

A VIRTUAL EXCHANGE TO BOOST STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract. How can universities enhance their students' internationalisation at home? The need to find teaching methodologies that boost students' intercultural communication skills without travelling abroad has motivated the present study, carried out by two English lecturers from Florida Universitaria in Spain and Jade University of Applied Sciences in Germany. Research was divided into two stages: first, a deep analysis of the intercultural experiences organised in the past at both universities; and second, the implementation of virtual encounters with students from different cultures as tools to promote interculturality at the home university. This paper aims at showing the impact of those exchanges on boosting students' intercultural communication in English. Two groups of undergraduate students, during their English classes, worked synchronously on topics related to essential aspects of intercultural communication. The main teaching objectives of the Virtual Intercultural Communication (VIC) exchange were to increase participants' motivation for knowing other cultures, to raise their intercultural awareness, to foster their capacity to change perspectives, and to improve students' English language skills and their digital abilities. Through the outcomes achieved, students' self-reported feedback, and lecturers' observation, it can be concluded that virtual exchanges are effective tools to improve students' intercultural communication while they meet the English learning objectives.

Key words: intercultural communication, virtual exchange, English communication skills, ICT in education, motivation

INTRODUCTION

After years of collaboration between Jade University of Applied Sciences (Jade UAS) (Germany) and Florida Universitaria (Spain) in the organisation of international

student exchanges within the ERASMUS programme, the two coordinators of the experience presented in this paper realised the importance of providing an international opportunity to those students who were not able to travel abroad. Internal statistics of the Jade UAS show that, in spite of many years of promoting student mobility within and also out of the European Union, the mobility goals of the German Academic Exchange Service, DAAD (Online 1), have not been reached, so that only a minority of students (about 10-15%) take the opportunity to study or do practical training abroad. The reasons for not going abroad are manifold. Students face barriers such as physical or mental issues, fewer opportunities owing to their financial, educational, cultural, or regional background, or having a family that must be taken care of, to mention a few. This is not only an observation of the two universities involved in this project, but these are also challenges that most European universities have to face.

How can universities enhance internationalisation at home and allow certain target groups, who have previously been excluded, to gain international experience? The need to find teaching methodologies that boost students' intercultural communication skills without travelling abroad has motivated the present study carried out by two English lecturers from Florida Universitaria and Jade UAS. The research method followed was divided into two stages. First, a deep analysis was carried out of the intercultural experiences that had been organised at both universities in the past, such as International Weeks, in which lecturers from other countries taught students for a few days, or International Fairs on the university premises, among others. Evidence showed that a closer interaction between students from different cultural backgrounds was necessary to make them feel the importance of fruitful intercultural communication in their personal and professional futures. This led to the second stage, in which setting up a virtual exchange between undergraduate students from both universities was envisaged as the most effective way to promote interculturality at the home university, following the initiative taken by the European Union in this regard. The EU has named *inclusion and diversity* as one of their four top priorities for the new Erasmus+ generation 2021-2027 (*Implementation guidelines: Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Inclusion and Diversity Strategy*, 2021: 12). In order to be more inclusive, new measures have to be taken, and offering more opportunities for virtual exchange is one of them. As stated in the Erasmus programme guide:

Virtual exchange projects consist of online people-to-people activities that promote intercultural dialogue and soft skills development. They make it possible for every young person to access high-quality international and cross-cultural education (both formal and non-formal) without physical mobility. While virtual debating or training does not fully replace the benefits of physical mobility, participants in virtual exchanges ought to reap some of the benefits of international educational experiences. (The European Commission, 2023: 205)

As Eisenchlas and Trevaskes (2007: 417) explain, the concept of internationalisation is a process of communication and interculturality in which students are exposed

to interactions focused on intercultural content. The actual travel to other countries is not the only possibility to gain international experience; through a virtual exchange, the practice of intergroup communication is guaranteed, and as Eisenchlas and Trevaskes (2007: 415) claim, this intergroup communication is the only way in which students can improve their speaking abilities and put into practice the content learned in intercultural communication classes.

This paper aims at showing the impact of virtual exchanges on boosting students' intercultural communication in English from their home university. The virtual exchange programme here described was called Virtual Intercultural Communication (VIC) and was organised by two English lecturers at Florida Universitaria (Spain) and Jade UAS (Germany). So far, there have been three editions of the VIC (2021, 2022 and 2023) in which two groups of undergraduate students from their universities worked synchronously online on the acquisition of intercultural communication skills.

