

Inter- and Transcultural Experience among Future Foreign Language Educators

International Virtual Exchange between Teacher Training Institutions

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1. Introduction

It might sound surprising, but the pandemic did not affect us to a great extent, at least not regarding the way we teach and collaborate within our transnational framework. What we report on in this chapter dates back to 2015, when we decided to collaborate online in what today is usually called virtual exchange, heron VE, and thus laid the foundation of the experience in the DIVA project reported here. Of course, we had limited experience with such formats at the beginning of our partnerships, as only one of the authors had participated in an online collaborative project before (Waldman & Harel, 2015). Nonetheless, over the course of the years, we were able to improve and further develop our skills and knowledge – technically, pedagogically and interculturally – so that the cooperation during the pandemic turned out to be the most rewarding and intense online collaboration between our two institutions so far. Before reporting on the DIVA collaboration between the two English departments of Kibbutzim College of Education, Technology and the Arts in Tel Aviv, Israel, and Ludwigsburg University of Education, Germany, we provide an overview of the most important aspects of how VE in foreign language teacher training is characterised. Following the description of our programme, insights into our research findings are given, where the main focus is on the students' perspective and experience. In our conclusion, we suggest how online collaborations can be conducted successfully in a post-Covid era.

2. Virtual Exchange and Foreign Language Teacher Training

Virtual Exchange (VE), Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), or Telecollaboration are terms used almost interchangeably in the literature (e.g. Belz, 2003; Dooley, 2008; Helm, 2016; O'Dowd, 2007, 2018). In this chapter we use the term VE and define it in the following way:

VE supports the idea of online communication via digital tools to bring together language learners in geographically remote places. It fosters language and intercultural competences through collaborative tasks and/or project work. It is rooted in Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Project-Based Language Teaching.

(PBLT) respectively. Most importantly, this approach is student centred, and knowledge and understanding are constructed through student-to-student interaction.

In this description, several important aspects are highlighted: international collaboration, digital literacy, language learning, language teaching methodologies, and inter- and trans-cultural learning (Schwab & Drixler, 2020). A primary pedagogical goal of VE is to foster intercultural communicative competence (ICC), intercultural learning and critical cultural awareness (Avgousti, 2018; O'Dowd, 2011). VE was originally limited to universities in the 1990s (Warschauer, 1996) and moved into teacher education some decades later (O'Dowd, 2015). Today VE also takes place on a growing scale between schools and school children in diverse areas of the globe (Papadakis, 2016).

VE has its roots in international remote collaboration and student email exchange. However, this idea can be traced back to scholars such as Célestin Freinet or even Jardine (Dooley, 2007) who encouraged their students to send letters to students in other countries. With the emergence of the World Wide Web and the rapid development of the internet, more projects were launched and supported by essential stakeholders in the field of education (EU, government ministries, school boards, etc.) (Baroni et al., 2019). Today there are various models of VE, and generally teachers design their model according to their pedagogical goals and the resources available (O'Dowd, 2018). This involves teacher partners working closely both at the stage of design and throughout the collaboration to facilitate the entire process and to deal with unexpected issues as they arise.

The collaborations described in this chapter were part of a project funded by the German Association of Academic Exchange (DAAD). This chapter deals with one of two parts of the overarching DIVA programme and focuses on the

collaboration between prospective English language teachers in Israel and Germany.

3. Description of the collaborations

The collaboration described here consists of two parts which differ in respect to student cohorts, the main focus of collaborations and their time frames. However, both parts were developed, planned and conducted in close coordination. On the Israeli side, two facilitators (the first two authors) were involved, whereas on the German side, both collaborations, conducted in two consecutive semesters, were facilitated by the same person (the third author).

