The Role of Virtual Exchange in Enhancing Intercultural Competence: The Case of Erasmus+ Project

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Abstract

This article aims at investigating the effectiveness of Erasmus+ Virtual exchange project in enhancing individuals' intercultural competence (IC). In order to obtain relevant data, a questionnaire has been administered to 50 participants who have taken part in the course of "Cultural Encounters: Perspectives on Populism 2020". The results reveal that most participants have developed their behavioural aspect of IC known as intercultural effectiveness. Thus, the integration of virtual exchange in foreign language education is useful to engage university students in meaningful intercultural experiences.

Keywords: intercultural competence, intercultural effectiveness, virtual exchange, Erasmus+ virtual exchange project, culture.

دور التبادل الافتراضي في تطوير كفاءة التواصل بين الثقافات دراسة حالة لمشروع إيراسموس +

ملخص

يهدف هذا المقال إلى التحقق من فعالية مشروع إيراسموس + للتبادل الافتراضي في تعزيز كفاءة التواصل بين الثقافات للأفراد ولذلك تم توزيع استبيان على 50 فردا شاركوا في دورة "لقاءات ثقافية: وجهات نظر حول الشعبوية "2020". كشفت النتائج أن معظم المشاركين قد طوروا جانبهم السلوكي من كفاءة التواصل بين الثقافات المعروف بالفعالية الثقافية وبالتالي، فإن دمج التبادل الافتراضي في تعليم اللغات الأجنبية مفيد لإشراك طلاب الجامعات في تجارب هادفة بين الثقافات.

الكلمات المفاتيح: كفاءة التواصل بين الثقافات، فعالية بين الثقافات، تبادل افتراضي، إيراسموس + للتبادل الافتراضي، ثقافة.

Le Rôle de l'échange Virtuel pour Renforcer la Compétence Interculturelle : Le Cas Du Projet Erasmus+

Résumé

Cet article vise à étudier l'efficacité du projet d'échange virtuel Erasmus+ dans l'amélioration de la compétence interculturelle (IC) des individus. Afin d'obtenir des données pertinentes, un questionnaire a été proposé à 50 participants ayant pris part au cours de « Rencontres culturelles : perspectives sur le populisme 2020 ». Les résultats révèlent que la plupart des participants ont développé leur aspect comportemental de l'IC connu sous le nom d'efficacité interculturelle. Ainsi, l'intégration de l'échange virtuel dans l'enseignement des langues étrangères est utile pour engager les étudiants universitaires dans des expériences interculturelles significatives.

Mots-clés : Compétence interculturelle, efficacité interculturelle, échange virtuel, projet d'échange virtuel ERASMUS+, culture.

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Introduction:

Globalisation is opening up new opportunities for individuals to communicate with each other and cultivate relationships. Due to the cultural diversity and multiculturalism that exist in societies, individuals need to be more aware of and tolerant towards the various perceptions, values and behaviours which can influence any intercultural encounter. Thus, intercultural learning within the context of foreign language education plays a major role in enhancing learners' ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds, that is, developing their IC. One way to promote such a competence in learners is the use of virtual exchange (VE)

VE entails the use of technology to engage learners from different cultural affiliations in online collaboration projects. This virtual learning experience can help participants to interact with others and share perspectives to build understanding of themselves and others. Within this context, Erasmus + VE is a pioneering project that provides a safe online space for encouraging intercultural dialogue and understanding. Henceforth, the purpose of this research paper is to investigate how the Erasmus+ VE programme can influence IC with a focus on participants who have previously taken part in the course "Cultural Perspectives on Populism 2020" as a case study.

1- Literature Review:

1-1-An Overview of Intercultural Competence:

IC is a polysemic concept [1] that is differently defined across disciplines. The most widely cited definition sees IC as "a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" [2]. Deardorff defines it as "the skills, attitudes, and behaviors needed to improve interactions across difference, whether within a society (differences due to age, gender, religion, socio-economic status, political affiliation, ethnicity, and so on) or across borders" [3]. She also emphasizes that the important elements of IC involve greater self-awareness of oneself and others, openness, respect, reflexivity, and empathy. Thus, it is important to develop this competence in individuals as a way to understand and appreciate differences, establish relationships with others by means of engaging in intercultural dialogues, and bridge "societal divides" [4].

Chen and Starsota refer to IC as the speakers' ability to achieve their communication objective effectively and appropriately through using communication behaviours to negotiate between the various identities which are present in an intercultural setting. For them, IC embraces three dimensions: intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural effectiveness [5].

Intercultural awareness represents the cognitive dimension which is the knowledge that individuals have about their own and others' culture. Intercultural sensitivity represents the affective aspect and entails the individual's ability to distinguish between the different behaviours, perceptions, and feelings of different speakers in the intercultural context in addition to the ability to appreciate and respect them. Finally, intercultural effectiveness (IE) represents the behavioural aspect of IC and refers to the ability to attain communication goals in intercultural interactions. This behavioral aspect of IC is the concern of this study that attempts to investigate the development of this construct in the context of virtual mobility through the Erasmus + VE Project.

