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PROJECT IBUNKA – A SUSTAINABLE VE PROJECT AND THE PRACTICES

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I have been coordinating a virtual exchange project, *Project Ibunka* for twenty-three years. *Ibunka* means different cultures in Japanese. The major goal is to provide asynchronous authentic interaction among EFL/ESL learners around the globe. About 8,000 English learners from twenty-five countries have joined it since 2000. *Project Ibunka* is extremely proud of the long life, cooperative and dedicated partner teachers, the cultural diversity, and the quality of messages exchanged. These are invaluable assets of the project. In my presentation, I would like to show the following two: key features of *Project Ibunka* that contribute the sustainability, and the specific practices at my institute, Yokohama National University, Japan.

1.   Key features of *Project Ibunka*

Watanabe (2020a) stipulates the following three core administrative features of *Project Ibunka*:

(1)

i.   non-unified project goals for partner institutions

ii.   selecting and sequencing themes and sub-themes

iii.   moderation by experienced instructors

The following charts demonstrate the difference between COIL (collaborative online international learning) and *Project Ibunka*. In COIL, both instructors and students work for a few pre-agreed goals. Whereas, *Project Ibunka* is more flexible. It provides fields for cross-cultural interaction. However, it does not pre-determine the goals for each of the partner institutions. Each institution has broad discretion in how it can incorporate the interaction into its curriculum design.
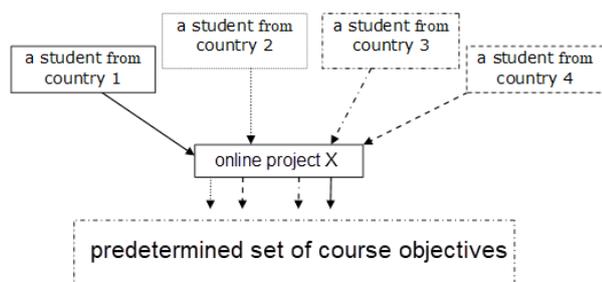
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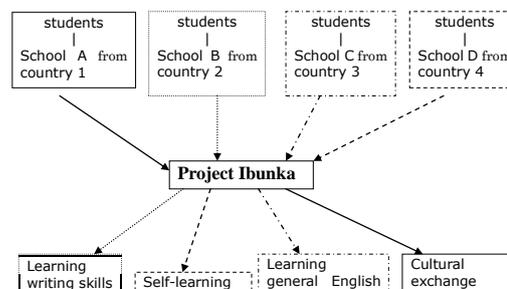
Project Ibunka

Not only the diversity of goals among partner institutions, *Project Ibuka* allows partial participation. Although it is preferable for institutions to engage in the twelve-week intercommunication, this is not mandatory. Some might participate only for the first four weeks and some for the last four weeks.

Project Ibunka provides the following three discussion themes, 1) *school life*, 2) *cultures*, and 3) *social issues – world peace*. The following shows the approximate correspondence between these themes and CEFR scales:

Discussion Themes	CEFR Scales
School life	
Cultures	A2
Social issues - world peace	B1 B2

Each of the three themes lasts for four weeks. *School life* requires students to write a message with 200 or more words, *cultures*, 300 or more, and *social issues – world peace*, 400 or more. Students write longer and more challenging essays as the themes proceed.

Instructors' moderation is significant in *Project Ibunka*. Instructors give students various types of information, reply promptly to the inquiries made locally, achieve a sense of unity with other partner teachers, reduce the risk associated with VE, guide students to better learning cooperation at their institutions, and others. The weekly-published project newsletters help instructors reduce their burden. Twelve issues published during the project provide information about 1) current tasks for students, 2) the operational procedures of WBB, 3) the partner schools, students, and teachers, 4) the compositional skills, 5) online asynchronous communication skills, 6) several excellent postings of the week, 7) a few reading materials for critical thinking, and others. Project newsletters perform a pivotal role in sharing information for both students and instructors.

2.   The practices at Yokohama National University, Japan

Watanabe (2020b) proposes that virtual exchange language instructors should tackle international controversies rather than shelve them so that students could approach the goal of multicultural understanding. Specifically, instructors should enhance students' cross-cultural dialogue skills and nurture their naïve sentiments for basic human needs. This is especially important in the Asia-Pacific region, where a number of politically unsolved controversies have been influencing not only state-level economic and political cooperation but also civil-level cultural exchanges. Even when we find a few state-level arguments, we can still promote structured civil-level exchanges, which in turn might affect the political resolutions of the states. Dialogue skills are the key for this and language teachers have much to do with them. Although Watanabe (2020b) presents

theoretical considerations for multicultural understanding, it lacks realistic pedagogical practices for it.