3.1 DIVA – the first steps: Undergraduate collaboration

The first leg of our DIVA contribution, taught in the summer of 2021, is part of the undergraduate study programme of both colleges and comprises a VE where students experience intensive online exchange with other students from different cultures. This VE was initially designed and facilitated by two facilitators (authors two and three) from the respective institutions in Israel and Germany (Waldman, Harel, & Schwab, 2016). One of the major goals of the collaboration is to establish relations among participants by providing an intercultural learning experience based on constructivist principles (Sadler & Dooly, 2016; O'Dowd, 2015). The first VE took place in the fall semester of 2015 between two classes of third year undergraduate pre-service teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL). The students met online weekly for about 45 minutes throughout the semester and collaborated on tasks and a final project based in their separate institutions. This VE, which has now become institutionalised, has taken place every fall over the last seven successive years with different student cohorts numbering over 300 participants so far (Schwab & Drixler, 2020).

The course programme has undergone a number of changes since its inception, with the facilitators building on research studies, reviewing regular student feedback, and integrating current digital tools, as well as making adjustments to meet students' needs, which were especially pressing during the Covid pandemic when students were forced to study from home. The semester-long process was as follows: each course began with an information exchange between students. Prior to the first meeting, the students posted a short introduction about themselves on Flipgrid (a video recording platform). The stu-

dents viewed each other's openings so that they could recognize each other during their first synchronous meeting, which consisted of a video conference discussion where they talked about issues such as student life, their respective institutions and educational systems in their countries, as well as what motivated them to choose a career in teaching.

The second stage of information exchange supported the team formation process. Students were divided by the course facilitators into teams comprising two or three partners from each country. In a team video conference (via Zoom), students discussed similarities and differences regarding cultural practices prompted by discussions around images of cultural artefacts that they had posted on Padlet before the meeting. Based on this exchange, they discovered a common foundation across cultures and developed a team name, working philosophy, and rules of conduct for their interaction (see also Baroni et al., 2019). This provided a common bond to support them in the continuing process while working together. It soon became obvious that by this stage, with online contact and communication between team members in and outside the classroom, close bonds had formed, which were essential prerequisites for collaborating successfully on a final digital product (Byram et al., 2002). Together, team members analysed teaching materials focusing on intercultural learning tasks and decided on a list of fundamental criteria for developing culturally sensitive learning materials. They used these criteria to design their product: learning materials and communication tasks employing several multi-modal contexts through the integration of various digital platforms. Before finalizing, the products were uploaded to the shared Moodle Platform for peer review and revision. The last session of the course included a video conference, in which the students voted for the best products according to pre-established criteria.

Finally, the last stage involved the students writing reflective essays documenting their personal experiences and what they had learned throughout the course. Throughout the VE the facilitators employed different strategies to support the students in meaningful communication, as well as in delicate issues that sometimes arose between team members. One such method involved the facilitators creating a task that urged the participants to tackle cultural differences which students tend to steer away from in what seems to be an effort to avoid confrontation. As facilitators, we ensured that communication during this task could take place safely, and if discomfort arose, we provided explicit mentoring to the students involved. Over the course of the collaboration, we,

the facilitators, stayed in permanent contact with each other via mail and regular video conferences.

3.2 DIVA – The next step: graduate collaboration

As a result of the successful collaboration between the undergraduate students described above, we embarked [GS1] on a new VE programme designed for Post Graduate Students of Education in Kibbutzim College of Education and M.A. students in Ludwigsburg University of Education, all of whom were studying to become EFL teachers (Böhmer, Schwab, Isso, forthcoming).

The collaboration began in the fall of 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic when students in both countries were studying online. The rationale behind this collaboration was to examine the impact of Covid-19 on EFL methodologies and practices in the two countries. An additional objective was – and thus in line with the first course – to increase students' cultural awareness and intercultural competences, as well as to provide a model for students on the implementation of VE within their own classes.

Students also met weekly for approximately 45 mins on Zoom, though only for four consecutive weeks, due to our individual course constraints. Before the first session, students were required to pinpoint where they were located in the world using Padlet. They were also asked to upload an artefact, i.e. a picture of an object, which represented their personal identity. In breakout rooms comprising mixed groups of 2–3 participants from both institutions, students shared information about their geographical location and discussed the artefacts they had chosen to upload. Towards the end of the first session, all reconvened in the main room to share insights they had gained from the activities.

