

## Guest Editorial Preface

# Special Issue on Virtual Exchange: Language Learning and Teaching in an Age of Complexity – Selected Papers From AILA 2021

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This Special Issue draws from papers on Virtual Exchange (VE) or Telecollaboration or Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) presented at the AILA congress 2021, with the theme ‘The dynamics of language, communication and culture in a changing world’. AILA 2021 was hosted virtually by the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. One of the strands in the conference was the theme of VE/Telecollaboration or COIL. This Special Issue focuses on this topic and includes papers delivered at two VE-based symposia. The first symposium (S083) was called *Language Teacher Education, Intercultural Communicative Competence and the ‘Web 4.0’: Scaling Up with Virtual Exchange*. The second symposium (S190) was called *Virtual Exchange: affordances and challenges*.

The definition of VE provided by the EVOLVE consortium (<https://evolve-erasmus.eu/about-evolve/what-is-virtual-exchange/>) is quoted by the authors in this collection: i.e.:

Virtual Exchange (VE) is a practice, supported by research, that consists of sustained, technology-enabled, people-to-people education programmes or activities in which constructive communication and interaction takes place between individuals or groups who are geographically separated and/or from different cultural backgrounds, with the support of educators or facilitators. Virtual Exchange combines the deep impact of intercultural dialogue and exchange with the broad reach of digital technology.

There are five symposia contributions in this Special Issue: four of these report empirical findings from VE-based projects covering a range of disciplines (e.g., psychology, biology, robotics) and socio-institutional contexts in different geographical areas (e.g., Asia, Europe, North and South America), while one sets the stage (Dooly’s). Dooly’s position paper foregrounds the intercultural, interactional, and technological demands and challenges which teachers and learners in VE contexts alike are faced with, especially against the backdrop of the global pandemic and the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Dooly also posits that VE could be seen as a novel methodology in language teacher education. The four other contributions in this Special Issue each speak to these challenges, while also stressing the many affordances of an interdisciplinary approach to VE for fostering intercultural competence (Fildokic, Oggel & Pascual Aibar, Fernández Peraza & Furumura), internationalization (Biondo Salomão), and innovation in teacher education VE-MOOC (Massive Open Online Course)-blends (Cerveró-Carrascosa).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century globalized world, learners and teachers need to possess digital and technological competencies in addition to a range of soft skills (critical thinking, empathy, social engagement),

as Dooly and Thorne (2018) have laid out in their White Paper “Knowledge for Networked-Based Education, Cognition, and Teaching.” Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) plays a key role in acquiring ‘techno-collaborative’ skills, ‘techno-social’ skills, ‘techno-ethic’ awareness and in developing ‘techno-creativity’ (Dooly & Thorne, 2018) - some of the key skills required for an increasingly interconnected world. In a similar vein, Develotte et al. (2010) argued over a decade ago that semio-pedagogical skills, which they define as “the capacity to mediate a pedagogical interaction by combining or dissociating modalities (written, oral, and/or video) that are adapted to objectives and to the cognitive requisites of the task” (p. 293), are critical for future teachers’ professional repertoire to allow them to exploit the multimodal affordances of online communication in teaching. By the same token, humans need to be able to evaluate and respond to a constant flow of data, work with an array of technological tools, and create, communicate, and collaborate with fellow humans (Aoun, 2017) – often across different cultures, media, and time zones. As Dooly notes in her position paper in this volume, AI enables an increasing interaction between human- and non-human agents, which means that educators and learners alike need to be cognitively flexible, resilient, and tolerant of ambiguity to fully embrace VE environments. This begs the question of how telecollaborative teacher education can adapt to the relationship between humans and machines (Web 4.0), while supporting the development of both teachers’ and students’ autonomous approaches to language education and

Moreover, there have been calls for a fuller integration of innovative VE practices into language teacher education to help (language) student teachers acquire the many competences that successful VE teachers need to possess, such as pedagogical, organizational, and digital competences (O’Dowd, 2015). One way to achieve this is through modeling innovative and purposeful approaches (e.g., Fuchs et al., 2017; Sadler & Dooly, 2016; Stickler et al., 2020). The overall goal is to encourage future (language) teachers to incorporate VE into their own classrooms (e.g., Marjanovic, Dooly, & Sadler, 2021; Sadler & Dooly, 2016) - and to do this in a way that is “meaningful and engaging for the learners” (Dooly & Vinagre (2021, n.p.). For instance, Cerveró-Carrascosa’s article, drawing on Orsini et al. (2018), illustrates how reflective and process-oriented telecollaborative approaches in teacher education can foster novel perspectives on ICC in language teaching and learning, by blending MOOCs and VE.

- 1) In her position paper “Virtual Exchange: Language Learning and Teaching in an Age of Complexity,” Melinda Dooly points out that the challenges of emergency remote teaching owed to the pandemic are not unfamiliar to Virtual Exchange (VE) practitioners, especially given the long history of distance education. This point in time thus warrants a close analysis and reflection of current VE approaches and practices, according to Dooly, especially with regard to inclusivity. To this end, she examines the advances of VE and associated practices as forced by the rapid evolution of technology and its associated literacies. Two central points are the development of Intercultural Competence (IC) and interdisciplinary through VE, which are also reflected in the contributions of this Special Issue. Dooly discusses both points against the backdrop of the increasing interaction between human- and non-human agents enabled by Artificial Intelligence (AI) and points out that educators and learners alike need to be cognitively flexible, resilient, and tolerant of ambiguity to fully embrace VE environments. Finally, she puts forth an overdue call for encouraging teachers in primary and secondary education to conduct research and publish their experiences because they tend to be among the most numerous practitioners of VE. It is our hope that publication venues can offer dissemination opportunities for this population and beyond.
- 2) Ana Vivian Fernández Peraza and Yumiko Furumura’s study is an important contribution for promoting intercultural competence, intercultural citizenship, and competences for democratic culture in different socio-institutional contexts. Drawing on Byram’s notions of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and intercultural citizenship, and on the Council of Europe’s Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, the authors implement project-based learning in a virtual exchange between undergraduate English as a Foreign Language learners at a private university in central Costa Rica and a public university in the southwest of Japan. In order to explore participants’ development of competences for participation in