Every endeavor to achieve an ambitious pedagogical goal should accompany a pragmatic analysis of learner needs. When multicultural understanding is set as a goal for Japanese language learners, three major needs can be pointed out. First, the lack of language fluency. Compared to English learners outside of Japan, Japanese learners cannot produce the target language for smooth communication. Due to the foreign language learning settings, students cannot find moments where they have to use English for authentic purposes. The classroom is a major place for the target language use. Coupled with the grammar-centered instruction they have got in classes so far, they care too much about accuracy at the sacrifice of fluency. Second, the lack of knowledge about what the Japanese had done to Asian citizens during the invasion period of the war. The tragedy of Hiroshima-Nagasaki has long been highlighted as the reason for the domestic pacifist movements in schools. However, the fact that the military invasion of neighboring Asian nations produced many human rights maltreatments has little been scrutinized. Third, the lack of confidence in bridging the gap between Japanese and non-Japanese who negatively perceive Japanese. Several diplomatic proposals have been made to create mutually satisfactory historical views. None of them have made any substantial results.

To satisfy these learners' needs, I incorporated three types of virtual exchanges in my 2021 course. They are different in the degrees of virtuality, i.e., virtual, more virtual, and less virtual.

Virtual exchange is *Project Ibunka.* This is an asynchronous written message interaction with the partner students. Bulletin board discussion gives Japanese opportunities to use English for authentic written interaction. Compared with participants from other nations, the Japanese lack fluency. The total number of responses each student has got from partner students, as well as the total number of his/her postings are evaluated so that students can pursue meaningful spontaneous interaction on the boards.

A more virtual exchange is also an asynchronous written message exchange. However, this is with the non-existent people. In August 2020, Y. Ochiai, N. Kitagawa, and M. Murota translated their Japanese book published in 2015 into English as, *Reflections on Stolen Youth 1945 ← 2015*. The book contains fifteen interviews of Japanese who survived World War II. They depict difficult wartime days from the viewpoint of a youth living at that time. The book contains interviewees' statements both as a victim and as an aggressor. Each of the interviews is coupled with a letter from a present-day youth addressed to the interviewee. Using the letters given in the book as a reference, students wrote a letter to the war-experiencing interviewee imagining him or

her as a person of comparable age. This more virtual exchange has made students consider what they had done if they had been in a similar situation as the interviewees.

Less virtual exchange is the online/in-person synchronous spoken language workshops guided by a few Japanese lecturers who have worked for the reconciliation between Japanese and war-damaged citizens outside of Japan. One of the workshops of 2021, for example, was organized by Ms. Naoko Jin, a representative of an NGO, Bridge for Peace, in Japan. She visited a small village in Negros Island, the Philippines, in 2000. She was a senior at her university at that time and learned the Japanese army had destroyed the peaceful lives of the local citizens. When she went back to Japan, she also learned that some of the ex-Japanese soldiers had been struggling with great remorse about what they had done during the war. Some of them had been suffering from post-war PTSD after they came back to Japan. She interviewed and videotaped many ex-soldiers in Japan, and re-visited Negros Island in 2005. She held a meeting with the locals and showed her video. After watching the apologies of the ex-Japanese soldiers on the video, one local lady said, "I would like to forgive the Japanese." It is true that we cannot see similar bridging efforts as Ms. Jin are not common in Japan, but what she did has given a lot of insights to the current university students in Japan.

Each of the three virtual exchanges is aimed to satisfy Japanese students' three needs for multicultural understanding: a virtual exchange is for their lack of fluency, a more virtual one is for their lack of knowledge about the military invasion of Japan, and a less virtual one is for their lack of confidence in dialoguing the foreign citizens who had suffered a lot from the invasion of Japan. Drukin (1993) defines reading comprehension as "intentional thinking during which meaning is constructed through interactions between text and reader". This means that students must proactively interact with the information to achieve sufficient comprehension. In my presentation, I would like to show offering various types of virtual exchanges is prospective for multicultural understanding since it can facilitate reducing geographical and temporal distance. In a virtual exchange, people with different cultural backgrounds can meet. In a more virtual exchange, students can tackle the unsolved controversies that have roots in the remote past. In a less virtual exchange, students can learn about successful multicultural dialogues. The different degrees of virtuality can provide students with appropriate dialogue skills for non-violent global integration.