The second session focused on their professional identities as EFL teachers and educators. The Padlet platform was once more used to facilitate this discussion, which was held in the same mixed groups that had been formed previously.

In the third session, students were asked to share their perceptions of the challenges and opportunities that the pandemic had afforded them as (future) teachers. To facilitate this process, they were directed to a shared google drive document in which they discussed and documented what they would like to »keep in their suitcases« and what they would like to »pack away in their closed suitcases«. The suitcase analogy was used to exemplify new tools and methods they believed they had acquired and to enable them to rethink practices they believed were no longer effective or appropriate. The assignment for the

next session was to decide as groups how they would present a framework for teaching EFL in the post-pandemic era, including statements on their teaching philosophy and concrete suggestions for the English language classroom.

In the fourth and final session, also done via Zoom, students were given time to work on their frameworks for teaching EFL and to present them briefly to their peers, as the allotted time would not allow an intensive discussion. This was done in a written reflection similar to what we had conducted in the first leg of our DIVA online cooperation with the undergraduate students.

Although this online collaboration was more confined in its time frame and workload, it did not seem to be less intensive for either students or facilitators. This might be because the cohort of students was more mature, especially on the Israeli side, where all students were older, as they had all embarked-on teaching as a second career. It might also be due to the fact that the limited amount of time encouraged students right from the beginning to be more focused. It is worth mentioning that this collaboration was conducted during a military campaign in Israel. Israeli students were subjected to air-raid sirens, and many had spent time during the night and during the online sessions in bomb shelters. This might have contributed to increased expressions of empathy on the part of the students in Germany. The Israeli students had been given the option to drop out of the collaboration, yet all chose to remain in the group. This might have been because they had been in lockdown for an extended period and were craving social interaction with others, albeit via zoom.

4. Research

Although a major part of the DIVA project was to provide participants with the opportunity to meet students from different cultures and backgrounds, we also integrated a research perspective into our endeavours from the start.

4.1 Methodology

The study is a mixed method study, which uses varied methods of data collection to capture different dimensions of the effect of the collaboration on participants. Three data sets were collected from the Israeli and German students: written reflections based on guiding questions, Zoom break-out room video recordings and collaborative online-products created by the transnational teams. In this chapter, we will focus on the written reflections. By writing the

guided reflections, participants were encouraged to share their insights on their experience, their perceptions of knowledge and skills gained, as well as the nature of the interaction with their overseas partners, and their perceptions of intercultural awareness and competence. Both sets of reflection essays were analysed using thematic analysis methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and the emerging themes of (1) digital literacy, (2) intercultural awareness and learning (3) collaboration and (4) Continuing Professional Development (CPD) were identified. The products showcased participants' knowledge and application of skills acquired during the collaboration (for more details see also our project websites: www.telecollaboration.eu and www.diva-project.de)

To avoid ethical complications, the researchers followed the Ethical Standards of the American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2011) regarding confidentiality, integrity and informed consent. All participants were assured that participation or lack of it in the study would not interfere with their assessment or grade for the course.

4.2 Written reflections

Due to the differences in the nature of the two courses, the guiding questions for the written reflections differed to some extent. In the undergraduate course, we underscored the role of language and intercultural learning, whereas, for the graduate course, we put more emphasis on teaching methods and pedagogical knowledge. Nonetheless, both cohorts reflected on the use of digital tools and mobile devices in teaching (foreign) languages and dealt extensively with the notion of inter- and transcultural competences. In the following sections, we will exemplify our categories with several sample quotes from the written reflections of both cohorts (n=81¹).

4.2.1 Digital Literacy

Digital literacy is not just »a key factor in enabling participation in education« (Martin & Grudziecki, 2006, p. 249) but also a »broad concept, linking together other relevant literacies, based on computer/ICT competences and skills, but focused on >softer< skills of information evaluation and knowledge assembly, together with a set of understandings and attitudes« (Bawden 2008, p. 28). It

¹ I.e. undergraduate cohort: 27+20 German/Israeli essays, cohort 2: 21+13 German/Israeli essays. However in the second cohort, some Israeli students opted for a joint document.

encompasses other literacies, such as information or media literacy and emphasises its usage in social online spaces (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). In this vein, the notion of digital online learning and development of digital literacy can certainly be considered as being at the heart of VE and Telecollaboration. Nonetheless, we could not take it for granted that digital competences and digital literacy develop automatically.

