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Original article

Sustainable Higher Education via Telecollaboration: Improving Plurilingual and Pluricultural Competence

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Abstract

Introduction. Due to globalisation, the modern workforce is significantly diversified. Therefore, there is a need to modernise and embrace innovation in 21st-century education to prepare international professionals to work in cross-cultural teams via digital platforms. While research in the recent past has primarily focused on the refinement of future expert competences in tertiary education, only a handful of studies have been done to establish how plurilingual and pluricultural competence can be digitally developed at the inter-university level. In this light, this study sought to bridge this gap in the research on the sustainable cooperation model.

Materials and Methods. The design for the methodological plan of integrating plurilingualism and pluriculturalism in university teaching was premised on the need to promote networking among students from different universities and countries. Its major stages based on the Collaborative Online International Learning approach included three stages: find a partner, prepare the project and carry out the project. A virtual exchange experiment across two institutions of higher learning in Spain and Finland helped analyse plurilingual and pluricultural competence achievement by means of questionnaires.

Results. A special Collaborative Online International Learning approach used to explore plurilingual and pluricultural competence and the effectiveness of online-assisted language interaction, teamwork or intercultural cooperation. The study's findings confirmed that plurilingual and pluricultural competence among students could also be developed using virtual cooperation, thus supporting cost-effective options of sustainable university training.

Discussion and Conclusion. The project had a positive impact on reaching sustainable education goals by highlighting intercultural interaction prospects. Besides, it displays real challenges such as different schedules, grading systems, timing, motivation or virtual interaction among learners and ways of overcoming them. Regardless of the fundamental idea of formative exploration, our study presents some findings that lecturers, language training practitioners and policymakers willing to apply telecollaboration will be deserving of thought.

Keywords: sustainable education, plurilingual and pluricultural competence, English as a Foreign Language, second language acquisition, cultural awareness, Collaborative Online International Learning

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Научная статья

Устойчивое высшее образование посредством телеколлаборации: повышение плюрилингвальной и плюрикультурной компетенций

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Аннотация

Введение. Данное исследование направлено на изучение плюрилингвальной и плюрикультурной компетенций в рамках процессов модернизации современного высшего образования. Следует особо выделить проблематику подготовки будущих специалистов к тесному онлайн-сотрудничеству на устойчивой основе, которую изучает данный проект. Цель статьи – представить результаты исследования по телеколлаборации студентов двух вузов из разных стран и предложить актуализированную модель межвузовского компетентностно-ориентированного подхода.

Материалы и методы. Разработка методического плана интеграции плюрилингвизма и плюрикультурализма в университетское преподавание исходила из необходимости развития онлайн-взаимодействия между студентами из разных университетов и стран. Его основные этапы, основанные на подходе Collaborative Online International Learning, включали три стадии: поиск вуза-партнера, подготовка и реализация проекта. Эксперимент по виртуальному обмену между двумя высшими учебными заведениями Испании и Финляндии помог проанализировать достижение плюрилингвальной и плюрикультурной компетенций с помощью анкетирования.

Результаты исследования. Метод Collaborative Online International Learning использовался для изучения компетенции и эффективности онлайн-коллаборации в языковом взаимодействии, командной работе или межкультурном сотрудничестве. Результаты исследования подтвердили, что плюрилингвальную и плюрикультурную компетенции у студентов можно развивать с помощью виртуального сотрудничества, поддерживая тем самым экологичный вариант устойчивого университетского обучения. Проект оказал положительное влияние на достижение целей устойчивого образования, осветив перспективы межкультурного взаимодействия, продемонстрировал реальные проблемы: расписания, системы оценок, сроки, мотивация или виртуальное взаимодействие между учащимися и способы их преодоления.

Обсуждение и заключение. Полученные результаты вносят вклад в развитие новых моделей учебно-практической работы вузов разных стран. Кроме того, описанная методика позволит преподавателям и специалистам в области языковой подготовки, желающим внедрить телеколлаборацию, найти свое уникальное направление устойчивого развития.

Ключевые слова: устойчивое образование, плюрилингвальная и плюрикультурная компетенции, английский как иностранный язык, овладение вторым языком, культурная осведомленность, Collaborative Online International Learning

Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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Introduction

Over the past two centuries, human society has faced many revolutionary advances that shape its current socio-economic situation. It was necessary to use steam power, weaving looms and overall mechanisation to initiate Industry 1.0, cross the borderline of mass production and total consumption of electrical energy during Industry 2.0 and reach complete automation based on

computers to achieve Industry 3.0. But what is next? Industry 4.0[1], related to robots, the internet of things, augmented reality, big data or cybersecurity is forging ahead, experts claim [1; 2].

Current manufacturing and business challenges will imply evolutionary changes for higher education, learning models and collaboration systems. To discuss the juncture between industry, professional preparation and university, we have to revisit the foundations of the current university organisation. The Bologna Process opened a general transformation of tertiary education – the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) – a unified system of cooperation among 48 countries aimed to offer comparable studies, academic mobility and quality education[2].

However, the essential commitments of the EHEA consider a wider range of aspects. Besides the three key priorities (three-cycle degree structure, recognition of qualifications and quality assurance), there is a need to attain learning and teaching, opening higher education, employability, internationalisation and values[3]. There should be a way to ensure quality university education based on the afore-mentioned features.

Recently and due to the widespread pandemic situation, we had to rethink sustainable development goals for quality education[4] and start implementing them in new ways[5]. Seeking a novel approach angle of inclusive higher education, we decided to energise and empower academic curricula by bringing a spotlight onto telecollaboration and cross-cultural learning. The current study covers a specific experiment, intended as an online L2 (second language) training project for international students from Spain and Finland. Rather than simply gathering students for online meetings, the investigation applied methods for competential advancement.

Referring to skills and competences, we focus on the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) that builds bridges between a 21-st century education model, industry and current social needs. At its core, sustainable development of education is located, seeking to ensure a long-term pursuit of competence-based learning in the industrial world. Now, it is essential to clarify such terms as skills and competences in the OECD context.

In the case of skills, we are dealing with abilities and capacities to convey procedures and use knowledge for accomplishing objectives. Moreover, skills are a piece of a "holistic idea of competency", including the preparation of information, abilities, perspectives and ethics to fulfil complex needs[6]. The continuous learning process allows future employees to permanently update their cognitive and metacognitive, social and emotional, physical and practical skills to reach diverse work opportunities.

