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Internationalizing Foreign Language Teacher Education Through Virtual Exchange

Abstract

Complex problems with global reach, such as issues related to global warming or the COVID-19 pandemic, underscore the need to equip young learners with the necessary competences to support them in becoming responsible “actors of change” in a globalized world. However, for this to be successful, teachers need to be trained to integrate a global dimension into their classrooms. As the central institutions for pre-service teacher training in Germany, universities are responsible for such training. This paper reports on the conceptualization and implementation of a virtual exchange project connecting pre-service teachers from Germany, Turkey, and Sweden, and shares initial lessons learned.

Keywords

virtual exchange, telecollaboration, global education, foreign language teaching, teacher education

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1 Introduction

Since the 1970s, the field of global education has been seeking ways to “promote students’ knowledge and awareness of the world’s peoples, countries, cultures and issues” (CATES, 2013, p. 277). In recent years, this goal has been reflected by changes in education policies, e. g., with the introduction and subsequent expansion of the Orientierungsrahmen für den Lernbereich Globale Entwicklung² in Germany (c. f. SCHREIBER & SIEGE, 2016), according to which secondary school teachers in all subject areas are required to integrate aspects related to global education and in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNITED NATIONS, 2015) into their classroom instruction. Digital media are seen as a crucial tool for this purpose, especially if physical mobility as a means of cultural and language exchange is improbable or even impossible, e. g., through collaborative projects with learners across the world (c. f. GEISZ & SCHMITT, 2016).

The concept of virtual exchange (VE), also frequently referred to as telecollaboration, online intercultural exchange (OIE), or collaborative online international learning (COIL) (c. f. O’DOWD, 2018), offers approaches and frameworks for such computer-mediated communication (CMC). It is defined as the practice of connecting learners with different lingua-cultural backgrounds over prolonged periods of time through CMC as an integrated part of their curriculum and under guidance from experts (c. f. THE EVALUATE GROUP, 2019). VE has not only been researched as a potentially effective means of fostering linguistic, cultural, and digital competences (c. f. *ibid.*), but is also considered a less expensive and more inclusive alternative or complement to physical mobility (c. f. JAGER et al. 2019, p. 29).

This workshop report discusses a VE seminar at the University of Göttingen that intends to support pre-service teachers (PSTs) of English as a Foreign Language

² Reference Framework for the Learning Area Global Development (translation by the author).

(EFL) in the Master of Education program to develop their “global teaching competences”. Course participants explore VE as a means of fostering global competences through experiential practice (c. f. SCHWAB & DRIXLER, 2020) as they exchange information, discuss, and collaborate with future and current EFL teachers at Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey and Uppsala University, Sweden on the joint design of complex competence tasks (CCTs) (c. f. HALLET, 2013) from October 2020 until February 2021. The development, implementation, and ongoing evaluation³ of this project has been supported by funding from the “Innovation plus” program of the Ministry of Science and Culture of the federal state of Lower-Saxony (MWK Niedersachsen), Germany. This paper reports on the theoretical conceptualization, implementation, and preliminary lessons learned – based on participant observation and direct feedback from participants – for future VE projects, in EFL teacher education and beyond.

2 Theoretical Background and Guiding Design Principles

The design of our teacher education project rests on three theoretical pillars: VE, Global Education, and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). This section introduces the specific concepts and models that informed our design and identifies specific design principles.

2.1 Current Approaches to Virtual Exchange

While VE has been practiced under many different names and with several different learning goals in mind (c. f. O’DOWD, 2018), our course design draws inspiration from two specific models: the progressive exchange model (O’DOWD &

³ As this report was written in January of 2021, the project was not finished at the time of writing.

WARE, 2009) and the transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education (c. f. O'DOWD, 2019).

The progressive exchange model consists of three phases, divided into stages of information exchange, comparison and analysis, and collaboration. The first one acts as an “icebreaker” phase in which participants exchange personal information to establish rapport with each other. In the second phase, participants “carry out comparisons or critical analyses of cultural products from [all participating] cultures” (O'DOWD & WARE, 2009, p. 175), which generally requires a greater deal of linguistic and cultural negotiation of meaning. This stage offers opportunities for participants to “develop their ability to communicate effectively in intercultural contexts” (THE EVALUATE GROUP, 2019, p. 13). The final phase is the joint creation of a shared outcome, such as co-authored digital presentations or lesson plans. Agreeing on a product within transnational teams usually demands the highest level of negotiation of meaning, which is why this phase usually targets critical thinking skills and the ability to collaborate in diverse groups (c. f. *ibid.*).

