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Transilvania
din Brașov

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Faculty of Letters

Ph.D. Candidate

Gabriela TUTUNEA

THE ROLE AND POTENTIAL OF VIRTUAL EXCHANGE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE. THE CASE OF PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN ROMANIA

SUMMARY

Doctoral supervisor

Prof. Marinela BURADA, Ph.D.

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The topic of this thesis falls at the intersection between communication and technology. Online international projects are the contexts in which they both complement and depend on each other: participants from different cultural backgrounds interact and collaborate through the use of technology. In order to interact they need Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) and their collaboration is most often carried out in the virtual space. Such collaborations over the internet between partners of different cultures and within the setting of educational institutions shape Virtual Exchange (VE). The main concern of the thesis is the relationship between ICC and VE. In this respect a statistical approach has been adopted that allows for measuring both the role (with the correlation analysis) and the potential (with the regression analysis) of VE in the development of ICC.

The subject of this research is relevant in the context of Romanian education. The methodology for conferring the title of (National) College pre-university education institutions in Romania requires the "[i]mplementation of at least one project with external funding relevant to the development of the educational unit, in the last 5 years" (link 1 in Selected Bibliography).

Before 2019 distance working was just an alternative modus operandi for companies and the educational system. During the Covid-19 pandemic it became the only option, as the majority of activities switched to the online mode. For instance, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (cf. NCES, 2019), in 2017 only 13% of the university students in the United States took up distance learning courses exclusively; in 2020, because of Covid-19 lockdown, online learning was the only way to keep education going. In this context, many resources were created in order to support distance learning. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (cf. OECD, 2020) reports a larger use of online learning platforms, at all levels.

It should be pointed out, however, that while VE includes online learning activities, its scope is significantly wider. The aim of VE is to provide intercultural experience to as many people as possible (cf. European Commission, 2020). Therefore, VE activities focus on

interaction through dialogue between students with different cultural backgrounds. The success of a VE experience has been linked to the co-existence of the concurrent factors relating to curricula, task selection and design, performance assessment, and cultural and linguistic guidance provided by the teacher (cf. O'Dowd, 2013), subject detailed in Chapter 1.

Study Abroad (SA) is a well established educational programme that allows students to live and study in another country. In addition to knowledge and skills in different disciplines, students gain intercultural experience and improve their foreign language skills. Obviously, not many students have access to SA programmes, mainly because of the costs involved. Moreover, research into the impact of SA highlighted situations in which students involved in SA programmes interacted in a minimal way with representatives of the host culture, without developing, as a result, any kind of relationship.

While O'Dowd (2021) views VE and SA as two educational programmes that supplement each other, and should therefore not be compared, VE can arguably be considered an alternative to SA programmes, due to its "*purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students*" (cf. O'Dowd, 2017, p.8). Indeed, while a SA programme does not specifically aim at fostering the dialogue between students originating from different cultures (cf. European Commission 2020), VE come with the added advantage of providing students with international experience, allowing them to "*broaden their horizons or experience other cultures, improve their labour-market prospects and improve their competence in English*" (cf. Schleicher, 2020, p.10). More than just an alternative, VE was the only way to supply students with international exposure, given the travel restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, equally important, learning through VE helps avert the culture shock that international students may incur in the course of/as a result of a SA experience (more on this subject in Chapter 2).

In a multicultural project students can interact with peers from many cultures, and for longer periods of time. In 1994 Straus and McGrath observe that virtual teams work better in tasks that involve a low level of coordination, while face-to-face groups perform better in jobs that require a high level of coordination. A subsection of this chapter addresses the benefits and limitations of learning with VE, and another one tackles the assessment of collaborative working.

VE has become part of education, and, as a result, it targets not only the cognitive aspect, but also the physical, moral and emotional ones. For instance, referring to the goals of the American public school system, in 2006 Rothstein and Jacobsen listed the development of academic skills (including, besides the active and the passive skills, science, maths, and history), arts and literature education, higher and lower order critical skills, social and ethical skills, physical and emotional health education and, quite importantly, communication skills and intercultural cooperation abilities.