1-2- Intercultural Effectiveness: The Behavioural Aspect of IC :

The review of literature reveals that there exists a myriad of models of IC. The model employed in this research is the one proposed by Chen and Starosta with a focus on the IE component [6]. The rationale is that this behavioural dimension of IC deals with behaviours that aim at achieving appropriate and effective intercultural communication, which is especially relevant for participants in the Erasmus+ VE programme.

Chen and Starosta argue that IE, also known as "intercultural adroitness", emphasizes how to act effectively in intercultural interactions. IE embraces five components namely message

skills, interaction management, behavioral flexibility, identity management, and relationship cultivation [7].

In the context of intercultural communication, message skills is to the ability to use language of a culture other than one's native language [8]. Any intercultural encounter requires the individuals to be linguistically and communicatively competent. Other than language itself, message skills also entail the use of descriptive and supportive messages in the interaction process. Descriptive messages refer to giving specific and constructive feedback to other interactants instead of judging their behaviours. These nonjudgmental attitudes are significant for avoiding defensive reactions from the interactants. Supportive messages are also significant for effective communication. Thus, communicators in the intercultural setting need to know how to support and reward others affectively through nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, head nods, eye contact or physical proximity[9].

Interaction management refers to the ability to initiate and terminate a conversation, and take turns in conversation appropriately. This ability requires the smooth development of topics while interacting with others. Both interaction management and message skills are more related to language and communicative competences and they emphasize the ability to express oneself and understand one another when communicating with people from different cultures [10].

Behavioural flexibility refers to the ability to use appropriate behaviours in various intercultural situations. It entails the ability "to observe an interaction, distinguish and make use of the appropriate behaviours, and adapt to the specific situational context" [11] as well as the ability to respond to various communication demands in different contexts [12]. This construct represents the flexible or the creative dimension of IC since behaviouraly flexible individuals are "accurate and adaptable when attending to information, and are able to perform different behavioral strategies in order to achieve communication goals"[13].

Identity management refers to the ability to maintain one's counterpart's identity in interaction. This component is important because individuals need to learn who they are in the process of interacting with others. Effective communicators are those who do not only understand themselves while engaging with their interactants, but also inform others about who they are [14].

Relationship cultivation refers to the ability to build interpersonal relationships with people from different cultures. Chen defines it as "the ability to establish a certain degree of relationship with one's partner in order to satisfy each other's needs and reach a positive outcome of interaction" [15]. For example, relationship cultivation can be built through the process of VE between learners from various cultural backgrounds.

In summary, individuals can become more competent in intercultural communication as they enhance their IE which includes message skills, interaction management, behavioral flexibility, identity maintenance, and relationship cultivation [16].

1-3- The Importance of IC in Foreign Language Learning:

Being able to understand and communicate with people across all kinds of cultural diversity is instrumental in today's transcultural world. Here comes the role of foreign language education in helping learners not only to speak the foreign language, but also to develop the ability to interact with others with interest, curiosity and open mindedness towards the various perceptions, assumptions and values that are present in the intercultural setting, whether in a real-life contact or in a virtual environment.

The council of Europe argues that IC ought to be prioritized in foreign language education [17]. This can prepare learners for "interaction with people of other cultural backgrounds, teaching them skills and attitudes as well as knowledge" [18]. Moreover, Byram and his colleagues state that the main aims for developing learners' IC involve understanding and accepting people from other cultures as individuals with other distinctive perspectives, values and behaviours and seeing that such interaction is an enriching experience [19].

Intercultural learning plays a major role in preparing learners to engage with otherness. It helps them have a clearer image about individuals who belong to various cultural groups, to attentively listen and understand others and give them the chance to manifest their cultural identity. This can help in overcoming stereotypes and overgeneralisations about others. Thus, learners will "refrain from labelling people, from putting them in the categories that were already created before the actual encounter" [20]. Overcoming these barriers to intercultural communication is significant because "Once we stop categorising the world into "us and them", we begin to see more similarities between people, between their cultures, identities, behaviours and world views" [21]. Thus, the foreign language class should follow accurate techniques and strategies to help learners explore their own identities and reflect on self-analysis not only individually but in relation to others. In other words, we can better understand ourselves if we understand others and vice versa.

It can be argued that intercultural learning can take place during mobility programmes. Yet, living abroad does not necessarily lead to intercultural outcomes. The findings of research studies show that international experiences can increase ethnocentric attitudes and less willingness to interact with others [22]. Thus, foreign language education should promote learners' attitudes of respect and tolerance towards others and overcome stereotypes [23].

