

A Virtual Exchange between university students of Tourism and Business: connecting languages and cultures through a sustainable tourism project

Begoña F. Gutiérrez, Universidad de León, Spain

Marta Fortes, University of Limerick, Irlanda

Marta Giralt, University of Limerick, Irlanda

Abstract

This paper examines a Virtual Exchange (VE) amongst 42 participants which took place with University of Limerick business students and Universidad of León tourism students. The primary aims of the VE were the development of disciplinary, language and intercultural skills.

As part of the VE, students had to carry out a series of telecollaborative tasks over 10 weeks. For both groups, the final product of this project was a promotional video exhibiting places within Ireland and Spain. The main objective here was to attract tourism based on sustainable practices while learning and promoting their own heritage and local communities.

This paper presents the project design, the tasks that the students carried out, together with some of the learning outcomes. This VE between students of the same age, sharing similar modules and personal interests, and with a strong curiosity for each other's language and culture was highly motivational. The VE achieved the objectives of developing intercultural awareness and professional skills while covering curricula contents and objectives.

Key Words: Virtual Exchange, Online Collaboration, Sustainable Tourism, Business.

Introduction

The global health crisis has posed diverse challenges to those students enrolled in programmes that include a foreign language (e.g. Business with Spanish, English for Tourism) where the target language needs to be learnt by practice. In this sense, implementing VE projects offers a practical approach and a source of exposure to the target language and culture. This is particularly beneficial for these students since intercultural competence is now essential for today's business professionals (Ferreira-Lopes 2020: 1).

This paper reports on the implementation of VE as a pedagogical approach that involves the engagement of groups of learners in extended periods of online intercultural interaction. Such collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations is seen as an integrated part of educational programmes under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators (O’Dowd, 2018: 5). The primary aims of our VE were the development of disciplinary, language and intercultural skills and involved 22 students of Tourism from the University of León (Spain) and 19 students of Business from the University of Limerick (Ireland). The participants interacted and collaborated during a period of 10 weeks (October to mid December 2020) in small international groups formed by 2 or 3 students from each country. Students participated in this VE in their target language (TL) subjects. Therefore, the VE was bicultural and bilingual and students had to follow two rules when it came to language use: in their asynchronous interactions in the Virtual Learning Environment (Schoology) students had to write their posts in the discussion forums in their TL and comment their partners’ posts in their mother tongue. Second, during synchronous interactions, conversations were conducted half in Spanish and half in English, which the students found very beneficial in terms of language learning and interaction. Furthermore, they helped each other to correct grammar mistakes on the work submitted in the target language.

In the different sections of this paper we describe the tasks and design of the VE, followed by the methodology used to gather and analyse the data derived from it. Afterwards, we present the results around the development of the different learning outcomes: disciplinary, linguistic and intercultural. We finish with a brief discussion and conclusions about the benefits of engaging students in VE in relation to the development of 21st century student competences and employability skills.

Virtual Exchange design

The VE was designed following the main telecollaborative task types identified by O’Dowd and Ware (2009): information exchange, comparison and analysis, and collaboration. These tasks revolved around the theme of sustainability applied to tourism and business.

During the **first task**, corresponding to the **information exchange** category, students introduced themselves and their views and habits regarding sustainable tourism by posting videos they had created using AdobeSpark. With this tool students added a voice-over to their photos on their international working group forum in Schoology.

During this task students also had their first videoconference where they identified common interests in order to create a group name.

Once the students had completed the initial ice-breaking phase the VE moved on to more complex tasks. The **second task** focused on the **comparison and critical analysis** of a situation regarding sustainable tourism in their cultural contexts, businesses and activities. To do so, students first answered a Cultura-like questionnaire (Furstenberg et al., 2001) in which participants from both cultural contexts answered the same questions and then compared the answers coming from both contexts:

- *The major benefits that tourism brings to my local area are...(name 3);*
- *The biggest environmental risks/threats that tourism in my area implies are...(name 3);*
- *Complete the sentence: "In order to deal with climate change more effectively, my government should..."*

After analysing the answers, students had a second videoconference presenting to their international partners a home destination. They would propose that the same destination could be further developed to promote sustainable tourism, moving on to discuss together what new sustainable tourism businesses or activities could be introduced into this destination.