A more recent approach to VE that also acts as a conceptual bridge to the notion of global education is the transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education. This model supports the idea that VE has the potential to foster competences in line with the aims of global education, including the “action [domain]” posited by CATES (2013, p. 278; see section 2.2). It specifically sought to address criticism of traditional, often bilingual and bicultural VE initiatives that tended to result in superficial interaction. Referencing KRAMSCH, O'DOWD emphasizes that “[i]t is no longer appropriate to give students a tourist-like competence to exchange information with native speakers of national languages within well-defined national cultures” (KRAMSCH, 2008, p. 251 in O'DOWD, 2019, p. 8). Rather, the model intends to address the needs of current language learners who are “increasingly likely to use a language such as English [...] with non-native speakers as a lingua franca in their future employment” (*ibid.*, p. 7). For these (and other) purposes, O'DOWD suggests seven criteria which act as key design principles for our project:

1. Creating opportunities for rich intercultural interaction which can include but is not limited to bicultural/bilingual comparison
2. Establishing partnerships across a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds and using lingua franca for communication with these partners
3. Encouraging learners to engage with themes which are of social and political relevance in both partners' societies
4. Enabling students to work with their international partners to undertake action and change in their respective local and global communities
5. Including ample opportunities for guided reflection of the intercultural encounters in the classroom
6. Being integrated and recognized part of course work and institutional academic activity
7. Increasing awareness to how intercultural communication is mediated by online technologies and how social media can shape the creation and interpretation of messages. (O'DOWD, 2019, p. 23)

2.2 Global Education in English Language Teaching

The coronavirus crisis is but one example of the wide array of “global issues” prevalent in the globalized world of the 21st century. Reasons for integrating global education into foreign language teaching (FLT) are often based on the idea that foreign language competences are a key prerequisite to empower learners to actively participate in transnational discourses on global issues (cf. *ibid.*). E. g., they can enable learners to understand relevant texts – such as news reports, policies, or scientific publications – and empower them to act as “responsible global citizens and [to] actively take part in shaping a better, shared future” (FREITAG-HILD, 2018, p. 169), e. g., by participating in worldwide activism as a part of Fridays for Future or Black Lives Matter.

Given its status as the most common lingua franca in the world, the English language is considered especially relevant in this regard, which is why EFL teachers and researchers in particular have been seeking ways to account for global educa-

tion (c. f. CATES, 2004). In our VE project, we introduce the concept of global education with the help of CATES' model, consisting of four domains:

1. knowledge about world countries and cultures, and about global problems, their causes and solutions;
2. skills of critical thinking, cross-cultural communication, cooperative problem solving, conflict resolution, and the ability to see issues from multiple perspectives;
3. attitudes of global awareness, cultural appreciation, respect for diversity, and empathy;
4. action: the final aim of global learning is to have students "think globally and act locally". (CATES, 2013, p. 278)

2.3 The Complex Competence Task (CCT)

The CCT concept is a potential framework for the design of transnational VEs dealing with global issues. As a specific approach to TBLT, the CCT concept rests on the idea that self-actualization and participation in today's globalized world requires the command of foreign languages. Thus, the development of foreign language discourse competences, i. e., both adequate and critical communicative competences, should be a key aim of all formal education (c. f. HALLET, 2013).

For the purpose of our PST training course, three specific characteristics of the CCT prove particularly compatible with our goal to explore VE and global education. First, CCTs should focus on topics that are relevant and topical to the learners. In our case, the PSTs discuss self-chosen global issues, namely climate change, sustainable transportation, and gender equality, within the framework of the SDGs. Second, CCTs intend to mirror the complexity of such real-world discourses by asking learners to ponder potential solutions to current global problems. In our course, students design classroom materials and tasks that confront their future learners with such global issues. Third, CCTs explicitly target the initiation of linguistic-discursive and social-interactional processes (c. f. *ibid.*). In small transna-

tional teams, our participants are required to communicate in their target language and to coordinate and negotiate different local perspectives on their chosen global problems.

3 Selected Challenges and Lessons Learned

As the project discussed here is still in process at the time of writing, our evaluation has not been completed. This section zeroes in on selected design principles, how we attempted to implement them, whether the implementation succeeded, and how future VE courses might be adapted. The selection focuses on two broader design principles – curricular integration of the VE, and its sequencing and guided reflection (c. f. section 2.1) – which are likely relevant for VE projects outside of teacher training and global education contexts.

The conclusions stem from qualitative data, including observations of the teacher trainers and feedback from participants throughout the project (e. g., oral and written reflections, particularly from PSTs in Göttingen). Findings were discussed with experienced practitioners (e. g., Robert O’Dowd) and compared with previous studies (e. g., EVALUATE).