1-4- Virtual Exchange and Forgien Language Learning:

Virtual exchange (VE), also known as online intercultural exchange (OIE), collaborative online exchange or telecollaboration, refers to the engagement of groups of learners in virtual interaction with other partners from different cultural affiliations or geographical locations. This online experience is facilitated by educators or expert facilitators who ensure successful and fruitful intercultural dialogues among the participants [24].

Within the field of foreign language education, VE is regarded as a useful tool for fostering intercultural awareness in the foreign language classroom since the regular communication with individuals from different countries can provide new opportunities for learners to learn about and reflect on their intercultural experience in a safe environment. This virtual space can be enriching for understanding others and building greater self-awareness. Although VE is a useful tool for intercultural learning amidst the proliferation of technology, it "continues to be a relatively peripheral activity" [25]. This is because educators can struggle to sustain the long-term exchanges, and often even the short-term ones, without the adequate support from their institutions [26]. Still, in the contexts where it is possible, VE can bridge the gap between learners across the globe. Bosio sees that VE can involve learners and teaching and non-teaching staff in international and intercultural experiences that can enhance the development of "global citizenship", the sense of belonging to a community which can surpass the national borders [27].

1-5- The Role of Virtual Exchange in Enhancing Intercultural Competence:

VE is used in various fields, but it has gained more prominence in foreign language education [28]. In this concern, O'Dowd and Dooly highlight four advantages of VE in intercultural learning. Firstly, telecollaborative exchanges can help learners to know more about other cultures. This knowledge is more realistic and reflects the individuals who are present in the virtual environment. Indeed, such knowledge cannot be found in textbooks or any cultural studies resources and websites. Secondly, learners can develop their pragmatic competence in foreign language learning because they are widely exposed to a broad range of foreign language discourse options. This exposure is facilitated due to the interactional and performative aspects of online exchange. Thirdly, learners can explore in-depth cultural 'rich points' and elicit connotations of cultural behaviour from 'real' communicators in the online intercultural setting. This allows learners to get more insights about the personal and subjective experiences of their partners' sociocultural environments which is relevant for learners since they can experience similarities and differences in how they understand the various aspects in the online negotiations. This process leads to a deep awareness "of the relativity of their own cultural beliefs and values as they try to make them explicit for their

partners through carefully guided reflection" [29]. Fourthly, learners have more opportunities to better understand that cultures are highly complex and dynamic with fluid and mutable boundaries. Thus, they become by themselves more aware of how globalisation and the local influence each other [30].

It is worth to mention that intercultural learning through telecollaboration is not automatic. VE ought to be designed and based on a sound pedagogy with principles of collaborative learning and mutual understanding [31]. O'Dowd and Dooly also recommend that educators applying VE should "avoid unfounded expectations that the activity will have magical transformative effects on students' linguistic skills and intercultural awareness" because "intercultural learning is a lifelong process and is not something which can be achieved through one particular learning experience" [32].

Evidently, there are many ways and tools for educators to implement VE projects within their respective institutions. In the primary and secondary levels, teachers appear to organise telecollaborative exchanges through large networks like eTwinning and ePals. For higher education, the European Commission has launched Erasmus+ VE which is an online pilot project to promote various forms of online collaboration for adults [33].

1-6- Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Project:

Erasmus+ VE project is based on using virtual synchronous sessions and online learning activities to promote intercultural dialogue and understanding among the participants. It was first launched by the European Commission under a contract with the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency in January 2018 to link people aged 18 to 30 years old from Europe and Southern Mediterranean[34]. Erasmus+ VE programme is regarded primarily as an intercultural dialogue project. It also provides participants the opportunity to develop their "soft skills", which include foreign languages and teamwork [35].

During the synchronous sessions, facilitators play a major role in facilitating the communication process between the participants. These facilitators have received advanced training to be neutral and multi-partial in order to maintain a safe online environment for exchanging ideas and sharing perspectives. The ultimate goal is to ensure that all the voices of all participants, regardless of their origins or cultural affiliation, are heard, represented, and respected[36]. Facilitators also ensure a good discussion in which participants engage in constructive, authentic and respectful dialogue in order to learn deeply from the group They intervene only to ensure clarity, understanding, equality among the participants, and progression of the discussion. They also ask critical thinking questions that require deep analysis and self-reflection, give accurate observations, and provide summaries of what have been discussed.

The facilitators' role does not undermine the participants' voices which are the driving force for the online exchange [37]. The platform is theirs to listen and respond to each other, share opinions, ask questions, explore the various perspectives and engage with differences in a meaningful manner. Participants also have time for their own reflection and self-assessment. During the virtual courses, participants attend weekly synchronous sessions, watch content related videos, fill out online response journals and other different assessment activities, and work on collaborative projects with their peers [38]. Participants who successfully complete the course are awarded online badges which are based on existing frameworks for digital and intercultural competences. These badges can be displayed on social media or downloaded and printed [39].