The OECD also distinguishes between skill and competence, identifying the last

[1] Mclellan S. University 4.0: Is the UK Doing Enough to Prepare Students for the Fourth Industrial Revolution? April 3, 2018 [Electronic resource]. Available at: https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/uh7RSZ (accessed 20.10.2020). (In Eng.); Schwab K. The Fourth Industrial Revolution. New York: Crown Publishing Group, Division of Random House; 2017. 192 p. (In Eng.)

[2] The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999: Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education: European Ministers in charge of Higher Education. Available at: https://www.eurashe.eu/library/bologna_1999_bologna-declaration-pdf (accessed 05.09.2020). (In Eng.); Ministerial Conference in Budapest-Vienna. Budapest-Vienna Declaration on the European Higher Education Area on March 12 2010 [Electronic resource]. Available at: http://www.ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/Budapest_Vienna_Declaration_598640.pdf (accessed 05.09.2020). (In Eng.)

[3] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018. The European Higher Education Area in 2018: Bologna Process Implementation Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union [Electronic resource]. Available at: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/european-higher-education-area-2018-bologna-process-implementation-report_en (accessed 09.09.2020). (In Eng.)

[4] UNESCO. World Education Forum, Incheon Declaration. Framework for Action. Towards Inclusive and Equitable Quality. Republic of Korea: Incheon; 2015. (In Eng.)

[5] United Nations. Sustainable Development Goal 4: Targets and Indicators: dedicated webpage [Electronic resource]. New York: United Nations. Available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg4#targets (accessed 15.11.2020). (In Eng.)

[6] OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030. Conceptual Learning Framework. Concept Note: Skills for 2030 [Electronic resource]. 2019. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/teaching-and-learning/learning/skills/Skills_for_2030.pdf (accessed 18.09.2020). (In Eng.)

one as the expert performance and comprehension in a specific area. Additionally, competence combines "the interactions between disciplinary, interdisciplinary, epistemic and procedural knowledge take place in this context, helping connect and integrate different aspects of knowledge with the ability of each learner to adapt and apply what they know to a changing landscape" [7].

In other words, modern society demands dynamic learning systems where students take an active part in a responsible and sometimes autonomous training. There is an immediate need to update disciplinary, interdisciplinary, epistemic and procedural types of knowledge aligning them with skills, attitudes and values to strengthen university preparation. Supporting intercultural communication development [3] or e-learning in tertiary education has been challenging[8]. Recent approaches towards telecollaboration and L2 digital competence [4] or culturally informed L2 use [5] provide deep insights into the project-based, class-based and autonomous forms of collaboration.

Considering plurilingual and pluricultural competence to be a vital part of cross-cultural training, it is appropriate to support to new kinds of interaction that might simulate real-life contact, decision-making and cooperation in international teams. In a Spanish setting, the pandemic was not only a great national challenge healthwise but a huge opportunity to implement new digital or online assisted methods of pedagogical guidance.

For the current study, the researchers used a special Collaborative Online International Learning projects (COIL) approach, created by Jon Rubin to promote international virtual exchange programmes at higher education institutions across nations and continents. It is a cost-effective and innovative manner to create a digital learning environment for virtual travels and interaction. COIL initiatives (www.coilconsult.com) help connect classrooms of two or more universities, different faculty learners building up culturally diverse and still quite realistic forms of communication.

The COIL model does not only give relevance to learners´ thoughts and writings as they investigate and acquire knowledge but also generates secure and affordable virtual scenarios in which to build up their collaborations[9] [6]. Participating educators work closely with all students, however as a rule they are granted evaluations just at their home establishment.

Our key research goal is to extend and develop university students' plurilingual and pluricultural competence through telecollaboration. The study research questions will generally review the following aspects of online-assisted development on the plurilingual and pluricultural competence:

RQ1 What impact have university collaboration policies had on the plurilingual and pluricultural competence?

RQ2 How did Spanish and Finnish students perceive online communication experience and relate it to the development of plurilingual and plurilingual competence and motivation?

RQ3 How effective was the application of online-assisted training to meet the necessities of sustainable development goals for quality education?

The plurilingual and pluricultural competence collaborative online international learning project involved students from Spain and Finland, and, therefore, this eliminated any cultural barrier that would be present. It was easy for the students to portray their internet usage skills and share information with others embracing diversity and tolerance, thus eliminating any form of bias. The online platform allowed students to improve

[7] OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030. OECD Learning Compass 2030 [Electronic resource]. 2019. Available at: http://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/teaching-and-learning/learning/learning-compass-2030/OECD_Learning_Compass_2030_Concept_Note_Series.pdf (accessed 18.09.2020). (In Eng.)

[8] Krajka J., Marczak M. From Everyday Language to Key Competences – Teachers' Views on Developing Intercultural Competence through e-Learning. In: Górski W., Zielińska L. (eds.). E-learning in Teaching Foreign Languages at the Tertiary Level. Kraków: Foundation of the Cracow University of Economics; 2013. p. 1-13. (In Eng.)

[9] Rubin J., Guth S. Collaborative Online International Learning: An Emerging Format for Internationalizing Curricula. In: Globally Networked Teaching in the Humanities. New York: Routledge; 2015. p. 27-39. (In Eng.)

their communication skills and learn from other learners from different cultures. From the given questionnaire, we described the process of a sustainable communication system, which is crucial in language awareness and the development of language abilities. Students acquired a clear understanding of the PPC COIL in the 21st century that brings people together despite their localities, languages and culture.

To approach our study goal, we follow the classical research tradition by stating the research questions. After that, we place our investigation in context with the previous work in this area and describe the theoretical background. Then, we identify the methods and materials needed for developing our project. Next, we argue the investigation of plurilingual and pluricultural competence achievement via telecollaboration and present project results. In the end, we conclude.

Literature Review

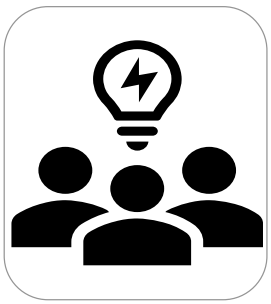
Motivated by the need for the competence-oriented development of university students, in this research we focus on plurilingual and pluricultural learning aspects. Additionally, we characterise the process of online training and telecollaboration as an essential part of instruction based on the following theoretical aspects (see Figure 1 below).