We, therefore, incorporated the use of digital tools in various ways to promote digital literacy. Students were encouraged to try out a wide range of tools and, at the same time, were given the opportunity to discover, implement and experience new platforms whenever possible and meaningful. Students appreciated this across the board:

»We think the use of digital tools in this collaboration was excellent and is necessary first and foremost as a way of helping us communicate and getting our creative juices flowing.« (Israeli, graduate)

Interestingly, most of the technological input was provided by fellow students, often from their international partners who introduced new digital tools to the collaboration.

»I wrote down all the tools that both my group and the other groups used in their product and will use them later.« (German, undergraduate)

Another interesting aspect which arose from the written reflections was the difference in the use of technology in the two countries; this was evident in the following statement:

»The LUE students were really surprised and impressed that we have a projector in every classroom in Israel and that it is used daily in many lessons. This led to an interesting discussion regarding digital tools, which they rarely use and therefore are less acquainted with them.« (Israeli, graduate)

As digital tools are not an end in themselves, a significant goal of the project was to focus on The critical use of digital tools to serve pedagogical aims in teaching languages to students of various ages and levels – also an essential aspect of digital literacy among future teachers:

»We were taught that technology is important and knowing how to use a specific technological tool that suits a specific assignment is an amazing way to engage students.« (Israeli, undergraduate)

Students developed a critical stance on digitalisation and the use of mobile and digital devices by reflecting upon their use in the language classroom.

»These and more tools I gratefully put into my teaching toolbox. Of course, however, one should always be critical and not see digital interaction as a panacea. Every tool must continue to be critically scrutinised and tested.« (German, graduate)

Such a reflective stance towards digitalization is an important aspect of digital literacy and can help to empower participants in becoming competent members of their own »community of learning« (Martin & Grudziecki, 2006, p. 258), be it in a national or international context.

4.2.2 Intercultural awareness and learning

One of the main objectives of these collaborations was to increase students' intercultural sensitivity and awareness in order for them to better understand intercultural differences, to avoid and reflect upon stereotyping and to develop a curiosity about others (Byram et al., 2002). We were interested in examining to what extent we had achieved this aim. Looking at the following reflections, it seems as if we reached at least some of our goals:

»I have definitely extended my intercultural skills during this online collaboration. I think I have developed the intercultural skill to never judge a different culture by how they act or react. I have extended my ability to understand different cultural contexts and viewpoints, and moreover my acceptance to different cultural settings.« (German, undergraduate)

and

»Because the many cultures out there are so diverse, it is difficult to prepare them specifically for each one. However, working closely with people of even one other culture allows students to transfer these experiences to other such encounters through competencies like multiperspectivity, tolerance and open-mindedness.« (German, graduate)

Nevertheless, this quote reveals that some students are still unaware that even in »one« culture, there are students from diverse backgrounds.

Furthermore, not all participants managed to develop this sensitivity and remained entrenched in their prior stereotypes, apparently unable to transcend them.

»To be truly honest, what I anticipated was exactly what I experienced. I knew there would be a behavioural difference.« (Israeli, undergraduate)

External conditions, specifically the military campaign in Israel that occurred during the collaboration with the second cohort, did, however, create an opportunity for increased intercultural sensitivity and empathy. This was evident in the written reflections of both German and Israeli students:

»I admit, my first thoughts of cultural awareness were like traditions, special foods or housing situations. But never in my life would I have thought of missile attacks and war!« (German, graduate)

»We did not talk about politics at all, but during the zoom meeting that took place during the military campaign, they were very empathetic. Both girls were interested in what was happening, wanted to hear first-hand information and told us how the media in Germany was very biased. It was important to them to hear how we felt and they could not digest the fact that rockets were being sent towards our homes to harm us.« (Israeli, graduate)

Nevertheless, as is evident in the following reflection, some students realised that to become culturally competent, more than one such transnational experience is required.