Since its foundation in 2018, the Erasmus+ Virtual programme has been dealing with topics that target intercultural outcomes, in addition to transversal and digital competences. To list just a few, European Refuge/es: Cultivating Diversity Together (2018); Cultural Encounters (2019); Countering Hate Speech (2020). According to UNICollaboration, the Cross-Disciplinary Organisation for Telecollaboration and VE in Higher Education, the Erasmus project has succeeded in engaging more than 24.000 young people in VE activities and created over 250 partnerships with universities and youth organisations[40].

There are two main types of Erasmus+ VE programmes which are pertinent for the context of higher education. First, "ready-made" VE is designed and managed by organisations under the guidance of experts in the field. Second, the Transnational Erasmus+ VE Project (TEP) is developed and implemented by teachers themselves in higher education after receiving intensive training and professional development [41].

Erasmus+ VE has proved to be beneficial on many levels. It is a new experience that permits participants to discuss topics and issues which they do not usually tackle with their friends, as in the case of themes like populism, nationalism and gender equality in media. It also gives them the chance to virtually meet people, learn from their experiences and gain more confidence to work in a culturally diverse context [42]. Above all, the programme has helped participants to get out of their comfort zones and explore the richness of taking part in building intercultural dialogue.

2- Research Methodology :

The process of collecting evidence on how Erasmus+ VE programme can help to improve the participants' IC, particularly IE, has followed a comprehensive research methodology. The researchers have employed the mixed method approach relying on both quantitative and qualitative data to gather evidence concerning the development of IE of participants who have taken part in an Erasmus+ VE course.

The rationale behind opting for a mixed method approach is that "a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches is needed in cross-national research due to the highly diverse cultural contexts to be studied" [43]. This is relevant to the current research as the participants in the study are from different countries and cultural backgrounds.

The data which constitute the core of this research paper have been collected from 50 participants in the course offered by Erasmus+ VE "Cultural Encounters: Perspectives on Populism 2020". The target population includes 36 females (72%) and 14 males (28%) who come from different countries like Algeria, France, Belgium, Germany and Pakistan. In order to enroll in the course, participants have filled in the application form with general information about them and reasons for choosing this course.

The course lasted for ten weeks from March 9th, 2020 to May 17th, 2020. The programme involved various topics like open identities, populism and authoritarianism, and rethinking the concept of borders. Participants had weekly two-hour synchronous sessions through the dialogue platform "Exchange Portal". They also watched video lectures from expert academics each week and submitted thoughtful comments via online platforms, which had to be reflections on their own understanding and implications. At the end of each synchronous session, participants also had to fill in the weekly online response journal which is a personal record of their experience and development during the nine weeks. The final assignment is a video dialogue project. Here participants were required to invite a friend or a family member to discuss some of the topics that were raised in the course and respond to the colleagues' views in the project [44].

A questionnaire has been submitted via Google Forms to 50 randomly chosen participants, who have taken part in Erasmus+ VE course "Cultural Encounters: Perspectives on Populism 2020". The questionnaire is divided into three parts. The first one contains three questions to obtain background information about the participants concerning age, gender and country of residence. The second part of the questionnaire is a quantitative tool to measure the influence of Erasmus+ VE in developing IE. This tool is called the IE Scale (IES) and contains 20 items of five-point Likert Scale originally developed by Portalla and Chen based on Chen and Starosta's conceptualization of IE [45]. Thus, the selected tool measures the behavioural aspect of IC that has been described earlier in this paper.

The IES contains six corresponding factors to the model of IE. Thus, the five main constructs of IE, message skills, interaction management, behavioral flexibility, identity management and relationship cultivation are represented in the measurement instrument. The six factors constructing the IE scale are Message Skills (items 6,10,12), Behavioral Flexibility

items (2,4,14,18), Interaction Relaxation (items 1,3,11,13,19), Interactant Respect (items 9,15,20), Identity Maintenance (items 8,16,17), and Interaction Management (items 5,7) [46].

The third part of the questionnaire contains four open-ended questions. Thus, qualitative data is gathered concerning the participants' views about their experience in intercultural exchange through the Erasmus+ VE project. Indeed, open-ended questions can serve to obtain more insights and reflections concerning the influence of online intercultural encounters on the participants' IE.

Like any other type of research, this descriptive study has some limitations. First, the target population included only 50 participants in the Erasmus+ VE course. More insights could have been reached if there had been a larger number of respondents. Second, the self-report process in the IES can be the subjective outcome of the participants' impression. In this regard, Chen and Starsota argue that it is difficult to decide whether the individuals' IE should be evaluated by themselves as they are the ones involved in intercultural interaction or by an observer. Hence, judging people's ability to be interculturally effective is a challenging task [47]. Results could be different if more qualitative tools for collecting data were employed. Another potential limitation is that the study does not trace the participants' development of IC before and after the course. It only assesses their IC after the Erasmus+ VE programme. Thus, discussion will be made in relation to comparing the results of the six different aspects of the IES and analysing the reflection questions.