Competences in higher education. Targeting competence-based preparation through university training was widely discussed by HE practitioners[10] [7–9]. Purposely, Mulder [10] advocates for competence-based education as the type of training that empowers future professionals to access new sectors of the economy as staff members or entrepreneurs. Moreover, its positive effects on professional development and employment were highlighted in various studies conducted in several EU countries[11] [11–13].

Therefore, a variety of definitions of the term "competence" attained to the higher education is remarkable. Different researchers offer several perspectives varying according to the branch of knowledge:

– [business administration] "[entrepreneurial] competence should be viewed as learned (rather than instinctual) and as a construct that requires interpretation and understanding" [14, p. 370];

– [teacher education] "competences have the intention of closing the gap between education and labour, to bring together theory and practice and to prepare students for employability and lifelong learning; reasons which explain the attractiveness of the concept in initial training in higher education" [15, p. 1509].



Competence-oriented HE (competence-integrated system of education; capacity-building, critical thinling and applied skills)

Plurilingual and pluricultural competence (plurilingual value of training; intercultural communication for enhancing self-confidence and learning skills)

Social learning via internet (internet communication environment; Social Learning Theory: attention, retention, reproduction and motivation)

F i g. 1. Theoretical framework overview

[10] Lima R.M., Mesquita D., Rocha C. Professionals' Demands for Production Engineering: Analysing Areas of Professional Practice and Transversal Competences. In: International Conference on Production Research (ICPR 22). 2013. p. 1-7. (In Eng.)

[11] Asonitou S., Tromaridis H. Bologna Efforts to Promote Skills and Competences in Higher Education and the Greek Context. In: Strategic Innovative Marketing. Cham: Springer; 2017. p. 35-43. (In Eng.)

In words of Rodríguez Martínez et al. [16], the ultimate goal of university training is the construction of more complex and contextualised knowledge modalities, which integrate concepts, professional skills and abilities, as well as personal attitudes that allow students to take their corresponding place in the world of work and, in general, in society.

It should be also noted that two sorts of competences need to be properly divided.

Transversal competences also called generic competences are considered the cornerstone of the Bologna Process in terms of general capacity building, critical thinking and applied skills[12]. Additionally, specific competences or subject knowledge tend to embrace functional endeavours for expert performance [17]. In the context of the current research, we address a generic plurilingual and pluricultural competence.

Plurilingual and pluricultural competence. Initially, the contemporary perspective on language education supported by the UNESCO[13] upholds the linguistic pluralism combining the mother tongue, a second language and a modern international language. Such an approach requires not only a clear definitive base but a set of instructions and didactic features that bring together policy-makers, students, educators and parents. Both editions of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages[14] provided us with considerable assistance in setting up and running educational strategies aimed at linguistic development and validation.

The contribution of the original Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) highlighted numerous social benefits of plurilingualism by defining it as an opportunity to amplify individual language background and building up "a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact"[15]. Precisely the mutual connection between language and culture empowers individual progress in any facet of life [18] as an integral part of the plurilingual and pluricultural competence.

Later on, the updated CEFR Companion Volume brought the definition of plurilingualism as an "uneven and changing competence, the dynamic and linguistic repertoire of an individual user/learner"[16]. Due to the inseparable connection of plurilingual and pluricultural parts of the competence, the notion of a joint Plurilingual and Pluricultural Competence (PPC) can be retrieved from several studies[17] [19; 20]. Presently, the linguistic and cultural aspects of the PPC are closely interconnected in such a way that numerous benefits arise from prior sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences helping better understand interlinguistic structure of different languages, enhancing interrelation of linguistic structures in separate languages, building new capacities and quickening resulting social, linguistic and cultural learning.

Furthermore, a new type of plurilingual pedagogy [21] based on three principles arises:

a) reaching new abilities of any language should be seen as a plurilingual growth;

b) any type of language instruction requires considering global transversal and transferable competences, general cognitive

[12] Polyakova O., Galstyan-Sargsyan R. Implementing Transversal Competences in Higher Education. In: Innovative Practices in Plurilingual Education. Valencia: Tirant Lo Blanch; 2020. p. 11-30. (In Eng.)

[13] UNESCO. Records of the General Conference, 30th session, Paris, 26 October to 17 November 1999, v. 1: Resolutions–UNESCO. UNESCO [Electronic resource]. Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000118514 (accessed 02.08.2020). (In Eng.)

[14] Council of Europe. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge; 2001. 261 p. (In Eng.); Council of Europe. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Companion Volume with New Descriptors [Electronic resource]. 2018. Available at: https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989 (accessed 10.09.2020). (In Eng.)

[15] Council of Europe. Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning [Electronic resource]. Available at: https://op.europa.eu/es/publication-detail/-/publication/6fda126a-67c9-11e8-ab9c-01aa75ed71a1/language-en (accessed 09.09.2020). (In Eng.)

[16] Council of Europe. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. (In Eng.); Council of Europe. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Companion Volume with New Descriptors. (In Eng.)

[17] Coste D., Moore D., Zarate G. Plurilingual and Pluricultural Competence. Strasbourg: Council of Europe; 2009. 50 p. (In Eng.)

development all this supported by collaborative initiatives between languages;

c) promotion of the meaningful exchange of abilities and communicative competences as a way of fostering students' confidence, thereby enhancing learning skills.

Considering the importance of the competence-based university training, we devised an applied approach towards the plurilingual and pluricultural capacities, grounded on reflections of Edwards et al. [22]:

1) plurilingual and pluricultural competence acquires international recognition as our life in a global society is closely related to a multinational employment profile offering more opportunities to those university graduates who are able to cope effectively with linguistic and cultural factors at work thus achieving better employability which is the final goal of the European higher education system;

2) plurilingual and pluricultural competence is an integral part of Lifelong Learning Programmes because of the PPC connection to several lifelong competences of the EU such as multilingual competence and cultural awareness indicated by the Council of Europe[18];

3) plurilingual and pluricultural competence can be integrated in the student-centred learning paradigm oriented towards innovation and interactive teaching methods application [10].