The main teaching objectives of the VIC were the following five: first, to increase participants' motivation for learning about new cultures by creating an international scenario in which they could use English in a more natural way than in a regular English course, students were from different countries; second, to raise students' intercultural awareness, working with partners from several different nationalities on topics related to interculturality was the ideal setting to make them aware of cultural differences; third, to foster students' capacity to change perspectives about people from other countries; fourth, to improve participants' English language skills, the activities were adapted to the learners' English level and designed to help them get the most out of the VIC; and fifth, to improve the digital skills of both students and teachers, given the fact that part of the participants were in Germany and part were in Spain, the only possibility for collaboration was teaching online. Since the use of technology was essential as well as a challenge, improving IT skills was also a key objective.

The present paper is a descriptive presentation of the VIC as a pedagogical proposal to help students improve their communication across cultures in English. First, the theoretical background that substantiates this virtual exchange will be explained. Then, the process followed to develop it will be detailed. After that, the results obtained through feedback questionnaires and observation will be analysed. Finally, conclusions and further action to be taken will be put forward.

INTERCULTURALITY IN EDUCATION

There is no denying that the development of intercultural competence is necessary for students to succeed professionally and personally in the globalised society in which they are immersed, but as Eisenchlas and Trevaskes (2007: 414) claim, 'there is little reflection on what intercultural competence entails, and on how intercultural learning can be fostered at university level'.

Certainly, interculturality should be integrated into all individuals' education; in fact, it should take up a major part in the curriculum, not only at the university but at all educational levels. There are many advantages to including interculturality in the syllabus of the different educational levels; Barros and Kharnásova (2012: 111) list some of them, such as that it is enriching for everybody since it enables better coexistence, it develops empathy, and it helps understand the world and oneself in the present society, which is characterised by multiculturalism.

Not only does the syllabus matter, but as Babaii (2018: 51) puts it, 'the attitude behind intercultural education matters'. Thus, genuine respect for all cultures is essential. Holliday (2018: 4) supports the notion that, behind the design of an intercultural education course, it is essential to consider people's intercultural background and how it can develop through their interactions with other people instead of focusing on the particularities of the different cultures.

Focusing particularly on the intercultural communication competence, which is the core of the present study, Spitzer (1997: 379) describes it as an 'impression that behaviour is appropriate and effective in a given context'. Chen (2014: 19) designed a triangular model that explains how to be interculturally competent. According to this author, people must know their own and their counterparts' cultural conventions and must show a positive attitude towards respecting and accepting cultural diversity. Additionally, Chen claims that people must act in an appropriate and effective way throughout intercultural interactions.

However, it is rare to find university subjects specifically based on intercultural communication apart from the modules belonging to the languages departments. Interculturality is a key factor in foreign language learning, as Barros and Kharnásova (2012: 97) support. Furthermore, for Avgousti (2018), nowadays, the main goal of a foreign language learner is to be an intercultural speaker, and the way to achieve this is to know their own culture and other cultures. Analysing the interrelation between language learning and intercultural communication in more detail, Cetinavci (2012: 3447) considers that to communicate successfully with people from different cultures, not only a proficient use of the language is necessary, but also the speaker's cultural awareness is essential when the language, in this case English, is used in countless interactions worldwide.

Considering all the above-mentioned ideas, both coordinators of the VIC, in their positions as English lecturers, found that the most appropriate way to set up an intercultural communication programme was to integrate it into the syllabus of the English subjects they were teaching, which implied working together with their respective groups of students. This context added validity and relevance to the exchange because students viewed the VIC as a part of their English module and, in consequence, important for their university course.

The idea of collaboration between the respective German and Spanish institutions arose at the beginning of the 2020-2021 academic year, when the outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic forced universities to teach online. Lecturers, as well as students, had become familiar with the IT tools for online teaching and learning. This created the ideal scenario to work on interculturality

over a distance with people from different nationalities and backgrounds, given the fact that travelling was not an option.

Avgousti (2018: 2) stresses the importance of technology in learning foreign languages and how online intercultural exchanges can be effective in developing students' intercultural communication skills because they can bring together online learners from different cultures. Nevertheless, despite the advantages, there are also drawbacks; Avgousti (2018: 2) highlights a few, such as the lack of stability in project partners, restricted support, and practical difficulties, but she thinks that its benefits outpace the difficulties. Researchers like Svenkerud and Källstöm (2012: 27) also highlight the importance of the information and communication technology (ICT) to make intercultural projects possible. They point out their low cost but recommend blended courses because of the importance of using face-to-face interaction to achieve good results in collaborative learning, with advantages such as the fact that face-to-face promotes group dynamics, positive interdependence, positive interpersonal skills, and attitudes, as well as individual accountability. Nowadays, however, most of the disadvantages listed above have been overcome through the online tools currently available. The collaborative experience presented in this paper would not have been possible in any other way but online, given the distance between participants.

