

9 E+VE-SFI: developing spoken interaction in a foreign language

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Abstract

E^{+VE-SFI} (Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange – Spain, France, Ireland) is a higher-education VE between students from Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (UAM), Université Clermont Auvergne (UCA), and the University of Limerick (UL). Its primary aim is to develop the speaking skills of undergraduates enrolled in foreign language programmes. Running over a six-week period, students interact in pairs via videoconferencing to carry out a series of tasks using either the foreign language (UAM-UL) or English as a lingua franca (UAM-UCA). Finally, students participate in an online session mediated by E+VE facilitators whose purpose is to increase their intercultural awareness in preparation for their study abroad experience.

Keywords: oral skills, virtual exchange, intercultural competence, preparation for study abroad.

1. Context

The European Commission recently launched E+VE, a project that aims to explore the effects that virtual exchange can have in enhancing youth's

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intercultural dialogue and awareness and in building their 21st Century skills⁴. In order to contribute to this initiative, a Transnational Exchange Project (TEP) was organised between university students in SFI. The aim of the E+VE-SFI exchange is to engage students in transnational partnerships to develop their foreign language spoken interaction and cultural awareness. Over six weeks, the students complete synchronous tasks using videoconferencing tools (*Skype* or *Zoom*) and discuss cultural topics included in their respective syllabi. This telecollaborative initiative has successfully run since September 2018 and engaged students from the three institutions described below.

The students from UAM are first year undergraduates from the programmes in Modern Languages and English Studies. They are learners of English who are enrolled in an oral skills English module (three contact hours per week over six weeks). The students take a placement test at the beginning of the academic year and their level of competence in the foreign language is between a B2 and C1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR – [Council of Europe, 2001](#)).

The students from UCA are first year undergraduates from the Applied Foreign Languages degree programme. The TEP is part of a spoken English module (two contact hours per week over a ten-week semester). Before enrolling in the course, the students complete the open-access SELF (*Système d'Évaluation en Langues à visée Formative*) placement test ([Innovalangues, 2014](#)) and, following results, the level is set at CEFR C1.

The students from UL are second year students from the Applied Languages and Arts programmes. The exchange is part of their Spanish oral and aural lab (one contact hour per week over a 12-week semester), which is a compulsory element of their Spanish module. The level of the learners is set at CEFR B1+/-B2.

4. https://europa.eu/youth/EU_en

2. Aims and description of the E+VE-SFI exchange

The primary aim of the TEP is to engage undergraduates enrolled in the foreign language programmes to develop speaking and interaction skills. A secondary aim is to develop intercultural skills and cultural awareness to better prepare students for physical mobility periods which are compulsory components of the degree programmes at UCA (students spend the sixth semester of their Bachelor's degree at a partner institution abroad) and UL (students spend Semester 4 on work placements abroad and Semester 5 on study abroad). This practice is also encouraged within the Modern Languages and English Studies programme at UAM, where an important number of students spend Year 3 abroad.

The six-week exchange engages participating students in partnerships to carry out five tasks that involve introducing themselves using *Padlet*, three oral tasks in which they discuss in pairs, via *Zoom* or *Skype*, specific cultural topics included in the syllabus for their respective courses, and a self-reflection video. The cultural topics are first discussed in class with the teacher and classmates and then outside the classroom with the partner in order to explore their cultural differences and whether these are reflected in their partners' and their own perceptions of the same topics. Finally, in the self-reflection video the students elaborate on the different aspects they have learnt and the competences they perceive they improved throughout the experience. In addition to these tasks, the students participate in a facilitated dialogue session mediated by E+VE facilitators (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Summary of the tasks

	Task 1	Task 2: Discussion	Task 3: Discussion	Task 4: Discussion	Task 5	
UAM- UCA	Introductions	Tourism	Technology and social media	Employment	Self-reflection video	Mediated session
UAM- UL	Introductions	Tourism	Technology and social media	Music, literature and cinema	Self-reflection video	Mediated session

For all participants, the practice of the foreign language is one of the most important elements of the TEP as it provides a unique opportunity to practise the language orally with peer learners in an authentic and interactional manner. As the three universities implement the exchange in their oral skills modules, the TEP fits effectively into the courses as a component.

3. Pedagogical design of the TEP

Given the different semester lengths, dates, and holiday periods, it was decided to run the TEP over a six-week period during which the teaching periods at the three institutions overlap. This does not prevent the partner teachers from conducting preparatory or evaluation activities in-class before or after this period.

