4 The transnational job exchange project: a French-German TEP

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Abstract

The technical institutions Institut Mines Télécom in Albi, France (IMT) and Trier University for Applied Sciences at the Environmental Campus of Birkenfeld, Germany (UCB) have been running Virtual Exchange (VE) projects since 2013. These projects allow the French and German students to use the vocabulary learned in class in a real context and to develop their interaction competencies. This case study reports on the latest project about job searches, in which teams with a German and a French partner were formed and different activities were created to gain insights into the job application procedure.

Keywords: tandem project, job research, language for specific purposes, German, French.

1. Context

IMT and UCB have in common one of the major aims of higher education institutions: to prepare students for the world of work in an increasingly globalized world. For this reason, the two institutions involved offer their students the possibility to do an internship in the partner country.

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Nevertheless, these students are often faced with intercultural differences they had not been aware of and for which they were not prepared, thus resulting in misunderstandings.

VE has shown to help students develop employability skills (Guadamillas Gómez, 2017; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016), which is one of the reasons why it has been implemented in this context.

IMT and UCB are partner universities and signed Erasmus+ mobility agreements more than ten years ago. The lecturers contacted each other within this Erasmus+ cooperation and since 2013, tandem projects between the two partner universities in which the students collaborate on technical as well as business topics have been integrated in the language classes, mainly at the B1 and B2 levels – Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR).

The two authors, one a lecturer in German at the French institution, and the other a lecturer in French at the German university, decided to integrate a bilingual VE project into their teaching to raise their students' awareness of intercultural differences and thus prepare them better for their period abroad.

The two lecturers decided to follow specific training programs offered within the Erasmus+ VE (E+VE) initiative to design their Transnational Exchange Project (TEP) collaboratively. The E+VE program also offered their students the opportunity to obtain their first virtual badges for their participation.

2.   Aims and description of the project

As the students have to do an internship abroad, and will potentially do it in the partner's country, the two lecturers decided to use their TEP to prepare their students to enter the graduate job market. The intended learning outcome of the project was to learn more specific vocabulary for the job search in the partner

country and to gain self-confidence for real job interviews, as well as to improve students' global competence (Asia Society/OCDE, 2018).

Focusing on this goal, the lecturers set up the course on the learning management system OpenOLAT of the UCB, with the following structure for a seven-week VE project (see Figure 1).

- In the first week, each student presented another student of their country in the foreign language. In the weekly forum, they discussed their fears and expectations.

- In the following six weeks, teams of two to three students from both countries worked both synchronously and asynchronously on the topics of the project (employment opportunities in their country; mock job interviews; and preparing for the first day of work in the partner's country). They had to deliver three recordings of synchronous video-meetings as evidence of their collaborative work.

- Finally, the students provided feedback in class and in a common survey to express their opinion concerning the project and to reflect on the learning experience.

The objectives of the weekly activities were described briefly before each activity was explained in detail – step by step what was asked for and which Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tool to choose. In the platform there was also a special tab containing important information, such as the dates and logins for the common synchronous sessions on Zoom, and a link to the weekly forum for the discussion of intercultural topics and awareness. Instructions were given in French and German.

The VE was accompanied by classroom lessons once a week for 90 minutes. Here the linguistic preparation for the different activities took place, and new vocabulary was established and shared between all students of the two countries

through Google Sheets and revised and trained by playing quizzes like Kahoot prepared by the lecturers and the students.

The lecture time was also used to share experiences, to ask questions, to give support, and especially to discuss upcoming problems, such as when agreed virtual meetings have repeatedly not taken place without being cancelled by the partner/s or when the required task could not be solved within the allowed time. The questions were also discussed under the focus of intercultural misunderstandings.

Three facilitated sessions were offered by UNICollaboration in which the students met in groups of 8-10 and were encouraged to get to know each other on a personal level in order to engage in meaningful intercultural dialogue with their partners during their collaboration.