3- Results and Discussions:
3-1-Section 1: Background Information:

Table n°1: Participants' Age

Age Range	Number of Participants
18-20	10 (20%)
21-24	22 (44%)
25-30	18 (36 %)

Source: By the authors

Table n° 2: Participants' Origin

Country	Number	Country	Number	Country	Number
Algeria	7	Poland	3	Afghanistan	1
France	5	Russia	3	Belgium	1
Turkey	5	Egypt	2	Spain	1
Tunisia	4	Lebanon	2	Palestine	1
Germany	4	Japan	2	Morocco	1
Syria	3	Greece	2	Italy	1
		Pakistan	1	Switzerland	1

Source: By the authors

The two table above show that participants are from different age groups and origins. This indicates that participants in the Erasmus+ VE course can enrich the online learning environment with their own experiences, perceptions and reflections. The different cultural affiliations of the participants, regardless of where they come from, in addition to the individual characteristics of each one of them are likely to influence the process of intercultural dialogue.

3-2-Section 2: The IES:

All the participants answered the IES proposed by Portalla and Chen which is an efficient tool for them to self-assess their IE [48] after participating in the Erasmus+ VE programme. As indicated in Table 3, the scale is divided into six factors. Each factor is composed of items in a five-point Likert scale. Items 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, and 18 are reverse-coded. The mean of each item is counted. Then, the total mean of each factor is provided in order to compare and contrast the result of each component of IE.

Table n° 3: The Results of the IES

IE Scale Factors	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean
Message Skills (items 6,10,12)						**3.50**
6. I have problems with grammar when interacting with people from different cultures.	11 (22%)	18 (36%)	10 (20%)	11 (22%)	0 (0%)	3.58
10. I have problems distinguishing between informative and persuasive messages when interacting with people from different cultures.	9 (18%)	13 (26%)	26 (52%)	2 (4%)	0 (0%)	3.58
12. I often miss parts of what is going on when interacting with people from different cultures.	8 (16 %)	16 (32%)	13 (26%)	12 (24%)	1 (2%)	3.36
Behavioral Flexibility items 2,4,14,18,						**4.14**
2. I am afraid to express myself when interacting with people from different cultures.	13 (26%)	23 (46%)	10 (20%)	4 (8%)	0 (0%)	3.9
4. I am not always the person I appear to be when interacting with people from different cultures	11 (22%)	21 (42%)	16 (32%)	2 (4%)	0 (0%)	3.9
14. I often act like a very different person when interacting with people from different cultures.	24 (48%)	15 (30%)	8 (16%)	3 (6%)	0 (0%)	4.2
18. I find the best way to act is to be myself when interacting with people from different cultures	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (6%)	15 (30%)	32 (64%)	4.58
Interaction Relaxation (items 1,3,11,13,19) **1**. I find it is easy to talk with people from different cultures.	1 (2%)	1 (2%)	6 (12%)	31 (62%)	11 (22%)	**3.91** 4
3. I find it is easy to get along with people from different cultures.	3 (6%)	2 (4%)	6 (12%)	25 (50%)	14 (28%)	3.9
11. I always know how to initiate a conversation when interacting with people from different cultures.	0 (0%)	4 (8%)	9 (18%)	32 (64%)	5 (10%)	3.76
13. I feel relaxed when interacting with people from different cultures	0 (0%)	3 (6%)	6 (12%)	214 (42%)	20 (40%)	4.16
19. I find it is easy to identify with my culturally different counterparts during our interaction.	0 (0%)	1 (2%)	10 (20%)	29 (58%)	10 (20%)	3.74
4. **Interaction Management (items 5,7)** **5**. I am able to express my ideas clearly when interacting with people from different cultures.	0 (0%)	5 (10%)	9 (18%)	23 (46%)	13 (26%)	**3.89** 3.88
7. I am able to answer questions effectively when interacting with people from different cultures.	0 (0%)	3 (6%)	11 (22%)	24 (48%)	12 (24%)	3.90
Interactant Respect (items 9,15,20) **9.** I use appropriate eye contact when interacting with people from different cultures.	1 (2%)	1 (2%)	13 (26%)	24 (48%)	11 (22%)	**4.36** 3.86
15. I always show respect for my culturally different counterparts during our interaction.	0 (0%)	1 (2%)	3 (6%)	7 (14%)	39 (78%)	4.62
20. I always show respect for the opinions of my culturally different counterparts during our interaction.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (6%)	13 (26%)	34 (68%)	4.62
6. **Identity Maintenance (items 8,16,17)** **8.** I find it is difficult to feel my culturally different counterparts are similar to me.	9 (18%)	18 (36%)	20 (40%)	3 (6%)	0 (0%)	**3.84** 3.66