Given the large number of students (n=90) involved in each TEP instantiation, students are paired randomly and, in some cases, triads are also organised if needed. The Spanish partner organises this and, where possible, places students who are also studying French as a third language in the UAM-UCA exchange. In this exchange, English as a lingua franca is used by the participants while both English and Spanish are used by participants in the UAM-UL exchange.

After the students are partnered, they participate in an asynchronous getting-to-know-you activity by contributing a post in which they introduce themselves to their TEP partners on *Padlet*. They are instructed not to stick to ‘regular’ introductions (e.g. age, hometown, hobbies) but encouraged to include photos, interesting facts about themselves, a description of their personality, or to share their favourite place/book/film/joke. They are also asked to share some information about their degree programme and their experience of the University semester so far. This allows each student to search for their partner and read their introduction before they meet for the first time. After this activity, the students must arrange a date and time with their partner in order to carry out the first task. During the TEP, each dyad carries out three 20-minute tasks via videoconferencing which take place outside the face-to-face lessons.

This is the minimum time required and some students have been known to have conversations with their partner of up to an hour. As mentioned above, to align with the different course content at the three institutions, the topics of technology and social media, employment and qualifications, and tourism are discussed in the UAM-UCA exchange, while the UAM-UL exchange explores cinema, books, and music instead of employment. In order to gather students' data for assessment and research purposes, a consent form was designed so that ethical considerations and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) compliance is ensured at all times. After the students sign these forms, they are asked to record the screencasts of their interactions. Students that use *Skype* for their exchanges generally use *Skype*'s built-in video recorder to generate the screencasts or rely on free trial versions of recording software such as *Camtasia* and *Evaer*. Students who use *Zoom* benefit from the built-in recording function.

In order to prepare the discussions, the partner teachers provide prompting questions on the selected topics (see [supplementary materials, Appendix 1](#)). For the bilingual exchanges, students are encouraged to speak half the time in one language and then switch to the other language.

The connection between the online synchronous interactions and the face-to-face sessions differs depending on the institution. For example, at UAM, a focus is placed on activities that help prepare students for the interactions with reference to the thematic content and topic-related vocabulary. In addition to language and vocabulary development, the students also analyse their recordings individually, looking for improvements in their communicative skills following a grid provided by the teacher. At UCA, the students also evaluate their language level by, for example, identifying examples of complex structures, phrasal verbs, or idiomatic expressions they used as well as words or phrases they used inappropriately. At UL, the topics discussed in the exchanges are practised in the face-to-face lab lessons focusing on developing aural skills through listening exercises. Face-to-face sessions at all institutions are used to debrief on the interactions and any linguistic and/or intercultural observations as well as any technical or organisational difficulties.

Prior to the final partner interaction, a mediated session run by E+VE facilitators is conducted in larger groups (15 students) via *Zoom* with students from the three institutions. For the UAM-UCA exchange, the sessions are conducted in English, while for the UAM-UL exchange bilingual sessions in English and Spanish are organised. The partner teachers decided that it would be beneficial for the students to explore cultural identity issues during this session, and suggested they could base their discussion on the 2014 TED talk by Taiye [Selasi \(2017\)](#), ‘Don’t ask me where I’m from, ask me where I’m a local’.

4. Assessment, evaluation, and recognition of the exchange

As already mentioned, each institution’s language course is hybridised to allow full integration of the TEP within the learning objectives and summative evaluation components as well as recognition via ECTS credits.

To assess the students, the three partner teachers have aligned their summative evaluations so that all students have similar tasks as well as specific grade weights attached to them, in the hope of encouraging engagement in the TEP (see [Table 2](#)).

Table 2. Course assessment for each of the institutions

	UAM	UCA	UL
Number of ECTS credits	50% component of a 6 credit module	50% component of a 3 credit module	25% component of a 6 credit module
Screencast of best interaction	40%	40%	50%
Video self-assessment and feedback on exchange	30%	20%	50%
Other	30% topic-related vocabulary for in-class discussion	40% self-assessment task based on screen casts of interactions	n/a

As regards the tasks, all students are required to submit the screencast of their best interaction (or the two best) and the five-minute self-assessment video elaborating on different aspects of the TEP and on what they have learnt with their partners. A list of prompts is provided to guide the students, e.g. *In what ways do you think this project has helped you to learn Spanish/English and to interact in Spanish/English; In what way do you think this project has helped you to develop intercultural skills?; Out of the different tasks, which task did you enjoy and why?; Which task did you not enjoy and why?* (see [supplementary materials, Appendix 2](#) for the complete list of prompt questions).