democratic culture and intercultural dialogue, the author's study employs a mixed-method approach through pre- and post-questionnaires as well as qualitative analysis of student reflections. The self-reported questionnaire data was analyzed using a paired t-test. The authors found the highest significant differences in the categories linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills, tolerance of ambiguity, and knowledge and critical understanding of the world. The authors found evidence of participants communicating efficiently and effectively when completing collaborative tasks. The qualitative data demonstrated evidence of improvement and growing awareness with regard to the development of linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills. These results were matched by participants' development of awareness of the necessary competences for participation in intercultural dialogue and democratic culture. The latter was reflected in learners' ability to value cultural diversity, their gained knowledge and understanding of their own and the other culture, and their confidence in interacting with the other culture.

Similarly the study by Mirjana Fildokic, Gerdientje Oggel and Cristina Pascual Aibar explores the development of undergraduate students' intercultural awareness, competence, and communicative competence through offering them a forum for shared experiences against the backdrop of the pandemic, and its impact on the changes in the way people act, live, and work. Specifically, in their study, they analyze an undergraduate virtual exchange between BA Social Psychology students at a large public research institution in Eastern Spain and students from different BAs enrolled in Spanish proficiency courses at large public research university in the north of the Netherlands. Data collection instruments included pre- and post-surveys and reflective portfolios. Participants expressed their preference for the virtual exchange. They reported being actively involved and engaged in because it offered them the opportunity to communicate in the target language and to establish cross-cultural personal relationships with others in an informal way. This resulted in participants becoming interculturally more aware and in learning how to adapt communicatively and culturally in their interactions with others. Likewise, participants reported improvement of their communicative competence in the target language, especially with regard to fluency and their ability to understand authentic language on social issues like the pandemic. These findings stress the potential of VE for cross-disciplinary collaborations.

A related study by Ana Cristina Biondo Salomão highlights the increasing importance of VE during the pandemic due to the limited mobility, and calls for a theoretical framework for VE as an interdisciplinary field and as a strategy of internationalization at home for HEIs. This would serve the purpose to train professors in designing and implementing activities that involve foreign language communication. According to the author, the large-scale project Brazilian Virtual Exchange (BRaVE) strives to use VE as an institutional strategy for internationalizing the curriculum by providing students with the opportunity to compare global and local perspectives, and by making use of active methodologies and digital tools to expand access to international experiences. Her study presents findings on strategies used by non-language specialist professors for facilitating communication in a foreign language in VE within BRaVE. Data collection and analysis focus on an analysis of participants' reflections. Results demonstrate that the strategies comprised informing foreign language proficiency as a prerequisite for the course, providing input and conducting the interaction among students, using nonverbal elements to scaffold the negotiation of meanings, organizing group work with more proficient students as leaders, and using automatic translators to aid communication. Salomão points out the importance of the role of the pedagogical coordinator in this process (see also Fuchs et al., 2017, on the role of the telecollaborative mediator in contextualizing a VE). She concludes that teacher training for VE needs to draw on the field of applied linguistics to shed light on the elements to consider for developing strategies for foreign language use and communication, and to raise awareness of professors' and students' own beliefs about language and communication, and how they affect the planning and implementation of collaborative work. She further stresses the need to sensitize students to the communicative struggles that native and non-native speakers alike experience.

In another teacher education project, Abraham Cerveró-Carrascosa takes the innovative approach of blending Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and VE. Specifically, he reports on the impact of the ‘Blending MOOCs into English Language Teaching Education with Telecollaboration’ (BMELTET) project, in which EFL pre-service teachers at a public research university in Spain collaborated with counterparts in the UK and China. Data collection involved surveys, and a focus group and personal interviews on how participants’ experiences in ‘Blending MOOCs into English Language Teacher Education with Telecollaboration’ (BMELTET) and the influence on their in-class professional practice. The analysis focuses on students teachers’ perceptions in Spain on the development of the ELT (English Language Teaching) specific competences. Results suggest that participants in BMELTET appreciated the opportunity to participate in a VE. They also reported having developed specific competences such as planning Content-and Language-Integrated Learning (CLIL) projects (a mandatory topic in their teacher education context), teaching English for primary education, and putting their language skills into practice. Furthermore, some participants, when in service, were able to transfer their newly gained knowledge to eTwinning and Erasmus projects, and highlighted their perceived improvements in their own intercultural communicative competence (ICC) as well as their ability to teach ICC.

In view of the pieces included here, it could be argued, in agreement with Dooly, that VE is not just a practice, but a (relatively) new way of approaching language teacher education and second language teaching and learning. A postmodern approach to teacher education that fits well with Kumaravadivelu’s (2012) post-method principles of particularity (situational understanding of the teaching context), practicality (autonomous approach to theory and practice with teachers as agents of their own theorization from their own practice) and possibility (awareness of the socio-cultural factors affecting teachers’ circumstances and their ability to be/become agents of change). Evidence is beginning to emerge (e.g. Orsini-Jones, Cerveró-Carrascosa & Finardi, 2022) that would appear to support the view that VE is also a fertile and decolonized Third Space (Bhabha & Rutherford, 2006), a transformative - and often challenging - experience in teacher education and second language learning and teaching, that can help all participants with acquiring new competences and rethink their beliefs and worldview.

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## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors of this publication declare there is no conflict of interest.

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