16. I always feel a sense of distance with my culturally different counterparts during our interaction.	13 (26%)	21 (42%)	11 (22%)	4 (8%)	1 (2%)	3.80
17. I find I have a lot in common with my culturally different counterparts during our interaction	1 (2%)	2 (4%)	5 (10%)	27 (54%)	15 (30%)	4.06

Source: By the authors

Graph n° 1: IES Mean Results
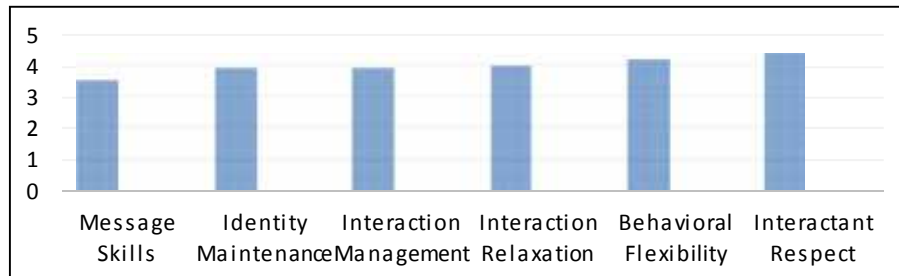
Source: By the authors

3-2-1-Message Skills:

The findings show that participants in Erasmus+ VE have the required message skills which are indispensable in any interaction process. Yet, the mean of this factor (3.50) is the lowest in IES in contrast to the other factors. This can be attributed to the fact that developing an appropriate use of grammar, distinguishing between persuasive and informative messages, and following the track of a discussion are the outcomes of a long-term learning process, not only nine weeks in Erasmus+ VE. While grammar use and differentiating persuasive and informative messages are ranked equally, item 12 is ranked the lowest in the whole IES where participants reveal that they miss parts of what is going on in interaction while conversing with others from different cultures. This is perhaps due to difficulties to understand the various accents of English used by participants or the challenges and complexities imposed by the Erasmus+ VE platform where technical issues take place more frequently, as revealed by participants in the reflection part that is discussed in section 3.

3-2-2-Interaction Management:

Interaction management is the ability of the individual to express ideas and answer questions during the interaction. It also involves the ability to start and end a conversation and take turns adequately. The mean of this factor is (3.89), which is slightly better than the previous one of message skills. Overall, most participants, including (46%) who agree and (26%) who strongly agree, indicate that they can express their ideas clearly when interacting with people from different cultures. Similarly, the majority of the respondents (48%) agree and (24%) strongly agree) say that they can answer questions effectively when interacting with people from different cultures. This ability to manage interaction can be the result of participating in the weekly Erasmus+ VE sessions where participants express thoughts and perspectives and ask reflection questions. The results also indicate that though participants rank low in message skills, they still can manage the interaction process.

3-2-3-Behavioural Flexibility:

This factor represents the flexible dimension of IE. The mean (4.14) makes it higher than message skills and interaction management. This entails that participants in Erasmus+ VE course can use appropriate behaviours in intercultural situations. Most participants (64%) prefer being themselves when interacting with people from different cultures, as they are not afraid of expressing themselves. Yet, some participants (32%) are uncertain whether they are always themselves when interacting with people from different cultures or not. This is probably attributed to the novelty of the Erasmus+ VE programme for participants who do not know how to act. The Erasmus+ VE platform can also limit participants' ability to "perform different behavioral strategies in order to achieve communication goals" [49] because

interaction in a virtual environment does not proceed the same way as in real-life communication.

3-2-4-Interaction Relaxation:

The interaction relaxation factor refers to the ease that the participants feel during conversation including their approachability, openness, and overall comfort level while interacting with others [50]. The results of the IES indicate that most participants find it easy to talk and get along with people from different cultures. They also find it easy to identify with their culturally different counterparts during their interaction. The mean of this factor (3.91) is higher than the ones of message skills and interaction management. This entails that despite the limitation in communicative skills, participants feel at ease when interacting with others. That is why Portalla and Chen argue that "people scoring high in the [IE scale] are less characterized by an unpleasant emotional state, feelings of tension or apprehension and worry […] towards the perceived interaction" [51].