In Europe, according to the framework developed by the European Commission, the educational goals relate to reading, mathematics and science, creativity, innovation, social cohesion, equity, active citizenship, lifelong learning and mobility, and entrepreneurship. It becomes obvious, then, that as in 2014 Lindner and Méndez Garcia (p. 226-227) noted, both the American and European school systems are geared towards "*developing intercultural competence to help citizens live together in culturally diverse societies*".

VE emerged in 1988 in the field of diplomacy, when the American organisation iEARN started to connect college-aged people from U.S. and Europe in online activities. Gradually, this practice made its way into formal education. Among the first reporting experiences of VE, in 1991 Tella described the way in which eMail communication can be customised for using it in FL classes. In 2020, the European Commission gave details of the rise of VE as an alternative to SA programmes within the field of educational studies. Later on, in 2021, having studied the Commission's documents "Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027)" and "Communication

from the Commission on achieving the European Education Area by 2025", O'Dowd presented VE as a complement to SA, a stage of initiating affiliation with a new cultural environment (p.14). Moreover, VE may be employed in situations in which homecoming international students maintain relationships initiated during a SA period in order to develop other projects. One subsection of this chapter deals with the nature of VE, and another one is dedicated to models of putting VE into practice.

In 2016 Kilian studied VE and noted that its specific goals are language learning, digital literacy and, last but not least, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), seen as an important skill to all – hard and social science – students. For this reason, Intercultural Communicative Competence makes the subject of Chapter 2 in the present work.

Many intercultural encounters happen today due to professional or personal reasons (cf. Hofstede *et al*., 2010). Engaging in an intercultural encounter clearly necessitates a common linguistic medium. Many authors argue that it also requires sharing a culture; failing that, it has been claimed, an intercultural encounter is most likely to result in a misinterpretation of the situation, or even in conflict (cf. Rutherford, 1990). However, some particular environments, such as sport clubs, universities, or armies, have overcome this issue by developing a culture of the group, where "*people can meet and mix as equals*" (cf. Hofstede *et al*., 2010, p.388).

Online encounters can nowadays occur more frequently than in person encounters; they require ICC as much as (if not more) than the latter because they lack the non-verbal cues. Online games and social websites are environments where many people experience intercultural encounters. The internet seems to be more a social thing than a technological item (cf. Berners-Lee, 1998). Likewise, information and communication technologies are cultural tools through which people build and maintain social and work relationships (cf. Cole, 1996). For instance, in 2008, Hanna and de Nooy analysed French forums linked to the "Le Monde" newspaper and concluded that participants developed cultural relationships in which "*neither politeness nor*

linguistic accuracy was the measure of intercultural competence, but the minimum participation in the genre of debate" (p.78). In the same spirit, online games are highly educative because "*gamers must be able to negotiate play and be socialized into culturally specific discursive formations*" (cf. Thorne, 2008, p.317).

The culture of a community is a consequence of its internal communicative processes. Therefore, communication is the precondition of a shared culture, a concept articulated on several dimensions: "*verbal and non-verbal language, attitudes, values, belief systems, disbelief systems and behaviors that is* [sic] *accepted and expected by an identity group*" (cf. Auwalu, 2015, p.3).

The concept of communication evolved in time: initially it was described as a one-way process, "*a transmission of information, ideas, emotions, skills, knowledge, by using symbols, words, pictures, figures, graphs or illustrations*" (cf. Auwalu, 2015, p.3). Later on, the focus shifted to the reciprocal nature of communication, seen as a two-way process, "*an exchange of meanings*". Nowadays, at the heart of the concept lies the reaction expected on the part of the interlocutor; in this light, communication is "*an exchange of ideas and feelings between individuals in a society, with a hope of a feedback*" (cf. Auwalu, 2015, p.3-4). In the specific case of VE, the ultimate goal of communication is maintaining the relationship between participants, by which positive feedback and satisfaction related to the encounter are implied.

The concept of intercultural communication involves interactions between people of different cultural backgrounds: "*an exchange of information on different levels of awareness and control*" (Allwood, 1985, in Auwalu, 2015:4). The discussion begins with a brief overview of the role of ICC in four different fields of human activity; its aim is to highlight the fact that ICC is not only relevant but also indispensable in professional settings nowadays; it will then go on to detail the nature of ICC.