Social and cognitive background of collaborative learning. Modern languages represent one of the segments in which the additional estimation of innovations for instruction is as of now noteworthy. Many academic and experiential projects supported by the Council of Europe offer a unique opportunity to strengthen cooperation among schools, colleges and universities both inside and beyond the territory of the European member states. The cooperation among EU universities brings together programmes, activities and initiatives oriented towards the sociocultural enrichment of partners. By clearly defining an online learning scenario, we create foundations for a sustainable and engaging project where technology goes hand in hand with social and cognitive theories.

To start with, telecollaboration relies on "the Internet communication tools by internationally dispersed students of language in institutionalized settings in order to promote the development of (a) foreign language (FL) linguistic competence and (b) intercultural competence" [23, p. 68]. Online videoconferencing offers undergraduates the chance to converse with other university students using English as the central nexus of communication. Increasingly, pluricultural competence becomes an intrinsic part of professional development supported by educational cooperation.

Next, the social component of telecollaborative language learning, closely connected to the Cognitive Development Theory of Vygotsky, acquires a symbolic prominence. In this theory, social interaction and guidance turn out to be the key factors building intellectual capacities. Through the role of culture as the training and development mediator, students improve memory, attention, learning and critical thinking skills[19].

Notwithstanding the above, the connection of the Social Learning Theory[20] with the current research context is noteworthy. According to its grounds, learning happens while four essential elements are taken into account:

– Attention: students learn better when they are centred on the activity; distinctive features of the training process help learners focus on it and progress more;

– Retention: individuals learn by disguising data; we would then be able to review that data later when we need to react to a circumstance similarly which we saw; to gain from what we see; we need to hold that data;

– Reproduction: undergraduates imitate recently learned conduct or information when it is required; rehearsing reactions in

[18] Council of Europe. Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning.

[19] Vygotsky L.S. Mind and Society: The Development of Higher Mental Processes. Ed. by M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, E. Souberman. Harvard: Harvard University Press; 1978. 159 p. (In Eng.)

[20] Bandura A., Walters R.H. Social Learning and Personality Development. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston; 1963. 329 p. (In Eng.); Bandura A., Walters R.H. Social Learning Theory (Vol. 1). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall; 1977. 247 p. (In Eng.)

their mind or in activities can improve the manner in which they react;

– Motivation: it is the determining factor that typically originates from seeing another person be compensated or rebuffed for something they have done; this can inspire us to do or not do that equivalent thing.

In this study, we will address the development of plurilingual and pluricultural competence of university students through telecollaboration based on the blend of both theories: cognitive enhancement of the Zone of Proximal Development and the Social Learning Theory.

Materials and Methods

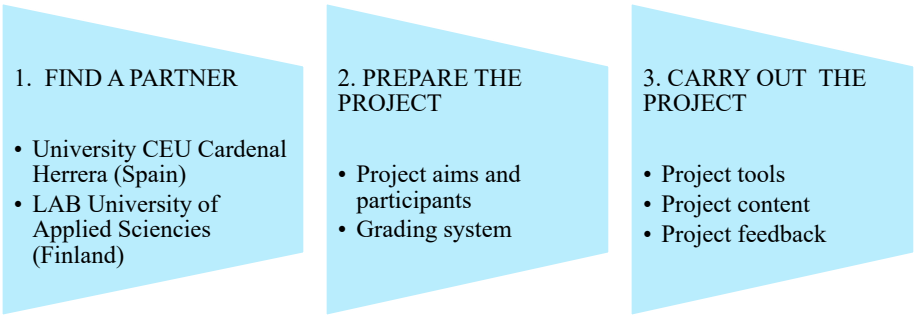
Online collaboration framework. The design for the collaboration scheme of integrating plurilingualism and pluriculturalism in university teaching was premised on the need to promote networking among students from different universities and countries [24; 25]. Besides the general learning of additional language and the transaction of knowledge, the project envisaged improving intercultural competence among participants. Through reinforced interactions over the project period, the students would appreciate diversity, compromise on cultural uniqueness and attain sensitivity in earning. The Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) approach was critical in fulfilling the project objectives.

Through interactive social learning, the project aimed to establish an ecosystem in which knowledge generation and dissemination among students will be seamless [26; 27]. This interactive social learning reduces possible barriers to learning, including institutional affiliations, socio-cultural backgrounds and individual learning limitations. In addition, it fosters impactful back and forth exchange of experiences, the project focused on empowering the participants to overcome barriers to effective knowledge sharing such as low self-esteem, apprehension, language and anxiety.

The updates of inter-university student interaction via telecollaboration during the COVID-19 lockdown period provided was an important milestone [28]. It provided a platform for student collaboration and also increased the intercultural and interpersonal awareness among the participants [29]. Such competencies are critical for students who would eventually work in different host communities upon graduation. The pluricultural and pluricultural competence training has to be impactful and incorporate well-planned student-student, student-lecturers and lecturers-lectures engagements.

Continuing with this rationale, Figure 2 shows a brief project outline aligned with the usual COIL methodology.

Project participants. The project used the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) approach. The overriding idea behind COIL is the fundamental need to challenge participant students to establish networks for sharing their different learning experiences. It is consistent with the Social Learning Theory (SLT), which emphasises the role of peer-to-peer learning in fostering impactful information. The participants from "Maestros I" of the Teachers' Training degree of the University CEU Cardenal Herrera, Castellón (Spain) and Business Administration students of the LAB University of Applied Sciences, Lahti (Finland) were involved.



F i g. 2. Plurilingual and pluricultural competence (PPC) COIL project outline

The two institutions are located in two different European countries, thus providing a considerably high level of diversity in student experiences. Understandably, country-specific factors play a role in student learning experiences. Considering the complexity of information sharing, the variety of ideas likely to be generated, the need to attain efficiency and the optimal outcome, a sizeable sample of students was selected.

Based on this principle of representativeness of both institutions 11 Finnish and 14 Spanish students were invited to participate, although only 20 of them were able to complete the project (6 Finnish and 14 Spanish participants). To guide them through the training process, three lecturers (two from the University CEU Cardenal Herrera and one from the LAB University) were involved in the cooperation process. For the Spanish learners, participating in this online international learning project was part of their speaking exam. Out of the possible 100% total score in the oral exam, the project would constitute 15% of the final result. Therefore, the Spanish participants had an unintended disproportionate higher incentive to participate in the program than the Finnish whose participation was not subject to any score or any form of graded evaluation.