»We know that global learning is inherently cumulative and multifaceted, and therefore difficult to cover through a single experience, but despite that this one-time experience has contributed a lot.« (Israeli, graduate)

Due to unexpected current events, namely the above-mentioned military campaign in Israel, the facilitators decided to concentrate less on their prepared and predesigned lesson plans. They deemed it more important to afford the students the opportunity to get to know each other and allow for time to ex-

press their feelings and fears resulting from the precarious security situation. Students recognised and appreciated this change in plan.

»The current events were also the reasons why we were not able to discuss all the tasks and issues that needed to be resolved. We thought it was more important to give them the time to talk about their experiences and how they feel about them.« (German, graduate)

or

»My cultural awareness was increased as I was able to communicate with people that live under different circumstances. This helped me to sympathise and engage in topics that I only know through the media.« (German, graduate)

These reflections emphasise the need for facilitators of VE to be flexible in their lesson plans and to be willing to *go with the flow* and address the needs of the learners. Additionally, intercultural experience can only be planned to a certain degree. Planning also depends on the context of the collaboration and sometimes there are unpredictable circumstances beyond the control of the facilitator.

4.2.3 Collaboration

One of the potential pitfalls in facilitating VE is ensuring the effective collaboration amongst students from diverse backgrounds, with differences in teaching experience, disparate levels of language mastery in English and varying degrees of motivation, as becomes evident in the following statement:

»The difficulty of working effectively was less due to us being encultured differently, but rather due to having different motivations, language skills, knowledge about language teaching, didactics, etc.« (German, undergraduate)

Nevertheless, the role of the facilitators and the meticulous design of the tasks can make a marked difference to the attainment of the goals of the collaboration:

»In my point of view, the whole process described went so smoothly because of the way we were introduced to each other in the beginning. I think the

two artefact-tasks were perfect considering the fact that we had something to talk and ask about.« (German, graduate)

The importance of providing carefully structured tasks to promote effective discussion was appreciated by the participants. Nevertheless, some felt that not enough effort had been made on the part of the facilitators to provide more detailed instructions and to better match the prior experience of the students from both countries and programs.

»In terms of the process around group work, we thought it could maybe have benefited from more instructions, expectations, or recommendations from the professors. There could have also been a way to match types/levels of experience people on both sides have.« (Israeli, graduate)

On the whole, though, the participants enjoyed the opportunity to collaborate on their joint projects, which related to both education and culture.

»Interacting with the German students on such important topics such as culture and education was refreshing and interesting.« (Israeli, undergraduate)

In addition, students recognised that despite the geographical and cultural differences, they also have much in common:

»[...] we are very similar; both as students and future teachers, we have the same challenges, concerns, and experiences. These differences sparked interesting conversations about the various aspects of being a teacher – our studies, salaries, status, and more.« (Israeli, graduate)

The Israeli students were envious of the high status the teaching profession enjoys in Germany, in stark contrast to the low status the profession has at present in Israel, a fact that might affect one's identity as a teacher.

4.2.4 Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Another pedagogical goal of our project was to encourage students to examine their professional identities as well as to model for them more inclusive pedagogical strategies and current pedagogical methods to assist them in addressing the challenges of increasingly diverse classrooms. According to Mann & Webb (2022, 14–15) CPD is a process and therefore »ongoing in its efforts to

promote professional learning and standards, and it fosters innovation, collaboration, and reflection«. The DIVA project targeted these three dimensions of professional development.

It seems evident from the students' reflections that they understood that the formation of a professional identity as an educator and teacher is something that evolves and transforms over time:

»But what I could take away the most from the collaboration, and what is the most important for me, is that I could learn from my partners that it takes a long time to find your professional identity.« (German, graduate)

All participants expressed the desire to attempt to incorporate principles modelled in the collaboration into their own classrooms in the future:

»I will definitely take this experience and I will try to place it somehow into my future classroom.« (German, undergraduate)

or

»The collaboration has made clear to me how important thinking outside our box and therefore outside our comfort zone is.« (German, graduate)

One student was explicit about the teaching technique she would implement.