Language competence alone is not enough to make one communicatively competent. In 1980 Canale and Swain describe communicative competence as consisting of four sub-competencies i.e., grammatical, socio-linguistic, discoursal, and strategic competencies, in order to undertake activities such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Three decades later, in 2014, Lotherington and Ronda raise awareness to the fact that nowadays' basic communicative competence includes managing digital audio and visual content, engaging in digital interactions through friending, liking, and/or sharing, and multitasking across multiple media platforms. In the same vein, in 2013, Katz and Macklin underscore the importance of digital literacy by comparing the requirements for handling information in the 21st century with those before the internet era: "*researching and communicating information via digital environments are as important as reading and writing were in earlier centuries*" (p.1).

The focus of attention in Chapter 3 is the support that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can offer to the professional side of people's lives, more precisely, to collaborative distance working. The premise of the following discussion is that a VE project primarily devised in an educational setting depends entirely on the ICT tools it relies on. The selection of the most appropriate ICT tools for a project must take into account the specific tasks of the project. Most ICT tools today are designed to offer many services; one and the same tool can be used in several processes of a virtual project (e.g., coordination of team members) and, conversely, different ICT tools can help accomplish one and the same task.

This chapter begins with a brief overview aimed at clarifying what ICT involves; this clarification is necessary, since the technological support and functionalities offered represent the main criteria of categorisation for ICT tools. It goes on to survey a collection of frameworks devised over time that are particularly relevant for the present research because they associate the tasks with the available technology. The chapter concludes with a discussion of what ICT skills involve, and why they are important in the selection of the ICT tools for a virtual project.

ICT is considered the crucial breakthrough of the 1990s due to the advent of the internet (cf. Kauffmann and Carmi, 2014). It should be noted that the term ICT refers to both the equipment and the software that allow access to information by way of communication. The wide range of applications that ICT has influences every major aspect of our life, such as, defence agencies, monitoring industry, banking, media, surveillance, education, organisational management, business, government, electronic recording of patients or socialising. In 2006 Hiltz *et al.* quote political campaigns and e-commerce as examples of activities that are largely dependent on ICT tools. Remote working in multinational companies, online banking or virtual socialising have already been fashionable in the society of the 21st century, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, during the COVID-19 lockdown, telecommuting became the only way to continue working in most of the domains.

Trying to get to the roots of collaborative tools, in 2008, Kock lists the telegraph, introduced in the mid 1800s, and the telephone, implemented in the 1870s, as the first tools employed in electronic collaboration. The eMail, devised in the 1960s, is considered the first remote collaboration tool. Decades later, it is regarded as the most popular collaboration tool (cf. Kock, 2008).

Different tasks need different ICT tools in order to work properly (cf. DeSanctis and Gallupe, 1987). Therefore, the selection of ICT tools for a VE project requires a preliminary assessment of the tasks. The ICT tools only serve to implement the tasks: "[t]*he most relevant aspect to* [t]*elecollaboration is the design of the activity, not the tool itself*" (cf. Dooly, 2007, p.219). Nevertheless, the author recommends integrating as many tools as possible in the design of a VE project.

But besides computer mediated communication, a crucial role in the development of successful VE projects is played by the strategies that guide the interaction within the group, especially in large online groups, strategies that promote collaboration between participants (e.g.

Dooly, 2007; Hiltz *et al.*, 2006). This is all the more necessary since, as noted in the literature, the social aspect of online interaction is often left aside and the virtual workspace involves lower levels of interactivity and team spirit (cf. Blanchard, 2008). This situation is linked to the nature of the digital medium itself: as remarked in the literature (e.g., Fernandez, 2008) technology-mediated communication makes people act more pragmatically, that is, more focused on the task, and less on the social context. In order to overcome this drawback, a VE project must incorporate either field trips or get-together tasks in its design.

Besides the strategies, hardware is also important. Some pieces of technology are particularly designed to enhance interaction between people. A research conducted by Usluel and Mazman in 2009 highlighted the benefits of blogs, wikis, podcasts, and social networks for distance learning. Chat has also been found to increase social presence which, in turn, leads to increased motivation (cf. Pritchard and Woollard, 2010). However, it has been argued that the most beneficial ICT tools in an exchange project are the ones that the participants are most familiar with (cf. Blanchard, 2008).

