was able to learn something about my partner's views/life/culture.	SA:	2	0
	A:	5 (42%)	1
	N:	4	6
	D:	0	6
	SD:	1	10 (43%)



I questioned my views about my culture.	A:	5 (42%)	0
	N:	3	5
	D:	2	10 (43%)
	SD:	2	8

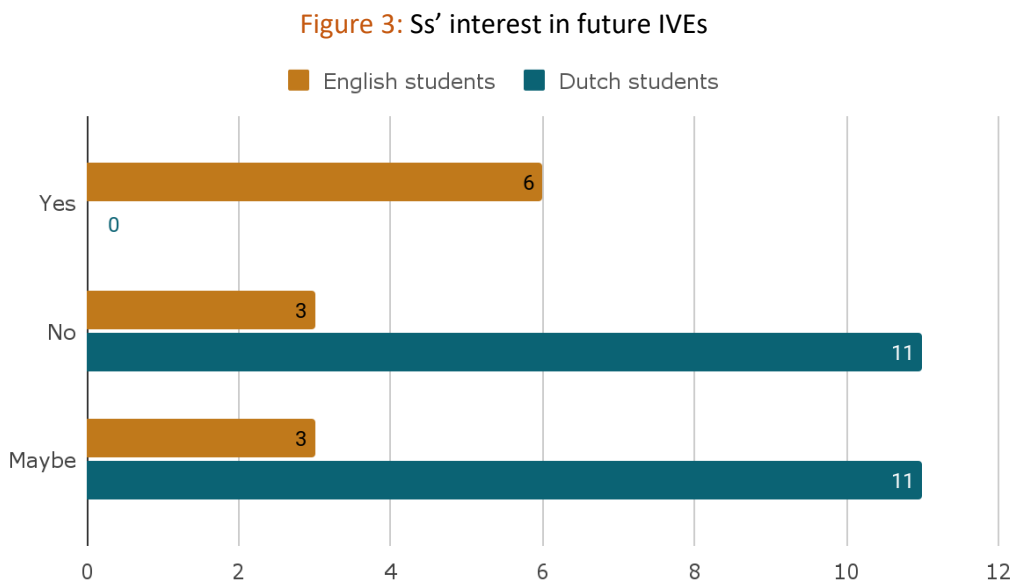
While some (42%) of the UK students agreed that they had learned about their partner’s culture and indeed, questioned their own culture in response, 43% of the Dutch students strongly disagreed with the statement that they had learned something about their partner’s culture as shown in Table 3. Similarly, some (43%) disagreed on whether the exchange with their English partners prompted them to question their own cultural views.

To take a deeper look into participants’ responses related to intercultural awareness, students were asked what they had learned in the VE relating to culture.

Responses included:

- what their international peers wore ;
- how their international peers travelled to school ;
- how the Dutch recycle in their school.

Towards the end of the questionnaire, students were asked about their interest in participating in future VEs (figure 3).



As we see in Figure 3, there is a contrast in the future interest between the two groups. The UK participants were split in deciding if they were interested in participating in future VEs, while their Dutch counterparts were split in possibly being interested in future exchanges if improvements were made.



Themes that were identified within students' 'maybe' responses provided suggested changes to improve the VE including:

- Smaller groups ;
- Personalising the topics discussed in the meetings (which links back to the initial wishes of the English students in the focus groups to personalise the subjects) ;
- Option to use English.

Next, we turn to our recommendations for future VE teachers.

5. Discussion and recommendations

Revisiting our first research question: How do secondary school students feel about participating in an asynchronous lingua franca exchange?

Before the exchange, the UK participants expressed a mixture of emotions describing both their excitement to participate in the exchange but also how they were nervous about their abilities to communicate with their international peers. The students recognised the opportunities that the VE could offer them with pronunciation, learning vocabulary, and speaking exam preparation with one student expressing an interest in learning more about their partner's culture. After the first task, the English participants showed some hesitations, worrying that their partners might judge them. They described however the authentic nature of the interaction and their motivation to talk about the task beyond the classroom walls with family.

Our second research question: How motivated are students in continuing with future VE exchanges?

We saw that the UK students reported being more motivated in the VE than the Dutch students. Although both groups were motivated to practise speaking French, especially to gauge their French accent with their peers, the Dutch reported being less motivated due to task organisational issues. Specifically, they reported wanting more face-to-face communication, pairwork, and to increase the frequency of the asynchronous interactions. Indeed, our analysis underlined that the lack of immediacy in communication may have limited the sense of connection with their partners and learner motivation towards the project.