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VIRTUAL EXCHANGE AND PEDAGOGICAL EDUCATION

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Digital transformation as a process of modernization of education should take into account the emerging advantages of the virtual world and allow the full use of the potential of digital technologies. Digital educational resources have become an effective tool both for teaching and educating the younger generation, as well as for preparing them for life in a digital society. Digitization of education opens up new opportunities and creates awareness of the value of such concepts as "digital world" and "virtual world". Digitization of education is primarily focused on the formation of digital competences of a fundamentally new type, new soft and hard skills. In particular, human activity in the digital environment involves the possession of such competencies as the ability to use digital tools for identification, access, management, analysis, evaluation and synthesis of digital resources, to productively, critically and safely choose and apply information and communication technologies in various spheres of life (in including work with content, communication, consumption, technosphere). In addition, all modern technologies are not called convergent by chance – current technological solutions are, as a rule, a synthesis, the result of the activities of specialists in various fields – from the field of information technology, genetics, chemistry, and physics to brain and social sciences.

The complications and dynamics of challenges in the modern world, the formation of a global information environment, continentalization and globalization at large – all these factors in their systemic unity determine the need for qualitative innovation-oriented changes in the paradigm of the implementation of lifelong education in general, and, in particular, in the professional education of teaching staff of higher education institutions.

The 21st century has become a turning point in teacher education. All its foundations are transformed. Modern pedagogical science is not searching for the general knowledge of the world, but for rebuilding this knowledge. And all activities of society today can be characterized in one word – innovation. Competent, responsible, competitive, proactive and professionally mobile specialists, who consciously use the means of information and communication technologies in their professional activities, are in demand in the modern world. Nowadays, digital technologies are a tool that is actively used in education and helps to improve all the mentioned qualities. Therefore, an important component of the educational process in institutions of higher education should be the provision of appropriate organizational and pedagogical conditions that contribute to the training of a

competent teacher focused on innovative activities in the conditions of digital transformation of education.

In connection with the current socio-political situation, the role of higher education is especially vital. The educational environment of the university creates conditions for a person who seeks to improve their culture with the help of the latest technological achievements, both in theory and in practice. The didactic system of continuous pedagogical education should be focused on modern educational innovations in its essential characteristics: innovation as an imperative and a system-forming characteristic, at the same time a goal, a principle, a means, a form, and a teaching method. Only with such a multidimensional implementation in the didactic system, innovation will create the prerequisites for the "cultivation" and continuous support of the teacher-innovator as a creative person with a special style of pedagogical activity and thinking (Hauck, 2019).

The teacher no longer simply has to keep up with the advancements in science and technology: the imperative of the advanced quality of education means the need to outstrip this progress in their professional growth. The virtual educational environment has been created and is being developed for effective communication of all participants in the educational process. A specialist's lack of competencies in the possession of relevant technologies a priori limits his professional opportunities, leaving progressive trends in the field of education on the sidelines (Dooly, 2020). The educational environment must meet the needs of the individual, a future teacher, in successful social adaptation and professional development as well.

Today, it is relevant to talk about the use of innovative means and methods for the rapid updating of knowledge, improving the quality of professional training and striving for education throughout life. Therefore, it is important and necessary in the university environment to create an atmosphere of exchange, virtual as well, of intercultural and social development, spiritual development, tolerant attitude towards oneself and others, self-realization and self-affirmation in life and in future professional activities. The use of digital technologies in the educational process will help teachers and students create a platform for discussions in the transfer of knowledge and skills. Road educational maps, new educational programs and scientific and professional platforms for social and cultural dialogue between teachers, students and employers should become a bridge for intercultural and social exchange in the educational process, offline and online as well.

Nowadays, the importance of internationalizing teacher education, producing globally competent educators, and sharing experience, technology and learning content has been recognized. The ubiquity of the Internet and easy access to free technology makes it possible to access global resources and communicate with educators around the

world. At the same time, it is important to purposefully integrate all these resources into curricula and learning processes to ensure an effective learning process.