This setting was sensibly performed by the COIL organising party (general programme structure and initial instructions to the participants), university lecturers (curricular embedding of the PPC COIL planning, guidance and evaluation) and students (active participation, interaction through an unfamiliar system of telecollaboration and inter-university social learning experience). Number-wise, the project was about 1 COIL mediator, three university lecturers and 20 students who finally took part in the endeavour.

The participants from LAB University came from Finland and Vietnam, meanwhile Spanish learners were all local residents. English is not a primary language in the countries mentioned, meaning that their active contribution significantly transformed their language and interaction skills.

Project tools and contents. Regarding the technical background for the telecollaboration process, Zoom was used as a platform for implementing the project due to its efficacy, convenience and immediate feedback. Zoom provides versatile options for students to have video calls, non-video conversations, sharing of PC screens, having breakout rooms, sending real-time messages and getting responses from other participants without interruption. According to the plan, students were to meet once a week for four weeks to work in groups in online rooms. Each Zoom session lasted 45 minutes, which was appropriate for participants to concentrate and remain attentive. According to psychological studies, the concentration of human beings drastically drops beyond 45 minutes; hence the length of the sessions ensured optimal participation among the students[21]. Nonetheless, the students were also free to participate in discussions and exchange any other time outside the 45 minutes set.

The most challenging bit in setting the groups into collaborative work was finding common topics that suited them. The participants were all drawn from different study courses, which means they had disparate subject area alignments. To overcome this challenge, the moderator took the leading role in presenting the students with multiple topics from which the participants would vote and agree on what to discuss for the next session. Having to vote for their preferred topics was an important step in ensuring that the students owned the project and felt adequately involved. Giving the topic for the next session was a strategic choice for all the students, including those who may not have preferred the chosen topic enough time to do thorough research to avoid feeling excluded in the next discussion.

Furthermore, our project model was based on three main components: icebreaker activities, collaborative tasks and reflection activities. In icebreaker activities,

[21] Sharan S., Chin Tan I. G. Organizing Schools for Productive Learning. Berlin: Springer Science + Business Media; 2008. 112 p. (In Eng.)

the students familiarised themselves with one another, developed rapport and asked important questions, which would open them up to diverse teamwork. These activities were moderated to ensure objectivity was maintained. The collaborative task involved students being put in rooms to discuss the proposed topic of each week. Finally, the students had to reflect on the session. The reflection involved a questionnaire with open-ended and close-ended questions which captured various elements of the session. The questionnaire was administered via Google Drive and made available to all participants.

Telecollaboration process. Regarding the contents and delivery of the project detailed below (see Figure 3), it was launched during the lockdown period occasioned by the declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic. Zoom was used as a platform for conducting the project to attain maximum and effective participation. Zoom is currently believed to be the more reliable digital solution for large scale video conferencing due to its versatility, including real-time video, messaging, screen sharing and break out rooms, among other important functionalities [30]. The project participants were organised into five groups comprising four students each. The composition was well mixed with 2–3 Spanish and 1–2 Finnish. They met on Zoom once a week for 45 minutes (guided sessions) and also held small group meetings on a weekly basis.

Even though the program was well laid out with students exuding high self-motivation levels, various challenges encroached. Still, the uniqueness of the timing and running the project virtually posed a challenge. One of the daunting challenges was to suit the time and work synchronously.

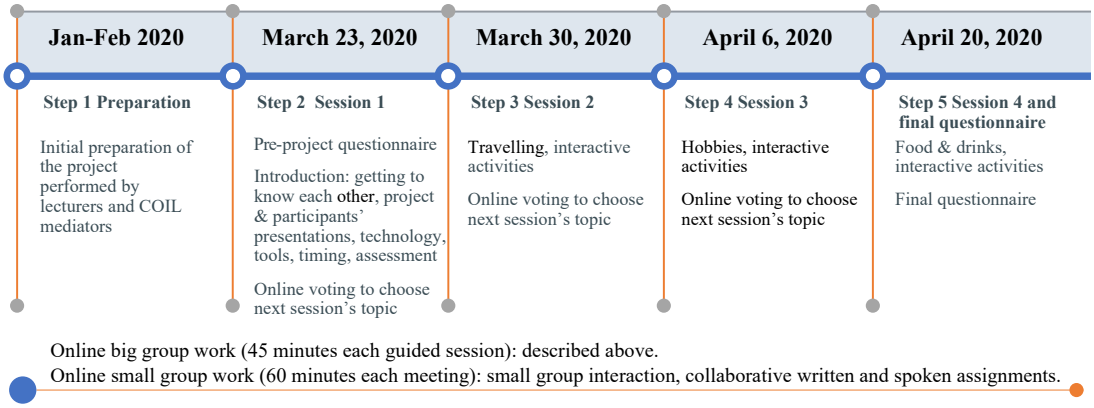
There was also an overriding assumption that all participants would dedicate their time to the project. However, it was not possible to ascertain their involvement in topic selection for the next session and outside the *Zoom* time. Whereas teams were carefully selected to facilitate the ongoing building of cross-cultural relations, students were overly careful not to display certain aspects of their culture, which prevented the full experience of authenticity in interpersonal student relationship. Ideally, restraint and inadequate freedom that comes with virtual teams undermine quality multicultural exchange [31]. Conceivably, much exchange would occur if the teams had physical interactions even if once during the project.

The project was designed in such a way as to be captivating and important. Participants were not to get involved all in vain. Student participants were made aware of the benefits of the project beforehand to anticipate what elements to assign greater importance. This approach is consistent with the concept of virtual team incentivisation through creating anticipation[22]. In this respect, students knew that participating in the project would contribute to 25% of the total mark for participation. The project was challenging since students were not used to online learning and the students were not used to chatting face to face online.

Training process. The training program was conducted with full acknowledgement of how virtual learning is highly predisposed to time management challenges, changes in participant interests and demotivation. One important goal of the programme was to ensure that all the participants remain motivated throughout the sessions and that their curiosities are progressively fulfilled. Therefore, the sessions were made expressly interactive and the supervising lecturers ensured that the students remained maximally involved even despite the fact that the pandemic completely changed the tertiary education process in both countries.