3-2-5-Interactant Respect:

Effective intercultural communicators can show respect to their interactants during the intercultural interaction. Respect refers to the person's ability to put the interests of others first [52]. Participants in the Erasmus+ VE course have obtained the highest score in the interactant respect factor with a mean of (4.36). The majority of the respondents claim that they show respect to their counterparts during interaction and they respect their opinions. This indicates that the respondents are aware of the reciprocal and interdependent nature of interaction. To show respect, participants listen attentively to others and use non-verbal cues to demonstrate that they are following the track of the dialogue. One way is the use of eye contact since eyes are used for sending and receiving meaningful messages during communication and are considered as "the windows to our souls" [53]. Results show that (48 %) of the participants agree and (22 %) strongly agree that they use appropriate eye contact when interacting with people from different cultures. The rest of the participants (26%) are uncertain about the use of eye contact in interacting with others while few participants (4%) disagree with the use of eye contact. This can be attributed to the individuals' own communication styles or the cultural norms and values that govern the use of eye contact. Hence, "individuals must be open to the possibility that another person's cultural or personal norms concerning eye contact may be subtly or markedly different from their own"[54].

3-2-6-Identity Maintenance:

Identity Maintenance refers to the person's ability to maintain a unique identity of their counterpart from different cultures while also maintaining their own separate identity during the interaction. The mean of this factor (3.84) is lower than the other factors except for message skills. The findings show that most participants disagree (36%) and strongly disagree (18%) with the fact that they find it difficult to feel their culturally different counterparts are similar to them. This entails that despite their cultural differences, participants still feel that others are similar to them. However, other participants (40%) are uncertain whether it is difficult for them to feel they share similarities with others. Furthermore, most of the participants disagree (42%) or strongly disagree (26%) with the idea that they feel a sense of distance with others during interaction. Instead, the majority of the participants say that they have a lot in common with other interactants. Discussion with others, sharing ideas and perspectives, and reflecting on personal experiences during the weekly synchronous sessions can help participants to discover points of convergence between group members despite their differing cultural identities and gain deeper self-awareness. More evidence concerning identity maintenance factor can be found in the discussion of open-ended questions.

3-3-Section 3: Reflections

The last part of the questionnaire contains four open-ended questions that delve into understanding participants' reflections on their experience in the Erasmus+ VE "*Cultural Encounters: Perspectives on Populism*". Thus, the qualitative data obtained serve to interpret

the quantitative findings of the current study and provide a more nuanced understanding of participants' experience

The first question enquires about the abilities that participants have developed concerning interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds. First, most of the participants indicate that the Erasmus+ VE course has improved their speaking skills, communicative competence, and interacting with others easily and more openly without any fear or shyness. They have become more fluent in speaking despite some limitations in grammar use, as one participant highlights. "*I used to be shy because I thought I had poor language but I could learn how to communicate and speak with others step by step*". Another one explains that the course has helped in "*Interacting more openly with others from different origins I could get out of my comfort zone and communicate better and express my idea*s". They have also enhanced the skills of asking and answering questions effectively.

Second, participants have improved not only their ability to speak, but also their ability to listen attentively to others in order to understand their varying opinions. What is more interesting is that some participants have increased their active listening, one of them reveals, "*I have developed the ability to listen actively to others. Instead of thinking about a reply, I think about the perceptions of my colleagues and try to understand why they hold such a point of view.*" This skill is fundamental for understanding others without any judgment. They have also learnt rules of conversation and listening without interrupting others. Thus, developing communicative abilities and interaction management skills correlate with the quantitative findings of the IES. The modest increase of message skills factor during the Erasmus+ VE course can be justified by responses such as "*I improved my communication skills to a little extent and I learnt about others cultures, behaviours, customs and the way they celebrate*" and "Not *really that much, I just improved my language a bit*".

In addition to speaking and listening skills, participants reveal that they have improved the ability to understand others. They have become "more culturally aware" in the sense that they have engaged in "*Effective dialogue which is based on mutual respect and understanding*" and developed acceptance of and tolerance towards others, valuing diversity and learning from others. One participant reveals "*The most important thing which I developed is understanding people of different cultures from their point of view*". More importantly, one respondent indicates the development of "*Empathy towards others*". Empathy is "the set of skills required to understand and relate to other people's thoughts, beliefs and feelings, and to see the world from other people's perspectives" [55]. Indeed, empathy is such a fundamental set of skills that the Council of Europe has regarded it as one of the competences for democratic cultures [56]. These indicators can possibly explain why the factor of interactant respect has the highest mean in the entire IES

The second question sheds light on the most important thing(s) that participants have learned concerning their own and others' identity during the Erasmus+ VE. Three important conclusions can be synthesized from the answers. First, respecting others is the mostly repeated response of most participants who emphasize that they respect their interlocutors regardless of their origins because they are all humans. One respondent indicates, "*The most important thing was the meaning of belonging to humanity instead of belonging to culture or nation*". VE makes them feel and understand that they belong to a larger community rather than only their culture or nation. This is what Bosio terms "global citizenship" [57].