Finally, another essential part of fostering interculturality in education is motivating students to learn about other cultures. To achieve a high degree of motivation, the activities designed must be carefully planned to incorporate the most appropriate motivating factors. In the VIC described in this study, the three main factors incorporated were: creating tasks that students felt relevant to real life; using teamwork as the basis of collaboration; and using technology to make the exchange more interesting and effective. Additionally, the exchange was designed taking into consideration the five ingredients that Williams and Williams (2011: 18) proposed to increase students' motivation: student, teacher, content, method or process, and environment. From the perspective of the content, the motivational impact of projects such as the VIC can be high. Allen (2021: 228), in his study, defends the claim that 'participants are motivated to study intercultural communication for reasons such as general interest and self-reflection'.

DESCRIBING THE VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

The VIC was designed for a group of undergraduate students from interdisciplinary backgrounds. As stated in previous sections, the universities involved were Florida Universitaria (Spain) and Jade UAS (Germany), with one English lecturer per university as coordinator.

There have been three editions until now: the first one in 2021, when, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, tuition was still online for both universities, and students as well as lecturers got connected from home. The second, in 2022, was the most complicated in terms of communication as Spanish students were already having

lessons face-to-face in the classroom, but wearing face masks was still compulsory. Instead, the students from Jade UAS were learning online from home and, therefore, did not need to wear masks. This made speaking and understanding hard. In 2023, both groups of students had their lessons face-to-face in their respective institutions, and finding enough spaces in the universities where students could connect alone was an issue. These different circumstances made the organisation of the VIC a challenging experience.

The number of students ranged from 32 in 2021 to 37 in 2022 and 34 in 2023. Only a few of them took part in more than one edition. In 2021 and 2023, there were participants from eight different nationalities, both universities considered, whereas people from only seven countries took part in 2022. During the three years, there were participants from Spain, Germany, Japan, China, Russia, Morocco, Greece, Iran, Turkey, Cameroon, Lithuania, Egypt, and Tunisia. This ensured a good representation of different cultural backgrounds throughout the sessions.

The two subjects in which the VIC was integrated were English for Specific Purposes (for Degrees in Tourism and Education) at the Spanish university and English for Intercultural Presentations and Negotiations (for Engineering and Business Degrees) at the German university.

The VIC was designed as part of the course syllabus in both universities and integrated into the students' course assessments. The exchange took place during regular class hours, matching timetables at both universities. There was no alternative to organising a synchronous exchange, owing to time constraints. Every edition of the VIC was divided into two sessions (2 hours each) over two consecutive weeks in February. This was the most convenient period in terms of organisation.

The three VICs focused on intercultural communication in English, although this topic was approached from different perspectives each year. This was due to different reasons: First of all, it was necessary to find topics that were relevant to all the heterogeneous student groups. Secondly, the previous knowledge of the students coming from up to 13 different cultural backgrounds and higher education traditions had to be taken into consideration. Thirdly, the contents of the VIC had to be adapted to the contents of the courses, which were taught separately at both Florida University and Jade UAS. Also, the experiences in the courses and the feedback of the students were always elaborated on to improve the upcoming course. The three VICs have to be regarded as 'work in progress' to gain new teaching and learning experience, to practice different methods, and to adapt the contents to the prerequisites and needs of the students.

In the first edition of the VIC, students jointly worked on the importance of intercultural competence and the influence of stereotypes. Since intercultural competence can be regarded as a key competence of the 21st century, as stated by the Bertelsmann Stiftung Foundation (Online 2) and the Fondazione Cariplo (Online 3), students' awareness of this topic should be intensified. The lecturers worked on intercultural knowledge and skills by offering them an opportunity to apply and improve their communication skills in the English language. Additionally,

the participants were provided with some comprehensive cultural knowledge, mainly about Spanish and German cultures. Due to the fact that students with a variety of cultural backgrounds also participated, more perspectives could be included. To train students' ability to manage conflicts, the use of *critical incidents* can be helpful, as described by Schumann (2012: 55). Examples were taken from the Mehrsprachigkeit und Multikulturalität im Studium [Multilingualism and Multiculturalism in Education] (MuMiS) project database (Online 4), hosted at the University of Kassel. *Critical incidents* are defined in this project as 'intercultural misunderstandings, which are kept in short stories as case studies of human behaviour in interaction. They offer introspective insights in the context of intercultural perception, interpretation and evaluation'. Students had to analyse the conflicts and regard them from different cultural perspectives. Afterwards, different options for solving the problems had to be developed. In so doing, they gained a higher level of intercultural competence. They had to shift their frame of reference from their own culture to other cultural perspectives, and with such improved understanding, they could empathise with diverging perspectives on conflict situations. As an external outcome, they had become more aware of different hidden cultural rules and more cautious about violating them.