Given the specificity of the PPC COIL project, we exemplify below various key actions and interactions that occurred during the PPC COIL process. The following figure summarises the important process dynamics, timing and telecollaborative activities performed:

[22] Fuller R.M., Harding M. The Impact of Interaction Anticipation and Incentive Type on Shared Leadership and Performance in Virtual Teams. In: 48th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences; 2015. p. 732-741. (In Eng.)



F i g. 3. The PPC COIL timeline

Here we will briefly present each one of the sections delivered during the online-assisted learning process.

The introduction session was comprehensively conducted to ensure that the students freely communicated their worries, suspicions and anxieties and overcame pre-existing assumptions about the other participants. The introduction set the favourable ground for subsequent effective interactions among the students. They were also taken through familiarisation with the digital solution to be used during the program, Zoom.

Afterwards, the students formed groups with which they felt comfortable to work. However, the groups' composition was moderated to attain balanced participation of the Finnish and Spanish students in them. The key to the project was the need to keep it engaging, less straining and informative. Therefore, the topics chosen throughout were not entirely technical but captivating. Ideally, this was a good way to accommodate possible extremes among the participants, motivate and align interests with the plurilingual and pluricultural development. A very relaxing icebreaker session preceded the project kick-off. During the icebreaker, students got the first opportunity to introduce themselves to one another and overcome possible anxieties.

It is worth mentioning that the training was divided into four sessions of big group. Setting the length of sessions at 45 minutes was guided by the fact that cognitive attention tends to drastically decline after 45 minutes of concentrating on the same thing. Each of the sessions had unique elements, such as topic identification, selection and discussion. Students in the teams identified topics for discussion in the proceeding session and they would vote for each participant's topic. The topics ranged from hobbies, foods, rituals, personal life, academic and social experiences and contemporary socio-political issues. The topic selection was liberal, which means that the instructors assumed a supervisory role and refrained from gagging the students. With the lecturers applying a hands-off approach, the sessions were not as structured as normal classroom situations. Additionally, each small group used to have a weekly hour-long meeting that was not supervised by tutors and used to create a better personal connection while dealing with group assignments set by the course guides.

During guided sessions, the lecturers made abrupt visitations into the *Zoom* rooms to supervise how the students continued their discussions. Typically, the teams delved into discriminating misinformation, prejudice, half-truths, misconceptions and gossip. They would synthesise their researched information to only remain with verifiable facts alone. In attributional learning, the students had to make concessions and stay as a team. They would remain resilient even in circumstances where cultural differences threatened to cause disintegration.

Each student was systematically acculturated to focus on learning unfamiliar aspects of the others. They were progressively inclined towards positively dealing with existing cultural differences and upholding cohesiveness.

One way of achieving this cohesion was to exercise intellectual humility and awareness and not judge others for their behaviour. Self-paced learning was applied in the project to minimise any potential strains on participants. The self-paced principle is based on humans' cognitive processes that favour progressive learning from simpler concepts to more complex ones[23].

Instructors in nurturing appropriate attributions were to incline all the students first to integrate the knowledge of existing cultural differences before they make conclusions. On the self-awareness aspect, the students were encouraged to identify points of departure in any aspect of other participants' cultures, note it and use that to reflect on their own. This element was important because agents of cultures often practice them without paying keen attention to what exactly influences their particular patterns. Using the cultures of the other as a benchmark, the students could easily examine how their culture involuntarily affects their behaviour.

Project feedback. Since the process of collaboration was based on a previously tested model of COIL cooperation, organising student telecollaboration was relatively fast and straightforward. Nevertheless, project participants follow a standard protocol involving the initial programme and the final opinion questionnaires. It is fair enough to consider students' perceptions to introduce further project updates or improvements.

Results

The plurilingual and pluricultural competence COIL project (PPC COIL) was predicated upon the need for learners from different environments to engage in continued transactional learning. This interaction among students that build their linguistic competence and culture does not necessarily take place on a face to face basis. The versatile digital solutions available today, such as Zoom used for this project, could leverage the possibility of guided learner interactions.

The study performed resulted in a closer contact with pedagogical and technological realities happening during the spring 2020 pandemic situation. As we will soon see, the goals of this project are threefold: (1) university telecollaboration policies and impact on PPC development; (2) digital partnership and intercultural collaboration experienced by European students; (3) especial COVID-19 online-assisted training experience. Our evaluation and results presented below strive to make these points clear.