Figure 1. The structure of the TEP project on OpenOlat
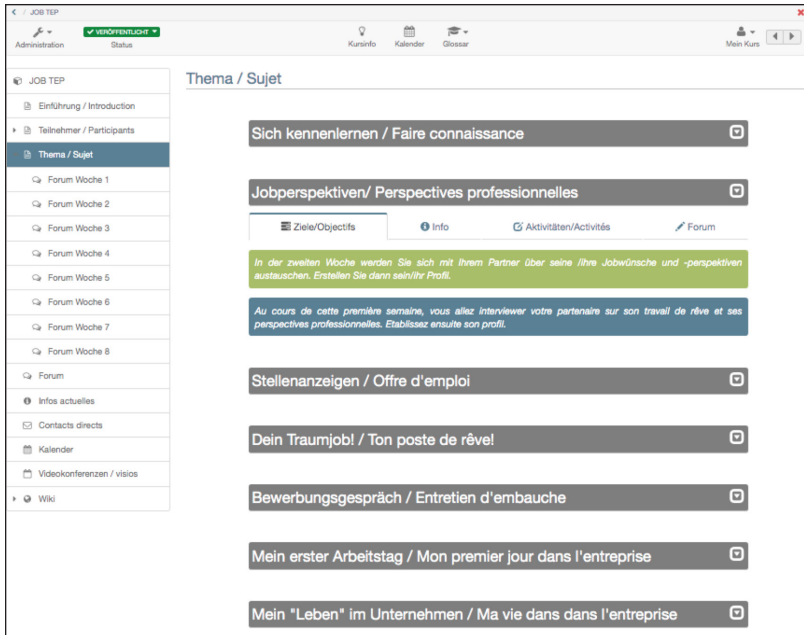
3.   Pedagogical design and tools

As to the organization of the project, it was set up on one learning management system, in the case of this project OpenOlat, which served as a supply for the activities and all organizational aspects. The ICT tools which had to be applied were explained to the students before they had to use them.

The following tools were used for this project:

- Zoom as a tool for video conferences (https://zoom.us/meeting);

- OpenOLAT as a learning management system: organization, information and telecollaboration in the forum as a tool for asynchronous communication and in the wiki (https://olat.vcrp.de/);

- Padlet as a collaborative working space and for sharing documents and information (https://padlet.com/);

- genial.ly as a telecollaboration and presentation tool (https://app.genial.ly/); and

- Mentimeter as a survey tool (https://www.mentimeter.com/).

The VE project started with a self-portrait: on a Padlet, a virtual pinboard which had been integrated in the course, the students and lecturers presented themselves. The layout of this pinboard allows all students' profiles to be visible on one page and to easily integrate images and photos.

In a second step, the students were asked to talk about their expectations and fears regarding the TEP in the course's forum – an ideal tool for asynchronous communication and discussion.

As the lecturers knew the language level of their students and considering their studies and interests, they formed the tandems (or sometimes groups of three)

between a German and a French partner. The groups were asked to find a name and a picture representing their team.

During the synchronous session of that week, the pictures of the teams were analyzed using the *DIE method* (Paige et al., 2002), which stands for Describing, Interpreting, and Evaluating. Here, the lecturers asked the students to describe only what they saw on the image representing the team. The students had to interpret the image by answering the questions: who, what, when, where, and why. The lecturers also asked the students to put the interpretation in an intercultural context. Finally, the students had to deconstruct the interpretation by evaluating it. They had to answer the following questions: Why did you interpret the image like this? Could there be other interpretations? Is your interpretation positive or negative? The pedagogical goal of this exercise was to create awareness of intercultural differences but also common values.

In the following week, the real VE started when the students had to exchange information about their studies and their job wishes and perspectives. On a poster, they presented their partner regarding their job perspectives. The students used genial.ly (https://www.genial.ly) to create this poster, an Internet site for interactive presentations and infographics.