3.1 Curricular Integration

O’DOWD states that VE projects should be an “integrated and recognised part of course work and [an] institutional academic activity” (2019, p. 23). Participants at the University of Göttingen attend this course as a part of an elective module and receive credit points and a number grade based on a final presentation of their jointly-designed CCT and a reflection paper. Additionally, we collaborated with UNICollaboration⁴ who provided a Moodle platform which we used as a shared online space, e. g., to post announcements and task descriptions as well as to facili-

⁴ <http://www.unicollaboration.org/>

tate written asynchronous CMC between all participants in forums. Regarding academic recognition, working with UNICollaboration allowed us to issue digital Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange participation badges to students at all three universities.

However, differences between the degree of curricular integration among the institutions has been leading to challenges. Since the students in Turkey joined the project on a voluntary basis, they are generally very motivated but do not share the stakes of the students in Germany, for whom the course grade would affect the completion of their degree. As such, and due to exams in other local courses, some students in Germany reported that their partners in Turkey were unable to contribute equally to their shared tasks.

For the students in Sweden, participation in this project was made possible by introducing the VE as a compulsory add-on activity for a regular seminar on FLT. Due to a relatively high workload and the requirement to produce specific deliverables in their local seminar, i. e., a year plan, a lesson sequence, and a language competency test, most students in Sweden lacked the time and capacity to participate in the joint design of a CCT. Consequently, most synchronous videoconference calls in transnational teams consisted mainly of students from Germany and Turkey, whereas students in Sweden generally participated less often.

These problems have been further exacerbated by differences between academic calendars: at Hacettepe University, the semester ranged from the end of September 2020 until the end of January 2021; at the University of Göttingen, from the end of October until mid-February; and at Uppsala University from early December until mid-January. Thus, only a few students from Sweden were able to participate in the project before and after their semester, while many students in Turkey had to focus on local exams before the end of the project.

A possible solution to these issues is to strive for a deeper integration between participating universities, e. g., by agreeing on a shared examination at the end of the project. However, such changes require ample time for negotiation and preparation, and might still fail due to local curricular requirements that cannot be changed. A

second, more practical solution is to tie participation badges to stricter, more specific requirements.

3.2 Sequencing and Guided Reflection

The VE project consisted of three types of student configuration: local classrooms (LCs), joint classrooms (JCs), and team exchanges (TEs). As the names suggest, LCs take place as synchronous video conferences with students at the respective university while JCs bring students from two or more institutions together at the same time. TEs, then again, were longer timeframes in which students had to complete shared tasks both asynchronously and synchronously. Due to the scheduling conflicts mentioned above, sequencing the VE project while maximizing its duration proved challenging. The relatively brief overlap with Uppsala University required us to place most JCs into this narrow timeframe. From the perspective of the students in Göttingen, this meant that most LCs took place before December and after January. Therefore, there were few opportunities to reflect on their interactions with fellow students and their instructor. To mitigate this, the instructor offered voluntary office hours, but those were only visited by three out of thirteen students. While this allowed for in-depth discussions, this measure failed to reach all local students. Thus, our next VE project aims to alternate more frequently between JCs and shorter LCs that focus primarily on the reflection of the experience.

To enable more guided reflection, we designed a reflective portfolio based on OER from the EVOLVE research project (c. f. JAGER et al. 2019) as a required component for students in Göttingen, and a voluntary measure for all other students. Throughout the VE, students are asked to write about their learning experience with the help of guiding questions. While these entries could have allowed for formative evaluation of the project at specific points, we decided against hard deadlines for the individual entries to minimize the workload.⁵ Instead, the students

⁵ The COVID-19 pandemic influenced some of our decisions to reduce the workload over the course of the project.

submit their complete portfolios after the project. In our next VE, we will require students to submit entries throughout the project to use the portfolio as a communication channel with our participants that can allow us to intervene more efficiently during the project.

4 Outlook

While this project is still in process at the time of writing, this report offered both a brief discussion of the theoretical rationale behind using VE as a means of fostering global education in teacher education, as well as a discussion of challenges and potential solutions related to the implementation of VE projects in higher education. In the short term, this project will be evaluated with the help of data gathered via surveys, portfolios, interviews, and recordings of computer-mediated interaction. Further, this VE project is planned to act as the first intervention in a series of transnational teacher education VEs conducted and researched by the author within the context of a design-based research (DBR) study (c. f. WANG & HANNAFIN, 2005).

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