»One example of applying what I have experienced in this course to my teaching is to use the opportunity of letting the students teach each other things they specialise in, without me explicitly teaching them that.« (Israeli, undergraduate)

Students related as well to the pedagogical principles implemented in the VE and stated that they would incorporate these principles into the practice of their future professions as English language teachers:

»Requiring students to comment on others' posts encourages them to practise writing in English and being empathetic. In addition, the collaboration required us to use different skills such as writing, speaking, listening, critical thinking, and more ... All these skills, steps, and tools will be in mind when conducting such a collaboration in the future.« (Israeli, graduate)

The reflections revealed that many students started to develop a sense of what characterises the notion of CPD, that is, a critical and reflective attitude towards one's teaching behaviour that can be described as »a long-term process [...] that teachers learn over time« (Oesterle & Schwab, 2022, p. 46). Our project is a step in this direction and encourages students to process situations and ideas that are hardly addressed in regular study programmes.

4.3 Conclusion and looking ahead

Our experiences have shown that VE has the potential to increase pre-service teachers' intercultural competences to a certain degree. It became evident in their reflections that awareness towards cultural similarities and differences was present, and that they displayed curiosity and empathy towards each other. This behaviour was particularly salient during the military campaign in Israel in 2021 when team members in Germany expressed concern for and kindness towards their Israeli counterparts.

These findings are limited as we have only included self-reported written reflections in this part of our study. Nonetheless, the findings are in line with those of many other scholars in the field (e.g. Dooley, 2008; Guth & Helm, 2010; Guth, Helm, & O'Dowd, 2012; O'Dowd, 2018; 2021; Sadler & Dooly, 2016; Schenker 2010) and therefore contribute to a better understanding of VE and its potential. We believe that these intercultural competencies are essential for educators planning to teach successfully in their communities and abroad. All classrooms today consist of learners from diverse cultural backgrounds and the ability to be sensitive to these differences is crucial for all educators. Pre-service teachers studying to teach EFL seem to be a particularly suitable target population for carrying out such collaborations, as English can in these circumstances serve as a neutral language where issues of language mastery are not involved (Waldman, Harel, & Schwab, 2019). Usually, participants are not mother tongue speakers of English, thus eliminating issues of control and language hegemony.

If carefully designed, collaborations as described in this chapter have the potential to model for students current pedagogical principles, including the critical use of digital tools and up-to-date language pedagogy, thereby contributing to students' repertoire of techniques and strategies to be used in their future classrooms (Baroni, 2019; O'Dowd, 2021). Ironically, it appears that the Covid-19 lockdowns, which forced Higher Education Institutions to transfer all their teaching to online platforms, contributed to the success of our collabora-

tions. This is due to students' digital infrastructure and WIFI-connection being more reliable from home than from campus, making collaboration easier for us as teacher educators and VE facilitators.

Moreover, enforced government lockdowns imposed during the pandemic appeared to heighten the need and desire for interaction with others, albeit only online. Meeting regularly during this period to collaborate online seemed to enhance student motivation. However, now that students have returned to face-to-face learning they may perhaps be experiencing ›Zoom fatigue‹ (Nesher Shoshan & Wehrt, 2022) and be less enthusiastic to participate in VE. This would require facilitators to rethink their planning for future collaborations, and e.g. extend VE with study abroad opportunities (Topaz & Waldman, 2022). One model could be the Extended Telecollaboration Practice (ETP) model that we introduced elsewhere (Waldman, Harel, Schwab, 2019) and which underscores the importance of combining VE with physical exchange – short periods of study abroad where students collaborate both in person as well as online. O'Dowd (2018, p. 20) stated, »[t]he future of virtual exchange appears to be bright yet still unclear in many respects«; we could add that its brightness depends on the flexibility and openness of the participating facilitators and stakeholders towards new and sometimes unforeseeable technological, pedagogical, social and even historical developments.

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