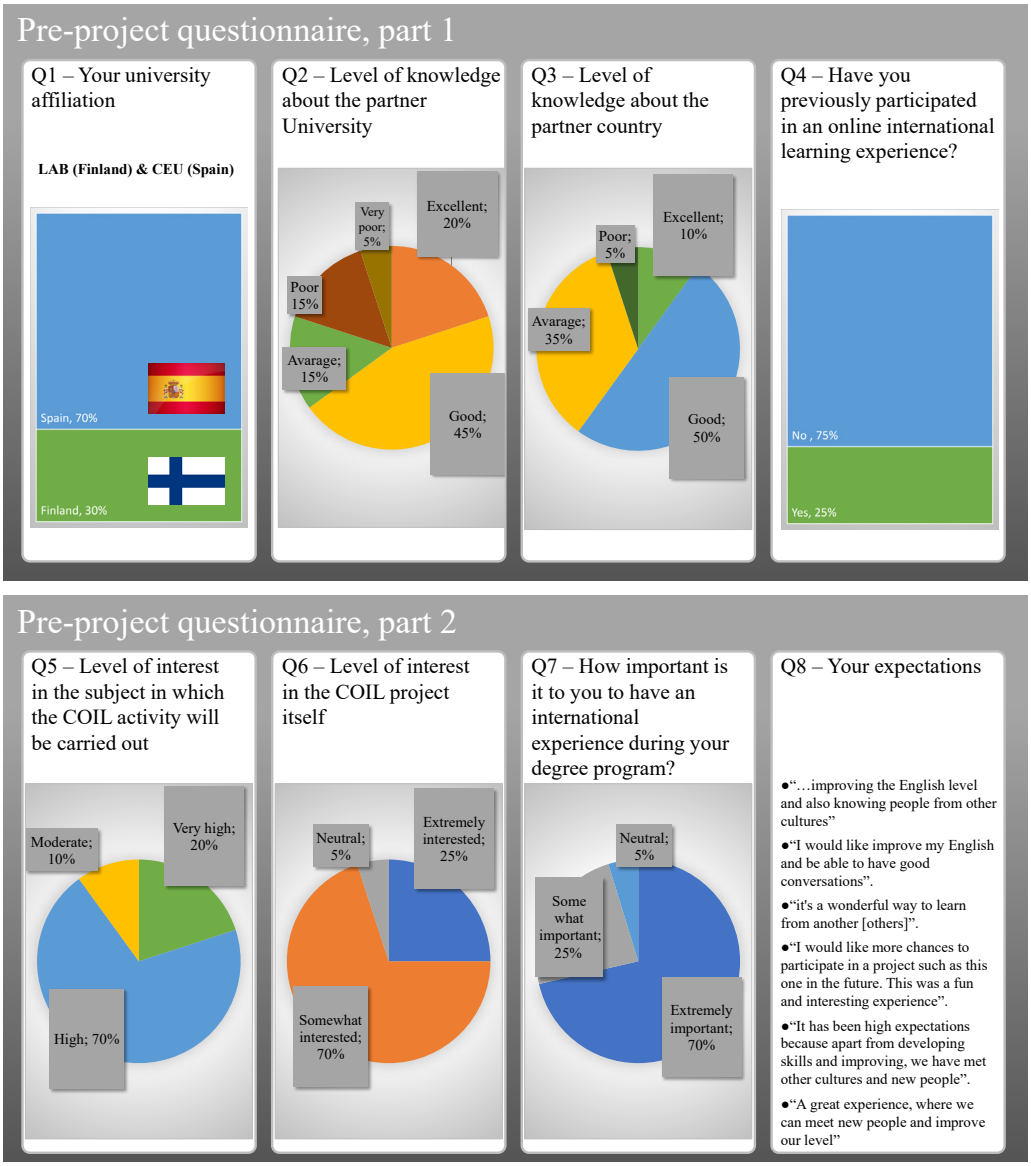
Pre-project questionnaire. In March 2020, during the first introductory session, 20 project participants took part in the opening questionnaire. Once indicated their university affiliation, learners were suggested 8 questions (mainly based on 5 Likert-type questions) related to the intercultural acknowledgement of the COIL experience (Fig. 4 below).

To start with, a significant number of respondents were from Spain: 14 persons from the University CEU Cardenal Herrera (70%) and only 6 Finnish students from the LAB University of Applied Sciences (30%) [Q1]. We can think of one plausible explanation for this fact: the Spanish institution offers graded assessment of project participation, meanwhile the Finnish counterparts opt for a voluntary partaking.

The questionnaire responses showed that even though the participating university are all within Europe, up to 65% of the student involved in the project reported having excellent or good knowledge of the partner university [Q2]; 60% of the students indicated that they had excellent or good information about partner country [Q3]. This reality suggests the need to bolster student awareness about other institutions and link them through collaborative networks. Through such initiative, knowledge sharing and generation are easily achieved.

Besides, 75% of the students had never participated in the online international learning process [Q4]. This percentage meant that they would not only interact but also learn the versatility of digital solutions as platforms for knowledge exchange.

[23] Jiang L., Meng D., Yu S.-I., Lan Z., Shan S., Hauptmann A. Self-Paced Learning with Diversity. In: Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems; 2014. p. 2078-2086. (In Eng.)



F i g. 4. The initial COIL questionnaire results

A 90% very high- and high-level interest among the learners in both the subject to be covered [Q5] and a 95% extremely interested and somewhat interested in joining the project itself [Q6] helped to overcome possible challenges. Conceptually, in a typical intercultural communication situation such as this COIL project, participants who have a high sense of motivation get fulfilled than those that are not. Imperatively, the participants' high enthusiasm for the content and nature of the project assured of more tolerance to uncertainty and alignment of the curiosity towards engaging with the others who are different. Such understanding effectively helped to maintain goal orientation as the participants would, without compulsion, find the self- and other-knowledge gained rewarding.

Almost all the students (95%) participating in the program considered it extremely important or somewhat important to have an international experience during their degree

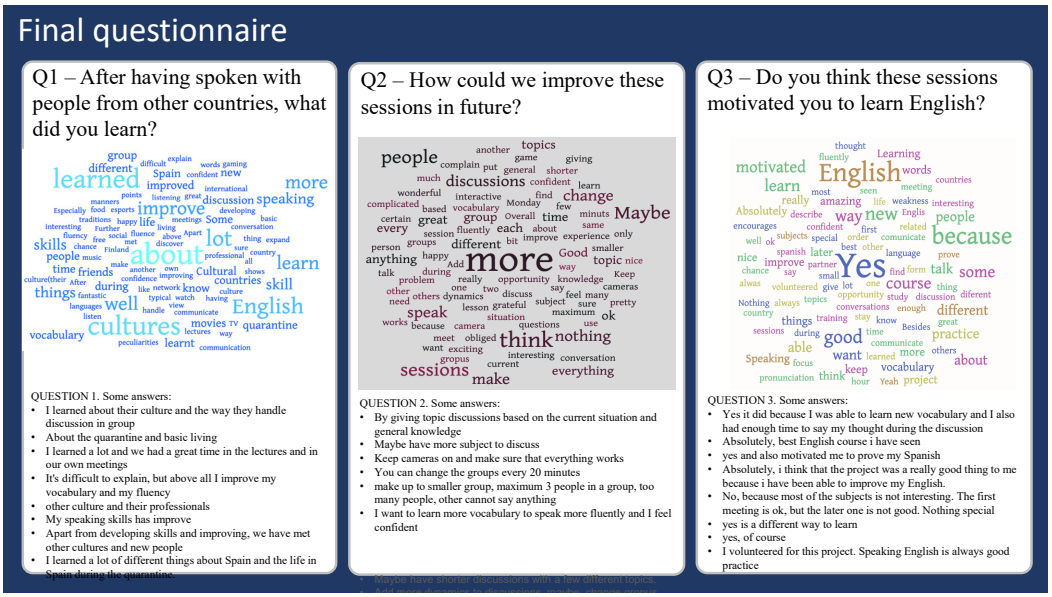
program [Q7]. In retrospect, the students already understood the dynamic nature of career development in which upon completion of studies, they enter different spaces globally. This reality means that COIL would significantly prepare them to develop intercultural competencies necessary for upholding intellectual humility, cultural awareness and tolerance to diversity. These attributes are hallmarks of career growth and success.