Students agreed that they spoke about the VE project with their family and friends outside of the exchange. This reinforces the motivation before the exchange that students mentioned in their focus groups. This could also be the result of the novelty of the exchange being that it differed greatly from the ways that students reported practising French in class beforehand, i.e., responses to the teacher's questions or reading aloud. However, the novelty of the project will lose its excitement in the students' eyes so it is important to consider how novelty can be introduced in other ways, for example, through the choice of task topics, technologies, etc.

These findings have helped us to suggest some recommendations for VE implementation and task design to which we now turn.

Recommendations for classroom practice could include (i) discussing with learners the pedagogical objectives of the exchange; (ii) establishing a learning agreement between all learners; and (iii) discussing/reflecting on how their interactions and comments co-create an intercultural dialogue



that is constructive, cooperative and respectful to promote a positive exchange. This may help alleviate some of the anxiety felt prior to the exchange. We also feel that learning gains could be explicitly discussed with learners in post-task reflection activities, potentially based on activities around the analysis of the asynchronous interaction data, such as self- or peer-correction activities, to help support learners' noticing skills and guide students in identifying their own learning.

Students' feedback from the VE calls for synchronous meetings to be added to subsequent VEs. We believe this will have an added effort on boosting motivation and interest in the VE project overall. This of course requires both schools to commit to VE projects in terms of timetabling prior to the school year commencing and therefore a need to plan well ahead.

The frequency of interactions within the asynchronous VE should also be considered. It is important when planning VEs that asynchronous tasks are completed in short, intensive periods and that where possible the time between tasks can be spent by students posting videos on the online discussion board and posting their comments and responses. Again, this requires coordination of timetables around other school events.

Finally, we feel that task personalisation is something that could be considered in planning future VE tasks as it was a specific motivation mentioned by the English students before the exchange. Future VE task design should consider how to align curriculum goals with learners' personal interests and/or within task instructions by providing blank space(s) for task personalisation.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What classroom speaking activities for practicing a second language do your students currently do?
2. How much speaking practice do your students have in class? Could it be increased?
3. Would you feel more comfortable implementing: an asynchronous exchange or a synchronous one? Which would your students' prefer?
4. What planning and organisation considerations are needed for both synchronous and asynchronous exchanges?
5. Which activity types could be introduced into a virtual exchange to help a) promote a positive exchange, b) help learners notice their language learning, and c) personalise topics within a task-based approach?

FURTHER READING

Want to learn more about implementing IVE in secondary schools? Check out these studies:

- Jauregi-Ondarra, M.K. (2015). Integrating telecollaboration for intercultural language acquisition at secondary education: lessons learned. In F. Helm, L. Bradley, M. Guarda & S. Thouèsny (Eds.) *Critical CALL – Proceedings of the 2015 EUROCALL Conference, Padova, Italy* (pp. 268-273). Dublin, Voillans: Research-publishing.net.



- Ware, P.D. & Kessler, G. (2016). Telecollaboration in the secondary language classroom: case study of adolescent interaction and pedagogical integration. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 29(3), 427-450. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2014.961481>.

REFERENCES

- Clavel-Arroitia, B. & Pennock-Speck, B. (2015). Telecollaboration in a secondary school context: Negotiation of meaning in English as lingua franca/Spanish tandem interaction. *@tic Revista d'Innovació Educativa*, 15, 74-82. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=5300225>.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. Plenum.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom*. CUP.
- E-LIVE (2024). *E-LIVE project website*. <https://eliveproject.eu>
- Emir, G., & Yangın-Ekşi, G. (2024). The role of telecollaboration in English language teacher education: a systematic review. *Smart Learning Environments*. 11(1), 3. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40561-024-00290-0>.
- Gardner, R.C. (1985). *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning: The Role of Attitudes and Motivation*. Edward Arnold.
- Jaramillo Cherez, N., & Nadolny, L. (2023). Willingness to communicate and oral communicative performance through asynchronous video discussions. *Language Learning & Technology*, 27(1), 1–23. <http://hdl.handle.net/10125/73521>
- O'Dowd, R., & Ware, P. (2009). Critical issues in telecollaborative task design. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*. 22(2). 173-188. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588220902778369>.