The British Educational Communications and Technology Agency investigated the outcomes of working with ICT in several subjects in schools (cf. Torgerson and Zhu). They compared pupils that were trained with and without the help of ICT. ICT-assisted learning led to improvements in spelling, the quality of writing, vocabulary development; no notable difference was found in reading-comprehension, while the level of mathematics declined (p.35-56). Overall, the experiment showed that investing in ICT was a good decision.

With regard to the use of large multi-touch tables in support of collaborative interactions, in 2014 Mercier and Higgins conducted a study on 24 groups of students; they received a mathematics problem to solve collaboratively. The task was designed so that it required collaboration, being too complex for a single student. From 12 out of 24 groups who used the tables to sketch their judgement, only 4 groups who used the table failed to solve the problem.

The authors concluded that multi-touch tables have the potential to enhance group processes: "*the use of this technology was associated with higher levels of task-focused talk, more interactive discussion and more joint interactions when compared with groups using paper, single-touch tables or traditional personal computers*" (p.508).

A virtual team makes "*fast*[er] *time-to-market, low-cost and rapid solution*" to managerial problems (cf. Ale Ebrahim *et al.*, 2009, p.2653); virtual work has been proved to "*pool the talents and expertise of employees and non-employees*" in order to increase the organisation's results (p.2653). For instance, the online groups were found to be more creative than the face-to-face groups (cf. Hiltz *et al*., 2006) also report better performances of larger (12 members) online problem-solving groups in terms of quality of decisions measured in the amount of ideas, distinct ideas, and distinct ideas per person. Moreover, the virtual workspace was found to be characterised more by cooperation (cf. Wicking *et al.*, 2021), in contrast to the traditional workspace, which consists more of competition (cf. Fernandez, 2008, 121).

Online communication bestows both advantages and limitations. In 2008 Switzer and Hartman sum up drawbacks of synchronous encounters as follows: diversion created by irrelevant issues, time and focus monopolisation of the dominant personality members, discouraging creative ideas through aggression and because of the fear of revenge, untimely closing of the meeting in order to avoid conflicts, an incomplete or subjective record of the meeting. On the other hand, in 2009 Ale Ebrahim *et al.* review the following issues to be addressed in asynchronous communication: trust, effective communication, team cohesiveness, predictability and reliability, social interaction, lack of face-to-face intermingling, and motivation – which varies according to the team members' orientation. Moreover, the authors also suggest important aspects to be taken into account when working in a virtual team: (1) regular and timely communication, (2) feedback aimed at building trust and commitment, (3) communication directed towards the social dimension, (4) team members that complement each

other, (5) working out cultural differences, (6) members that perform as experts, using their own initiative and resources, (7) promoting the participants' ability to change and adapt, (8) minimisation of the hierarchical structure, (9) understanding, sensitiveness towards the other members of the team, (10) appreciation of their viewpoints and suggestions, and (11) clarity of roles and responsibilities within the VE project.

Virtual connectedness brings about flaws in communication. In 2008 DeLuca *et al.* surveyed the research conducted on the way team members try to adjust their communication practices in order to counterbalance the shortcomings of the media; they found the following adaptations put in use in virtual communication: (1) in cases of remote communication, interactivity problems can be overcome via clearer and more complex messages; (2) limitations, like the lack of language variety and/or non-verbal cues, can be remedied by means of more focused, complex, and neutral messages, and (3) adaptiveness-related issues can be countered via more concise, precise, and persuasive messages.

The discussion so far has hopefully positioned ICT as a connecting link, conceptually, between ICC and VE: in the context of VE projects, the acqusition and development of ICC depends on the quantity and quality of the virtual/electronic tools (hardware and software) involved. The extent of their importance and their impact on the social aspects of communication and collaboration are issues still under debate in the literature.