In 2022, the VIC was based on intercultural negotiations, getting students to hold a meeting in which they had to negotiate in groups about a case study on sustainable tourism. Again, one of the outcomes was not only improved language skills in the field of negotiations but also a greater sensitivity towards cultural differences in preparing and conducting negotiations, or, as Varmer and Beamer (2011: 332) summarise it, 'To negotiate effectively, intercultural negotiators do not only need special communication skills, they also need to understand both their own and the other's team culture'.

In the third VIC (2023), students worked on the structure of oral presentations and the use of visual aids. Different cultural preferences as to the features of presentations like data load, visual impact, legibility, and use of colours were analysed and discussed. The methodology was based on collaborative learning through multiple group tasks; short input sections alternated with longer group works, which gave students a lot of time to practice their communication and problem-solving skills in mixed cultural groups.

Zoom and Microsoft Teams were used as teaching platforms for the exchange and organisation meetings. All the collaborative tools they offer, such as breakout rooms, whiteboards, questionnaires, material sharing, and chat, were used to apply the methodologies that were proven more effective in meeting the exchange objectives, namely, learning by doing, problem solving, and collaborative work. The authors of this paper agree with Fetcher (2010: 420) that it is a challenge to teach explicit and procedural knowledge in a virtual room: students should not only acquire explicit knowledge, but they should also be enabled to experience intercultural differences and reflect on them.

The following activities were designed to meet the teaching objectives that motivated the present experience: the objectives related to raising intercultural

awareness and changing students' perspectives were approached from a problem-solving perspective in which specific topics were chosen for discussion. For better results, the lecturers carefully created the work teams to ensure multiculturalism among the members. This gave participants the opportunity to debate and observe their partner's reactions and opinions, giving them a wide array of examples to discover cultural differences. A particular effort was made by the two coordinators to build up an atmosphere of confidence and collaboration to encourage students to express their point of view freely and even talk about their background. Some input was given by the lecturers at the beginning, but it was kept to a minimum to let students develop their own ideas.

In relation to the aim of improving students' English language level, students were tasked with activities that used specific vocabulary about intercultural communication, negotiations as well as oral presentations and covered the four essential communication skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing), as Table 1 shows.

As it can be seen in Table 1, students were able to practise listening with videos, in interactions with other coursemates, and with the lecturers. Reading practice was encouraged by reading the theoretical input provided as well as the information from the case studies analysed. Speaking was generally encouraged through discussions, debates, group work, presenting information, brainstorming, and sharing ideas, as well as answering questions posed by the lecturers or other students and giving examples. Finally, students were tasked with giving feedback, answering some questions in written form, taking notes when necessary, and writing a final report.

Improving the IT skills of both students and teachers was essential, given the distance between the two groups of students. All the participants had to learn how to work on Zoom and Microsoft Teams. The former was used for the virtual classes, and the latter for organisation meetings. Since the sessions were planned

Table 1 Activities to practise the four communication skills

SKILLS	ACTIVITIES					
LISTENING	video	interac- tion with students/ teachers				
READING	theory/ input	case study descrip- tion				
SPEAKING	discus- sions/ debates	group work	presenting informa- tion	sharing ideas	giving examples/ answering questions orally	meeting negotia- tions
WRITING	feedback	answering questions in writing	taking notes	report writing		

to apply the collaborative work methodology, there were activities to be carried out with the whole class and others in groups; therefore, participants had to learn how to set up and work in breakout rooms, how to use the whiteboard, how to answer online questionnaires, and how to share materials.

The results obtained from the actions taken to meet the previously mentioned four objectives led to the achievement of a more general goal: increasing students' motivation for other cultures as a result of the application of the motivational factors involved in the VIC.