Cognisant of the important contribution of the COIL project, the students focused on using this opportunity to improve their cultural knowledge and develop their English language skills [Q8]. Many of the students envisioned to use the project to attain dual experience; enhance cultural knowledge and language skills. On the other hand, some participating students prioritised using the project to improve their language skills.

Final questionnaire and assessment. Once all the selected topics were discussed, we asked project participants to answer three key questions related to the plurilingual and pluricultural online experience they took part in. Leaving aside the geographical distribution of the students, herebelow their joint answers are presented. Using *Wordcloud* visual support (https://worditout.com/), we have applied the option of varying word size with frequency, achieving a straightforward solution for the complete visualisation of the learners` opinions (Fig. 5).

On the first question [Q1] targeting learning from people from other countries after having spoken to them, we received a wide range of comments with the majority of respondents praising better understanding of partners` culture, traditions and the quarantine situation as well as English language fluency achieved. Several opinions prove this point: “Apart from developing skills and improving, we have met other cultures and new people”, “I have learnt different things from other cultures. I have also improved my speaking fluency and my confidence” or “About the quarantine and basic living”.

The second question [Q2] related to the possible improvement of the project experience offered a variety of proposals such as creating more and shorter discussions on a greater choice of matters, frequent group swaps, groups size changes, mandatory use of cameras, among others. For example, these are some of the suggestions: “It was really wonderful, nothing to complain. The only problem I got is the time of our session because I had one lesson at that time”, “Maybe have shorter discussions with a few different topics” or “make up to smaller group, maximum 3 people in a group, too many people, other cannot say anything”.



F i g. 5. Final questionnaire results

Regarding the third question [Q3], we were interested in the motivational value of the PPC COIL training for learning English. Almost all participants were pleased with the process and positively evaluated the unique opportunity of interaction in the global language. Here are some of the opinions: "Yeah, it is great chance for training my English and be more confident. Besides, I find out some of my weakness in order to focus later", "Absolutely, best English course I have seen" or "I volunteered for this project. Speaking English is always good practice".

As mentioned earlier, the Spanish undergraduates were offered an opportunity of graded assessment. After each session, they were asked to write a summary which was a good mode of assessment that helped to reinforce the student commitment to the project. The summary included ideas they shared and what new words they learned. In this way, the participants practised speaking, listening and writing. A key indication of how the project improved the students abilities was on their confidence level. During the program, the students from University CEU Cardenal Herrera showed gradual improvement in their confidence levels: they became more aware and not afraid to make mistakes.

Students could come up with different ideas from the discussion and develop them for a better understanding, which promoted critical thinking. It was easy to collaborate since teamwork made the project easy and intellectual humility and intercultural rigour were upheld. The carefully designed questionnaires made it easy for the process, creating a flow of interaction and solutions to the Spanish and Finnish perspectives on mutual cultural singularities and interaction enhancement. The collaboration from this project made the whole experience possible despite the challenges present, such as the time factors. Students shared knowledge, including the COVID-19 pandemic issue, thus catering to emerging issues and possible solutions.

Discussion and Conclusion

In general, the Plurilingual and Pluricultural Competence Collaborative Online International Learning (PPC COIL) project involved students in two universities; one in Spain and the other in Finland exemplified the great potential in using the internet to entrench beneficial knowledge sharing among learners. Furthermore, the project was collaborative, which means that teamwork, tolerance to diversity, intellectual humility and intercultural rigour were nurtured throughout. The conception, design, administration and evaluation of the COIL overcame the limitations of distance, time and cultural diversity. Objectively and carefully designed questionnaires made it possible to evaluate the process and outcomes of the initiative.

From the final questionnaire results on the three questions, the process was successful since students gave responses on their culture and traditions and English language fluency. It was easy to determine how different cultures perform their activities, and most students understood English as a language in a more fluent manner boosting their confidence. Participants enjoyed interacting with the worldwide language and shared what they learned from the project, thus showing the project success. Students could understand their mistakes and get corrections, and it is from this that their confidence was boosted. The project enhanced writing, listening, and speaking skills from the questionnaire, and this made them realize their weaknesses, and instead of getting afraid, they worked towards improving them. Although the groups had large numbers, it would be more successful if there were fewer people to ensure that every person had quality time to deliver their views from the questionnaires. It is from the cooperation and engagement from different students with different cultures that results were received from the questionnaire and led to the project success.

In our study, we described the process of a sustainable system of telecollaboration aimed at refining language abilities and cultural awareness. Although caution is needed when assessing these limited results in terms of research questions raised, we are convinced that the PPC COIL project had a positive impact on the 21-century quality education advancement:

1) inter-university collaboration has broadened Spanish and Finnish perspective

on mutual cultural singularities and enhanced interaction in L2/English;

2) telecollaboration experience was a smooth and positive one regardless of some challenges;

3) due to the online format, close connection and motivation of the participants, the project interaction helped exchange information related to the COVID-19 and students benefited from the education innovation by continuing the training process in spite of living an exceptional change of the schedules, cancelled on-campus lectures or general instability.

Finally, we would like to display some challenges experienced and share some recommendations for improvements. Even though the programme was well laid out with students exuding high self-motivation, various challenges emerged. Still, the uniqueness of the timing and running the project virtually posed a problem. One of the daunting challenges was to suit the time and work synchronously. Imperatively, the schedule of such programmes should be set flexibly. Sessions, too, should be recorded and shared among the participants for later review in case they miss any bit of it.

There was also an overriding assumption that all participants would dedicate their time to the project. However, it was impossible to ascertain their involvement in topic selection for the next session and outside the *Zoom* time. Whereas teams were carefully selected to facilitate the ongoing building of cross-cultural relations, some students were overly careful not to display certain aspects of their culture, which prevented the full experience of authenticity in interpersonal student relationships. Ideally, restraint and inadequate freedom that comes with virtual teams undermine quality multicultural exchange. Conceivably, much exchange would occur if the teams had physical interactions, even if once during the project.

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