The **final task** demanded the highest degree of organisation and collaboration from the international students involving the **joint creation of a telecollaborative product**. More specifically, they had to create a bilingual video to promote sustainable tourism in two destinations, one from each country. This third task of the VE proved to be the most demanding for the students as it was the most collaborative of all, which in turn made it the most fruitful in terms of skills development. It is therefore particularly relevant in this type of VE project to include tasks that involve real collaboration between international students in the creation of joint products (O'Dowd and Lewis, 2016: 279). Consequently, feedback from participants indicated the desire for more video-conferencing activities to negotiate and discuss issues related to the major tasks and topics of the project.

Methods

A qualitative approach was adopted to analyse the elicited data including the triangulation of self-reporting data from student portfolios, blogs, pre- and post-interviews with conversational data from student discussion forums and videoconferences in order to ensure reliability (n=41). This allowed us to explore the student involvement, perceptions and reaction to the VE experience. Additional

exploration of student awareness within intercultural learning, as well as the development of linguistic and disciplinary skills, was also possible.

For the analysis of the student interaction, a thematic analysis approach was followed. Thematic analysis is a reliable and proven method for conducting many forms of qualitative analysis. This method includes: “identifying, analysing, organising, describing and reporting themes found within a data set” (Nowell et al. 2017: 2). To establish a successful data analysis these steps were followed:

- familiarisation with the data;
- assignment of initial codes;
- search and examination of various themes already established (overall skills development, disciplinary skills development, linguistic skills development and intercultural skills development);
- the definition and nomination of previously identified themes and compilation of the final report.

The triangulation of self-reporting and conversational data allowed us to reach reliable conclusions in terms of the development of the different sets of skills since we could compare the interactional situations as they occurred and the VE participants' personal perceptions of the latter. This analysis led to the general results shown below.

Results

In this section the results of the data analysis are presented, following the main learning outcomes that arose from the data sources. We discuss the results concerning each of the established themes related to both the skill sets, and to the general feedback that the students provided.

Overall skills development

In terms of learning outcomes, three main categories may be identified: disciplinary skills, linguistic skills and intercultural skills. A common trait of VE projects is the high motivation to participate in authentic communication and collaboration with international peers (Gutiérrez and O’Dowd, 2021:19). This proved especially true during the pandemic, when students were so starved of peer social interactions (see table 1 for student quotations illustrating each of the developed skills sets).

Disciplinary skills

VE allows students from different countries to work together in an intercultural and multidisciplinary environment. “Competencies in working with people from diverse backgrounds and across different sectors are often viewed as key to employability”



(Héliot, Mittelmeier & Rienties, 2020: 2356). A VE will thus develop skills for team-work, group membership, coordinating actions and adapting to the needs of the group and the task. These skills are essential for business professionals in particular, but also for future employees in a cooperative society. Through this VE, Business students gained knowledge about sustainable practices that they implemented in their final course project. As part of the project, they developed a business plan where they created a commodity which had to be sustainable for the environment and for local communities whilst at the same time remaining attractive for tourists visiting Ireland.

In terms of disciplinary skills, tourism students were able to gain a better understanding of sustainable tourism and the different dimensions of sustainability involved: economic, social and environmental. Students also gained knowledge about existing and potential sustainable tourism sites, practices, activities and services in both contexts thanks to collaborating with their international peers (see table 1).

Language skills

Students felt their overall proficiency in the target language had improved thanks to their participation in the VE. Aspects most mentioned by the students were: the acquisition of new tourism and business vocabulary, authentic slang expressions, and the easing of language anxiety by language practice (see table 1).

Intercultural skills

The third main category of learning outcomes corresponds to student intercultural skills. This VE has helped them to learn from one another and their respective cultures (see table 1). Besides, students from both courses have expressed a desire to spend their Erasmus programme in their partners' country. This real life exposure to the culture can be an effective tool to connect the learning of the language with the country itself, engaging students and promoting study abroad.