In terms of assessment, each university applied different tools in coherence with the overall assessment system of their English subject in which the VIC was inserted. Nevertheless, three criteria were common to both universities during the VIC: attendance, active participation and good performance in the activities and outcomes. After the exchange, both coordinators adapted the results to their subject assessments and tasked participants with further assessment tools. In the case of the German university whose English module was assessed by a final presentation, the contents of the VIC were included in the presentation; therefore, they were part of 100 per cent of the overall mark. In the case of Florida Universitaria, the VIC was an element of the continuous assessment mark and accounted for 10 per cent of the total mark of the English module.

RESULTS OF THE VIRTUAL INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE

The results of the virtual exchange can be interpreted from two perspectives: on the one hand, in terms of participants' feedback, and on the other hand, considering the results students obtained in the assessment tasks carried out by each lecturer.

As far as participants' feedback is concerned, their opinion matters, as it is a key aspect of improving the VIC in future editions. Students had to complete a questionnaire at the end of the VIC. Different tools were used for its administration, depending on the circumstances. In the first edition, lecturers had more experience with the use of Zoom, and this platform was chosen for all aspects of the exchange, including the satisfaction form to complete. In the second, students wrote their answers directly on the whiteboard (also in Zoom) since the satisfaction questionnaire was a part of the last activity in which learners had to share their opinions with all the other participants. This enabled the coordinators to get students' feedback as well as be present in the discussions that led to that feedback. Finally, in the third VIC, a Google Forms questionnaire was designed because the coordinators wanted to explore other possibilities beyond Zoom.

The content of the satisfaction questionnaire was the same in the three years, but two more questions were added to the 2023 VIC. In the first edition, the lecturers' main interest was having opinions and suggestions from the participants without limiting them with closed questions. Qualitative information was more important than quantitative. Therefore, the coordinators decided to ask these five open

questions: What have we done? What have you learned? What did you like? What didn't you like? What could be improved?

Once the information collected in the VIC 2021 was analysed for the second edition (2022), the organisers decided to continue with the format of open questions. However, the fact was that sometimes students did not make the effort to answer the open questions with complete information, so carrying out a quantitative analysis was seen as an interesting possibility to obtain reliable feedback from those students who did not present extensive information. Consequently, in the third edition (2023), the lecturers decided to add two closed questions on top of the open ones. These questions targeted two aspects that were essential for the organisers: whether the learners liked the overall virtual experience and if they felt they had learned something.

The feedback obtained will be presented in the following paragraphs, organised by question and edition of the virtual exchange. The first question, *What have we done?*, was asked to make students reflect on the tasks carried out as well as the process. There were no relevant differences in the answers obtained in the three editions, but they were too varied to be listed here. The information collected helped the lecturers identify the students' perceptions of the methodology applied and the percentage of contents that they had taken in. According to the details students provided in their answers, coordinators could also identify which tasks were more relevant to them.

What have you learned? was the second question. It is interesting that, in the three editions, apart from aspects relating to language learning, they highlighted topics concerning interculturality such as how to interpret stereotypes, other people's customs and different behaviours. These answers showed a good level of intercultural awareness achieved throughout the virtual exchange.

To the question *What did you like?* in the three editions, all the participants unanimously pointed out meeting new people from other nationalities as the most attractive part of the VIC. Regarding methodology, basically students liked solving problems and working in multicultural groups, but some suggested having more diversity in activities as well as more open, less structured tasks. On the whole, students described the VIC as interesting and enriching.

What didn't you like? was the fourth question. Nobody disliked the whole experience, but there were some specific examples that bothered students. First, the language barrier: although most participants had a level between B2 and C1, there were still some people below those levels, which sometimes limited the discussions. This was one of the reasons for the lack of participation by some students. Other learners mentioned different degrees of personal involvement and distractions owing to the use of mobile phones while working. A few technical hitches were also highlighted; problems with connection and background noise were the most prominent. The fact that not all participants had their cameras on was also annoying for some. Although these are drawbacks, they can also be seen from a positive perspective, as students had the opportunity to grasp what the concept of *diversity* involved when working with people from different backgrounds, maturity, language level, involvement, and computing literacy.

The answers to the question *What could be improved?* in the three editions pointed at solving technical hitches, allotting more time for the students from the other university to be better acquainted with one another, and trying to arrange in-person exchange visits in the future, either in Germany or in Valencia, to continue working together. Additionally, in 2021, some group members recommended reviewing the group formation since they found their group did not fit and wanted to have more participants in the VIC. Also, in that edition, it was decided that better preparation of students before the VIC was important.