The second conclusion is that valuing diversity and overcoming stereotypes are prerequisites for building successful intercultural dialogue. For instance, one respondent says that he/she has learnt "*not to judge others based on the country they come from. The stereotypes we have about others are wrong for me; I learnt to be more open towards others without losing the sense of who I am*". Another one highlights that "*I care about the person more than anything else, I can totally relate to people no matter how much differences we might have regarding Nationality, race, religion, etc.*" Participants, hence, recognize the existence of multiple identities such as cultural, religious, ethnic and individual identities.

Through emphasizing the uniqueness of the individuals' identity, participants maintain that they have found similarities with their counterparts and gained an awareness about their own identity. Thus, the third conclusion suggests that they are aware of the existence of divergent and convergent characteristics as one participant reveals, "*There are so much things we all have in common and that it is precious to listen to the stories of others to truly understand where their beliefs are coming from.*" Furthermore, respondents have demonstrated an awareness of themselves in the process of interacting with others, which is fundamental for maintaining identity in intercultural interaction. One of them explains, "*I have learnt that we are all different in a unique way and that such cultural exchange is a crucial way to become not just aware of the other, but also aware of yourself and what makes you different from the others.*" Another one highlights, "*I discovered myself more, through reflections, I developed self-awareness I learned that other people are different from me, but we can have things in common*". Above all, these findings justify the quantitative findings related to interactant respect and identity management. Only one participant says that "*Cultural exchange is a bit confusing and irritating.*" This is perhaps due to the feeling of anxiety about communicating in the new online environment *Soliya* with people through using English as a lingua franca.

The third question enquires about how Erasmus+ VE programme had helped in building relationships with people from other cultures. Most of the participants say that they have succeeded in establishing interpersonal relationships with others from various backgrounds whom they will not have the chance to meet in real life. They got to know more people and make new friends through working collaboratively on the assigned tasks, exchanging ideas, and discussing matters that they all care about. This has contributed in learning about others' behaviours, customs, perspectives, assumptions and values. One respondent indicates "*During the pandemic, Erasmus+ VE made it easy for me to know people and exchange ideas. They are my friends now I hope we can meet in real life one day.*" Most of them are still in contact with each other via Watts up, Facebook or LinkedIn. This is useful as one of them reveals, "*I have made a lot of friends across the globe and that helped me overcome my shyness and my introvert nature.*" These findings correlate with the previous quantitative data of interactant respect factor that is related to relationship cultivation, the ability to establish positive interpersonal relationships through interacting with others. Yet, a minority of participants prefer real life interactions rather than virtual ones, which is why they did not maintain contact with the programme participants.

The final question investigates whether or not the participants would like to take part in future Erasmus+ VE projects or any other online exchange programme. Most respondents express their willingness to participate in Erasmus+ VE courses since they provide opportunities to engage in a safe online intercultural exchange. Participants also indicate that the course is useful for enhancing their communication skills, interacting with people from different cultures, making new friends and learning from them, and sharing experiences and perspectives with others. One of them emphasizes, "*I would definitely like to participate in future in such projects to further enhance my knowledge regarding societal issues and their solutions so as to contribute in the betterment of our society*."

Others, 6 % of the participants, however, prefer not to be part of VE courses because of the following reasons. First, it is hard to overcome technical issues that are likely to occur during the synchronous sessions and lead to interrupting the online learning experience. In addition to technical issues, another respondent reveals that "*the course also took a lot of time, the period of 10 weeks was too long. And the content of the course was a bit difficult and challenging.*" Indeed, discussing issues related to populism and nationalism is not an easy task.

Conclusion: Results and suggestions:

IC is an important area of research within academia since it allows people to interact appropriately and effectively with others from various cultures. It can be developed in the

context of foreign language education through the integration of online collaborative projects. For instance, Erasmus+ VE programme is useful for enhancing participants' bavioural aspect of IC since it involves direct online intercultural interaction with others.

The current study draws some recommendations. Teachers in higher education can design and develop VE Projects as part of the curriculum. For instance, the UNICollaboration provides educators the opportunity to find VE partners in another teaching context [58]. O'Dwod and Dooly also recommend that it is essential to consider the richness of online exchange that can offer learners a closer experience in intercultural communication within the supportive environment of the classroom. Indeed, telecollaboration is regarded as a sound approach to foreign language education and intercultural learning. What is more important is that teachers should follow some guidelines in order to ensure a successful intercultural learning experience for their learners. To achieve this goal, educators need to be trained in the field of online exchange as a tool for developing IC [59].

VE is challenging to be implemented, yet it remains a useful tool to engage learners in meaningful intercultural experiences, especially in the current time of restricted travel. The pandemic era has proved that learners in different contexts need intercultural learning amidst the spread of misinformation, fake news, propaganda and discrimination. The need for more opportunities to intercultural learning is more pressing than before. VE, as a tool for enhancing IC, is still in its early stages. Yet, it has the possibility to open up opportunities for building intercultural dialogue and communication.

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