During the next weeks, the students gained insights into the job application procedure. Each student had to find three real job offers in their own country suitable to the profile of their partner(s). In a word cloud on Mentimeter, the most requested skills were collected and discussed during the lecture time. Mentimeter allows users to create interactive live polls, quizzes, word clouds, Q&As, and more (see Figure 2 below).

The groups moved on to the presentation of their offers. In a Zoom meeting which had to be recorded, the French students presented the selected French job advertisements to their German partners speaking German and vice versa. The links to the recorded meetings were shared in a wiki that was integrated in the online platform. One page was provided for each group in order to facilitate collaboration and the sharing of documents.

Figure 2. The most important soft skills wordcloud on Mentimeter

After the presentation of the three offers, each partner selected the most suitable one and, as an activity for the following week, mock interviews had to be planned, one in French and one in German. Thus, the German students were interviewed in French by their French partners in the role of interviewers, and the French students then acted as interviewees in German. The students were again asked to record the meetings on Zoom. The vocabulary and important questions were learned in class by brainstorming and watching example videos of job interviews. The students prepared the mock interviews by means of their choice (email, Messenger, or videoconferencing), but they had to produce a 15-minute recording of both interviews on Zoom.

The next topic was 'How to prepare one's first day in a new company'. This question was asked in the forum and three tips in the foreign language were expected from everyone. Hints regarding clothes, form of address, time aspects, social behavior, and conduct toward colleagues and a superior were given in this asynchronous communication.

This was transformed into a task on work etiquette. Intercultural differences became evident and were discussed in the lecture time. Whereas the German

students focused mainly on aspects like the dress code, time aspects, and relation toward colleagues, nearly all the French students pointed out the significant role of the supervisors and the importance of hierarchy in French companies – which was unknown and strange to their German partners.

Finally, being virtually employed by the company, the students had to talk about their tasks in the new job, the atmosphere, and the netiquette in the company. The conversations also took place on Zoom and had to be recorded. Here the intercultural differences that were pointed out in the previous activity were again addressed. The German students for example complained about the rigid atmosphere in the French company, while the French students felt very comfortable in the relaxed environment of a German company – not only concerning the social relationships but also regarding the dress code.

4.   Evaluation, assessment, and recognition

The TEP ended officially at the end of January 2020. In their last shared lesson, the students were asked to complete the evaluation sheet co-developed by the two lecturers. This evaluation sheet, a Google Form, included questions about the management of the project (how much time did it need per week? Did you prefer synchronous or asynchronous sessions?...), the learning outcomes (did you learn relevant professional vocabulary? Which intercultural differences did you come across?…), and also asked for suggestions to improve the project.

Analyzing the evaluation, the feedback is mainly positive – besides the progress in especially oral production, the students welcomed the collaboration in an international team and the critical reflecting or thinking on stereotypes or prejudices. They also appreciated being creative at the beginning of the TEP. Besides the improvement of their language skills, they highlighted the soft skills they acquired during the TEP as good preparation for their future jobs, such as learning to collaborate with an international partner respecting their working time and manners, and applying digital tools to discuss and come to a conclusion. The students did particularly mention the difference of working and hierarchic

styles in Germany and France. One student's quote: "We don't have the same way of working, that's evident. I think that the Germans are more punctual and disciplined".

The students spent between one hour and one and a half hours on the project per week and estimated this time was suitable to the project needs.

The participants liked the synchronous sessions and appreciated the combination of both synchronous and asynchronous work (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.   Final evaluation: did you prefer synchronous or asynchronous sessions or the combination of both?
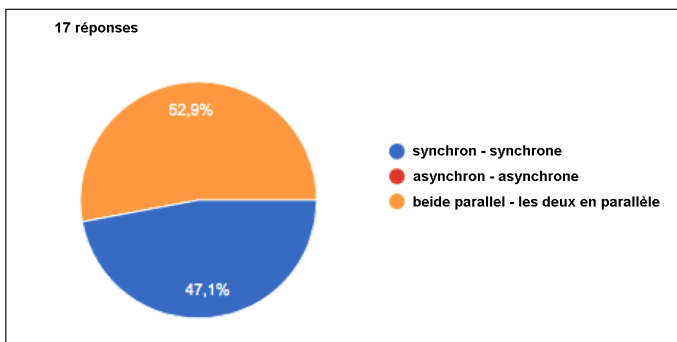
One of the quotes of the students[3]:

> "Mir hat die Eigenständigkeit der Teams gut gefallen, denn es ist nicht immer einfach, v.a. zu dritt, Termine zu finden und Abgaben abzuliefern, wenn einer aus dem Team gerade nicht kann/sich nicht meldet, etc. Also alles toll! :)".

It confirms the two lecturers' opinions that the students need not only online tasks but also training in class with face-to-face activities and synchronous video

3. Translation: I liked the independence of the teams, because it is not always easy, especially with three of them, to find dates and deliver documents when one of the team members cannot/does not report, etc. So everything is great! :)

conferences with their partners. As a matter of fact, online activities are very useful because students can manage their time individually (how often they watch a video and how much time they invest to learn vocabulary or to prepare synchronous sessions). They can also more easily compensate for the different systems in the two partner institutions. But to improve their oral competencies and ability to interact with a partner, it is necessary to combine the asynchronous online work with synchronous sessions where the students can apply what they have learned.

Almost three quarters of the participants highlighted not only their linguistic progression during the TEP, but also the international collaboration with all its advantages and misunderstandings as the best preparation of 21st century workforce skills. They especially welcomed the fact that vocabulary was acquired and practiced through exercises during the lecture time which they could apply immediately.

In the discussions of intercultural differences in their groups, with their French and German partners, the students needed this vocabulary and they had the chance to turn the passive vocabulary into actively used vocabulary. Although they complained on the one side about the amount of work, they were all in all happy about having participated in the TEP and proud of their badges distributed by Erasmus which they can link for example to their LinkedIn profile. The fact of being rewarded with such a badge by an official organization with the European Commission logo on it was all in all a determining point in their decision to choose the project. Furthermore, the badge can be added to an application which especially regarding the geographical location of the German university can be of advantage: on the one side, the attractive labor market in Luxemburg and on the other side, the French strategy of the Saar Government and its effort to become bilingual German/French by 2043[4].

Working in Germany and gaining initial professional experience in a German company as an engineer is very motivating for the French students. The TEP

4. https://www.saarland.de/stk/DE/service/publikationen/_documents/Frankreichstrategie.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=1

was thus designed to reflect their future professional life – collaborating in international teams on a project – and to gain their first experience in a transnational working environment. They benefited from being supported by their lecturers and by the E+VE facilitators on linguistic, intercultural, and organizational aspects.

5. Lessons learned

As to the opinion of the lecturers, the two great challenges of digitalization and internationalization which determine the European higher education program are combined in VE projects. Beyond the fact that they offer the possibility of integrating the challenges of innovative didactical methods – namely the four Cs (communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking) – in their teaching, an international context is provided. Participating in TEPs, the students gain soft skills such as working in international teams, which due to globalization is increasingly demanded in their future professional life.

A lot of students stated that one of the big challenges was the involvement of students in the project. This was due to intercultural issues, like different understandings of time management and discipline and to the fact that, in Germany, students choose this module and get more credits.

For their next project, the two lecturers plan to establish rules every student has to respect during the project, a 'netiquette' and to carry out a pre-survey in addition to the post-survey, to measure the development of intercultural awareness. They still need to explore tools to measure this awareness, which is currently done only by comparing comments and analyzing the post-survey.

6. Future plans

The two lecturers will continue to implement VE projects, but try to further improve them.

In addition to the netiquette to be written by the students at the beginning of the project and a pre-survey, the activities in the forum need to be further developed. As a matter of fact, the students are not really interactive in the forum, they need to be motivated.

The lecturers are also thinking of integrating more scientific subjects in the VE projects and seeking to cooperate with science lecturers as they both work with engineering students.

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