In 2023, when the two closed questions were added, as Table 2 shows, the responses to *Did you like the experience?* were extremely positive. Of all participants, 100 per cent liked the VIC; the majority (82.2%) were enthusiastic about the VIC, and they found it very interesting as well as innovative and wanted to participate in further editions, as written in the space provided for comments after the question, whereas 17.8% simply stated that they liked the whole experience. Participants were asked to rank their preferences from most satisfactory to least satisfactory. What students liked the most was meeting young people from other cultures (66.9%); online collaboration was the second option in the ranking (14.5%); and interaction during groupwork was the third option (10%). The topic, particularly oral presentations, was in last place (8.6%).

Regarding the second closed question asked in the VIC's third edition, *Have you learned something?*, 28.5 per cent admitted to having learned a lot, 57.1 per cent said that they learned some new things, and 14.3 per cent learned a few things. Nobody said that they had not learned anything new. These percentages are logical considering that the topic was 'oral presentations in intercultural scenarios' and some students had taken a short course on this theme in previous years, although with a lower level.

To obtain more information, a session for group reflection in students' own classes and face-to-face with their lecturer once the VIC had finished was arranged. Comments confirmed students' satisfaction and all the information summarised above, but it was extremely interesting because more details and examples than in the written questionnaire were provided by participants.

The success of the VICs was also confirmed by the assessment results, as everybody passed the exchange in the three editions. Two aspects were taken into consideration to evaluate students' performance: their attendance and

Table 2 Responses to closed questions (VIC 2023)

Did you like the experience?	<i>I liked it a lot</i> 82.2%	<i>I liked it</i> 17.8%	<i>I didn't like it</i> 0%	
What did you like best?	<i>Meeting people from other cultures</i> 66.9%	<i>Online collaboration</i> 14.5%	<i>Interaction during group work</i> 10%	<i>Topics</i> 8.6%
Have you learned something?	<i>A lot of things</i> 28.5%	<i>Some new things</i> 57.1%	<i>A few new things</i> 14.3%	<i>Nothing</i> 0%

participation, as well as the results obtained in the tasks assigned during the VIC and afterwards (as explained in the section about the exchange description). At least 90% of the students attended all the sessions. Nobody missed more than one session, and if somebody did, they sent a justification to their teacher. This percentage was consistent in the three editions, which shows the high degree of interest and motivation awakened by this experience.

The high quality of the outcomes produced during the three virtual exchanges, as well as the marks obtained by students in the assessment tasks assigned by each coordinator to their respective groups once the VIC had finished, confirmed the effort and commitment of all the participants in the three editions.

CONCLUSIONS

The VIC has proved to be an effective methodological approach to helping students improve their intercultural communication skills at their home university. Informal discussions with students after the VIC and the way they approached interculturality throughout the rest of the semester showed evidence of a higher level of intercultural awareness, beyond the level they had before taking part in the VIC. Students, for example, showed more respect for other cultures; they had gained insight into their own culture and other cultures. Undoubtedly, inclusive mobility took place where everybody felt integrated into a multicultural group and learned about cultural differences, customs, habits, etc. The VIC even raised students' curiosity to travel abroad as soon as circumstances permitted it. Nevertheless, apart from virtual encounters, research must go on to find other alternatives that complement these exchanges, and universities must provide a holistic plan to guarantee students' intercultural competence throughout their degree.

As for the other aims of the project here presented, results also show that the language-related objectives have been met. Apart from learning specific vocabulary and working on essential communication skills, the VIC, in the three editions, had a positive washback effect on the English subjects. Lecturers noticed that after the VIC, the attitude towards speaking in class and participating in debates had changed, particularly for those students who lacked self-confidence, in that they became more participative in the subsequent English classes.

In relation to the use of online teaching tools, nowadays the variety is so wide that all the activities planned were carried out. Learning about the use of such tools was challenging for lecturers and students, but they enabled the former to bring together online learners from different cultures.

Both partners have gained extensive experience in how to organise a virtual exchange, and they fully met the teaching as well as the internationalisation objectives.

Concerning organisation, from the teachers' point of view, it is essential to know the partner you are going to collaborate with previously for a successful experience, since organising the team-building activities and dealing with students' different

intercultural expectations and behaviours were especially challenging. All in all, lecturers as well as students are willing to repeat this experience.

To improve the VIC in the future, there is a need to gain more knowledge about IT programmes, to analyse assessments, and to introduce more evaluation tools. It is also necessary to tackle some organisational issues.

On the whole, the VIC experience, in its three editions, was challenging but highly rewarding and motivating for stakeholders, lecturers and students.

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