Virtual exchange is possible within blended learning by engaging groups of prospective teachers in short and long periods of online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographic locations as an integrated part of their educational programs or stand-alone meetings, usually teacher-led and/or mentors. Such interaction can take place in a variety of ways – students can interact with virtual education agents on specific topics in real-time or in a discussion forum; a training course may be presented by teachers from two or more educational organizations (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). In the course of discussions and exchange of experience between students, comparison and discussion of the advantages of different ways of teaching certain disciplines (e.g., language learning) or approaches to the overall curriculum can be carried out. The purpose of virtual connections or exchanges is the interaction of participants, intercultural communication and discourse in the learning process. Achieving these goals often depends on how virtual connections or exchanges are structured, integrated into formal activities, and planned as part of a larger learning process.

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USE OF INTERNET BLOGS IN CONTEXT OF
LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

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Globalization has brought new experiences in the bring cultures, languages, and cultural values together and the educational process has also undergone a process of globalization.

The emergence of educational platforms as a result of globalization allows individuals or organizations to interact on a large scale, which explains the large-scale exchange of students and teachers around the world (Liss, 2013). There is an increase in global competitiveness since the quality of education in the period of globalization is not only teaching students subjects in a certain area but also the development of such important soft skills as the ability to think analytically and effectively express their ideas.

The impact of globalization on higher education is manifested in the establishment of common global criteria for assessing the quality and requirements for the organization of educational programs and the acquisition of professional qualifications. Such trends in the development of higher education reinforce their importance for ensuring the competitiveness of individual states.

It should be noted that the main factor in the development of globalization in society in recent years is the rapid development of information and communication tools. It is information technology that allows people to communicate with several people at the same time. New communication tools have an impact on the content of information, as well as on how people perceive each other in the process of communication, especially representatives of different cultures.

The processes of globalization and the development of information technologies have led to an increase in interest in the problems of intercultural communication. Knowledge of foreign languages is one of the means of communication between representatives of different cultures. Moreover, at the present stage of development of society, there is an increasing need to train not only specialists who are fluent in a foreign

language but also who know all the intricacies of intercultural communication, understand and know how to use the nuances of verbal communication.

Information and communication technologies turn to teach a foreign language into a qualitatively new process that allows: to expand the audience of communication; bring closer and overcome the boundaries between isolated communities through the free exchange of opinions; comprehensively study the culture of other peoples and their experience; to promote the acquisition of a foreign language during the implementation of international projects (Tynny, 2019, p. 226).

Modern social communication tools, in particular, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter allow people from all over the world to present their points of view. Analyzing the features of the virtual environment, it should be noted that digital platforms provide synchronous online communication. This kind of communication can involve misunderstandings between people of different cultures.

In order to overcome the obstacles to building an effective communication process, it is sometimes advisable to use offline communication, which will ensure not only the transfer of information of a cognitive nature and the exchange of knowledge, but also the mutual understanding of people in the process of verbal interaction.

In this context, the teacher must find his own ways to increase students' motivation and skillfully apply them to their own pedagogical experience. Talking about the formation of intercultural competence in the classroom in a foreign language, the teacher must, first of all, use interactive teaching methods: project work, role-playing games, discussions and presentations, meetings with foreign representatives. The interactivity of the educational process contributes to the formation of a culture of communication among students and tolerance for the opinion of communication partners, allowing them to show their intellectual capabilities in terms of exchanging experience in the process of intercultural dialogue.

Stimulating strategies in the formation of intercultural competence also develop a focus on expanding the educational autonomy of students, and in modern conditions, this is especially important. The learning autonomy of students is when a student systematically, exercises self-control over the results of his work, corrects it, and uses effective learning strategies. In this regard, we can focus on the use of Internet blogs, which make it possible to involve students in situations of intercultural communication.

A blog is usually presented in the form of a diary or journal, which contains audio and video recordings, text, photographs, and links to other resources. We can suggest the following learning strategies based on the use of blogs.

1. For the development of language competencies, students can be invited to develop blogs to study lexical units, grammar rules, perform grammar tests, pronunciation using audio or video materials.

2. Teachers can organize discussions in a foreign language between students about what they saw or read in a blog, which contributed to the development of their communicative function.

3. Students as blog readers have the opportunity to express their personal opinion in comments and messages to the author of the blog. Therefore, blogs help stimulate student interaction and realize social learning.