The E+VE coordinators also ask students for feedback on the TEP through a post-exchange questionnaire. Although only 29 out of 90 participants responded and therefore the sample is not representative, the feedback was highly positive with the vast majority of students agreeing that they would be interested in having further opportunities to engage in virtual exchange in the future.

Regarding the primary aim of the TEP to develop L2 speaking and interaction skills, 24 out of 29 students agreed or strongly agreed that the TEP had helped them improve their foreign language skills and 23 out of 29 students felt the exchange had helped them develop skills to communicate in a culturally diverse setting. Concerning the secondary aim, the development of intercultural skills to better prepare students for physical mobility, 27 out of 29 students described what they had learnt about people from other cultures as positive or very positive; 28 out of 29 students felt that they had developed knowledge about the relationship between and across different societies; and 26 out of 29 students expressed that the TEP had increased their interest in taking part in an educational programme abroad. Although the questionnaire results offer only a partial view of the TEP, and the data is self-declarative, this initial feedback is certainly encouraging.

For future iterations, we are considering asking students to complete this questionnaire in-class and also making its completion a prerequisite to be awarded the E+VE Open Digital Badge. Students are currently awarded this if they submit all three interaction tasks and participate in the mediated session.

While being actively involved in TEPs within their courses, all three partner teachers are also advocating for recognition within their institutions of VE as an innovative and effective learning approach. Such an approach should become fully integrated into the institutions' curricula as a fully recognised educational practice rather than a voluntary activity based on the goodwill and enthusiasm of a few motivated practitioners. In order to contribute to this goal, the following initiatives have been taken.

At UAM, TEP implementation as an innovative pedagogy that facilitates virtual mobility has recently been integrated in *CIVIS* (<https://civis.eu/en>), an alliance of eight European universities⁵ labelled Erasmus+ by the European Commission in 2019. This European Civic University brings together a community of over 384,000 students and 55,000 staff members, including 30,000 academics and researchers. On a national level, UAM secured funding for a three-year National Research Agency project to analyse and assess the effects that integrating virtual exchange as an innovative teaching method has on the development of key competences for lifelong learning and employability of students in English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) classrooms. Data from the TEP will be explored within the *VELCOME* research project (Oskoz & Vinagre, 2020; Vinagre & Corral, 2019), which engages over 20 researchers in five countries.

At UCA, as of September 2020, the TEP will form part of the University-wide innovative pedagogy project (*Skills linked to Internationalisation at Home*) alongside the CLAVIER project (MacKinnon, Ensor, Kleban, & Trégoat, 2020 this volume). The project, in which the International Office is a partner, will examine the skills students develop during projects that promote 'Internalisation at Home', defined as "the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments" (Beelen & Jones, 2015, p. 69). The aim is to promote and better highlight these skills, which are currently not clearly visible, for UCA's 2021-2025 skills-based degree programme.

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At UL, the implementation of VEs in teaching practices occurs mainly within the School of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics, where several initiatives have been launched in the last few years (Batardière et al., 2019; Giralt, 2020 this volume; Giralt & Jeanneau, 2016). At the same time, the International Office Division provides support to all these initiatives and it is envisaging the expansion of VEs across the university as a means to prepare students for their mobility programme.

On these grounds, positioning our telecollaboration practices as a TEP within the E+VE initiative has been instrumental in helping us to gain recognition within our own institutions and we hope it will help us to develop links with partners working in similar initiatives within our own institutions as well as upscale our practices.

5. Lessons learnt and conclusion

Since the start of the TEP among the three universities, a very positive and encouraging response has been received from the students. It is essential that the VEs are integrated in the curriculum and that participation in the TEPs translates into credits awarded and external recognition, in this case, digital badges recognised by the European Commission. For our TEP, we would also like to better promote the award of these open badges. For example, at UCA, the students in the third semester have a teaching unit on writing CVs, which includes the Europass CV. Links with this course's teacher could be established in order to include the addition of open badges to the CV as part of the course aims.

With hindsight, for future TEPs we may consider subdividing the students into smaller groups and creating online notice boards or forums for each group to facilitate access to their partners' background information. This could be achieved, for example, by organising students into the groups in which they will later meet for the mediated session, or adding another facilitated session at the beginning of the project, thus allowing students not only to get to know their partner but also the other students in the group.

Overall, as practitioners we are very satisfied with the TEP and our students also appreciate the effort since, in addition to the positive findings mentioned above, they reported an increase in self-confidence and self-reliance when communicating in the foreign language.

6. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/e3t9gkwp16nirvuux4ugh9nfy5yz2xtq>

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