The key premise in the discussion relates to the capability of ICT tools to allow a dispersed team to carry out its activities as if it were a face-to-face team (cf. Ale Ebrahim *et al.*, 2009). For example, among the most popular tools employed by virtual teams are the listing and voting tools – used mainly in brainstorming, analysis and evaluation, as well as meeting tools (cf. Hiltz *et al.*, 2006). The ICT tools that are proved to be very effective in a team that works exclusively in the virtual mode are the hosting platforms devised for sharing knowledge and/or

expertise (cf. Akgün *et al.*, 2008); among these tools is the eTwinning platform, discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

In this paper I am only interested in determining, in hindsight, the role of ICT tools in support of virtual projects. Chapter 3 has hopefully established that ICT is essential for remote communication, in various areas of interest. But how important has ICT been in the development of the eTwinning projects under analysis here? Is Hockly (2014) right in saying that it is not the technology, but the tasks that determine the success of a VE project? These aspects are the main concern in the Chapter 4.

Grounded on the theoretical platform deployed in Chapters 1, 2, and 3, this chapter reports on the analyses of eTwinning projects. Aimed ultimately at determining the relationship between VE and ICC – the objective of the present research – the analyses in question required a preliminary identification of the three key elements, VE, ICC, and ICT, in each of the 62 projects in my corpus.

Chapter 4 begins with a description, of the data collection criteria and the resulting corpus. The analytical framework is further described; it consists of 5 features that make up ICC and 17 task types designed for the VE mode. Since in many eTwinning projects the features of ICC were either mislabelled or absent, the theoretical platform created in Chapter 2, helped correct or identify them.

Using IBM SPSS 23 and C++, the statistical computation has provided a synopsis of (1a) the role played by VE in the development of ICC by means of the Pearson correlation analysis and (2a) the potential that VE holds in developing ICC, with the help of linear regression analysis. This section also includes an in-depth analysis of (1b) the role of every VE task in de development of each of the 5 ICC components with the Spearman correlation analysis and (2b) the potential of VE in the development of each of the 5 ICC components, determined by means

of the logistic regression analysis. Further, the effect of every VE task on ICC has been computed via logistic regression analyses.

The regression analysis allowed me to forecast what ICC-related aims would benefit most, starting from the VE tasks. Conversely, starting from a pre-defined set of ICC-related aims, regression allows determining the optimal VE tasks that would support them. The two regression formulae used have been validated by matching the computed values with the aims/tasks announced in each project.

The results derived from the Romanian corpus indicated that, indeed, VE promotes the acquisition and development of ICC. This is in line with the empirical data reported in the specialist literature. Based on the eTwinning projects under analysis, the results indicate that, overall, VE has a moderate impact on the development of ICC (with a correlation coefficient of 0.36). The breakdown of data has revealed variations (from low to medium) in the impact that each of the 17 VE task types has on the development of each of the 5 ICC components.

Three limitations of this study should be mentioned, however. The first relates to data collection. The eTwinning platform that I investigated (from 2006 to 2020) allowed eTwinners to publicise their VE activities only partially, or not at all. On the new eTwinning platform (released in July 2022) all the activities are hidden by default.

The second limitation lies in the interpretation of the statistical data. It will be remembered that statistics only determines the general trend, not an accurate result. This is why the present research serves as a guideline, not a recipe for mapping tasks and aims, as far as ICC is concerned. In other words, the results reported here have been validated by more than half of the projects in my corpus, but not by all. Specifically, the lowest overall percentage of correct classification (agreement between what was announced to be done in the project and what was obtained through calculations that can be achieved) is 56.5 and the highest, 96.8.

The third limitation relates to the use of the formulae: mapping the tasks to the objectives should take into account the results of both correlation and regression computations. I recommend combining VE tasks with ICC-related objectives that yield positive correlation coefficients. Failure to do this may lead to unexpected regression results, which, in turn, invalidates the prediction.

With all its limitations, this research hopefully makes a contribution in the sense that it is relevant to teachers and educational project designers, particularly those with little experience in project design. Although ICC is an indispensable part of *every* collaborative international project, teachers are still largely unaware of what, exactly, it involves and how it can be fostered in their learners. The present research proposes a guideline and a user-friendly tool that facilitates the most suitable match between aims and tasks, with a positive effect on the learning outcomes. As demonstrated in Appendix 3, this tool allows the teacher to choose the VE tasks starting only from the intended ICC-related aims, and conversely, starting from a number of VE tasks, the project setter can determine the ICC components that can be developed by using them.

The present research relies only on Romanian data collected from eTwinning projects. However, it opens the way for replication studies by either expanding the Romanian corpus, or by including data collected from international projects developed in other cultural contexts.

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