Table1.

Student quotations that illustrate the development of different type of skills during the VE

Overall skills development	<p>“This project has been very useful to me for several reasons. First of all, I had the pleasure of meeting new people of other nationalities and at the same time getting to know my classmates better, having the opportunity to work together on the projects. Secondly, it gave me a greater awareness of teamwork, respect for other people’s ideas and the search for solutions that can be good for everyone (...) As far as content is concerned, I can say that I have learned a lot about sustainability in general and practices for sustainable tourism in particular. Before starting this project, I had an idea of sustainability almost exclusively linked and related to ecology and environmental care, while today I can say that I have understood well other dimensions that form</p>
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	sustainability. Last but not least, I have improved the two languages, Spanish from a written point of view and English in all respects, first of all speaking with native speakers”.
Disciplinary skills	“I’ve become aware that tourism generates a lot of benefits for the economy, especially the local economy. (...) Tourism also helps to preserve the cultural heritage of many cities, for example, through taxes. Also, there are cultural benefits for the people. Then we have to support it. Also, in both countries (Ireland and Spain) there are big environmental risks/threats that tourism poses such as pollution, degradation of the natural and cultural heritage, loss of local customs and traditions, massive tourism and noise pollution among others. Therefore, we have to be more careful with our environment and take care of it”.
Language skills	“En las actividades que hicimos relacionadas con el turismo sostenible he aprendido nuevas expresiones adaptadas a un ámbito más profesional. También como nunca me había encontrado en la situación de tener que esforzarme para hablar en inglés continuamente pues, claro, yo creo que esto ayuda a que de forma más rápida mejores el inglés porque te obligas a ti mismo a usarlo para tener una conversación fluida con tus compañeros”.
Intercultural skills	<p>“I have learned that it is enriching to know the opinions of different people who live in different places and with different backgrounds. Such a diversity of opinions and points of view have given rise to many original ideas”.</p> <p>“It has definitely improved my knowledge about Spanish culture, mainly through casual conversation with my Spanish partners. They told us about ‘tapas’ and really interestingly, their perceptions of religion. We had very similar views as young people in traditionally Catholic countries. I do believe it helped to improve my proficiency within the Spanish language. The girls were very good at telling me when I had made mistakes and explaining how some sentences could be said better”.</p>

Discussion

As Héliot, Mittelmeier and Rienties point out, building learning relationships with peers is an important foundation for collaboration (2020: 2358). Added to this, the context in which this VE has been developed with heavy restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the creation of not only learning but personal and social interactions has gained increased relevance. This has been reflected in the feedback students provided through Schoology and in their personal blog. All reported that the opportunity to socialise with people their own age and from other countries at a time when travel and

social interactions are not possible face-to-face, was what they valued most about the experience.

Furthermore, this VE has proved to achieve the desired aims and be beneficial in the development of different types of skills. Overall, feedback from students is positive, and participants have acquired specific 21st century competencies such as linguistic, intercultural, digital, interpersonal and entrepreneurial skills, which are essential in future professional interactions. Regarding specific disciplinary skills to course contents, some respondents felt that VE tasks had a stronger focus on Tourism content rather than on Business content. These perceptions were collected from personal blogs submitted by Business students. In future iterations, we aim to set up VEs where a balance is found in the topics of interest to students from both fields of expertise, probably more centred on the socio-cultural aspect of sustainable tourism according to students' suggestions.

Conclusions

The project presented in this paper provides empirical evidence of the effectiveness of the implementation of VE in FL Education, with students from different disciplines developing specific 21st century competencies such as linguistic, intercultural, digital, interpersonal and entrepreneurial skills. However, this interdisciplinary approach requires a high degree of close collaboration between the VE teachers to ensure that the curricular needs and interests of both groups are met. In addition, this experience gave a valuable opportunity to students from two different cultural backgrounds to establish connections, create a sense of collaboration and cooperation and build interpersonal relationships during the challenging times of a pandemic.

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