4. Finally, blogging as a writer in a foreign language can improve students' writing skills and it has a significant impact on the development of their rhetorical strategies. What is more, blogging plays a huge role in improving grammar, paragraphing constructions, and developing feedback focus.

Internet blogs will contribute to the formation of a competitive specialist, not only successful in the information environment, but also able to think critically, capable of making non-standard decisions during intercultural English-speaking communication. Multimedia teaching aids, such as Internet blogs, create the most favorable conditions for the development of cognitive interest and creative abilities of students, the use of their individual characteristics in educational activities. (Bikonya, Shevchenko, Vityaz & Ivanishina, 2021, p. 261).

To sum up, the virtual environment of the Internet offers ample opportunities for autonomous learning of students, since it provides free access to modern materials, among which we can single out the blog as an affordable method of language learning. An analysis of the capabilities of modern virtual platforms through blogs suggests that they provide numerous opportunities for learning and using foreign languages in practice. Although blogs are not intended directly for educational purposes, their resources with the right methodology can be an important part of both classroom and independent learning of a foreign language, as well as developing an understanding of oneself and the culture of other people.

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PSYCHOLOGICAL AND MULTICULTURAL ASPECTS OF VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

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We are living in a digital world where most of our life is spent in front of a screen. We work online, study online, and exchange experiences and knowledge online. With the availability of the Internet and the possibility to share information in real-time people all over the world are increasingly developing responsibility for the quality of data shared. Today, apart from promoting knowledge and expertise across borders mankind faces an abundance of fake information, hatred and privacy invasion. In spite of the threats educators across the globe are seeking mutual understanding, intercultural cooperation, and awareness of cultural differences, all of these for the sake of foreign language proficiency via virtual exchange programs.

A definition of the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange platform says that "virtual exchange combines the deep impact of intercultural dialogue and exchange with the broad reach of digital technology" (Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, 2019, n.p.). Along with this, digital media has a deep impact on the process of communication in the virtual exchange environment. On the other hand, Shuter (2012) states that some educators are still following the paradigm of the twentieth century, where face-to-face education was prevailing. He claims that intercultural communication can be "governed by different processes in virtual communities than organic ones", and it can be "necessary to utilize multiple new media platforms to achieve intercultural dialogue" in a cyber-world (Shuter, 2012, p. 226).

During the pandemic, the war and on, scientists and foreign language teachers as well as students depend on online education in the virtual environment with the students seeking to widen their knowledge on one of the platforms suggesting virtual exchange programs called Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange. The program aims to give the opportunity to European youth as well as the Southern Mediterranean young people to have experience in intercultural interaction online as part of their formal and non-formal education (Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, 2019, n.p.). Another platform for the young is the Soliya Connect program (2007-2020). The program aims at young Muslims that are brought together to form dialogue societies to exchange thoughts and ideas on global issues, and thus, facilitate mutual understanding which results in mutual cooperation. As we can see from the programs they cannot be limited by educational purposes, but the

virtual environment gives the young people the platform for immediate connection, immediate response, and immediate result, which otherwise could hardly be seen possible given a variety of geographical locations of the participants. The existence of such platforms refutes the idea that communication in real-time against face-to-face communication can lead to misunderstanding, and even conflict in the intercultural world ((Jia, 2019, p.7).

In terms of digital format virtual exchange consists of such notions as telecollaboration, teletandem, e-tandem, e-twinning, collaborative online international learning, and open virtual mobility (O'Dowd, 2020; Rajagopal et al., 2020). Virtual exchange in all digital formats is more than just exchanging valuable experiences and information. It results in the transformation of the participant of the program (Van Maele, 2020), where the participants of an educational virtual exchange program can even develop a new identity when the collaborative online learning process continues through a period of time in a multicultural environment comprising a variety of online formats. The students acquire an awareness of the variety of global issues, approaches to solving a problem, and diversity of thoughts and ideas mixed in a trustworthy atmosphere can evolve into a new scientific digital community.

Psychological issues are also in the focus of our attention. The idea is that the students from eastern countries being more shy to speak than their western counterparts can rid of their shyness during the course. Prejudices can also disappear in the course of the program. While developing trust and openness the students create a dialogue where the equality of differences predominates. However, a unique model for all intercultural environments does not exist. With every program, the facilitators take into account a specific cultural context to facilitate mutual understanding and therefore, mutual cooperation.

Besides psychological aspects, virtual exchange programs can boost the formation of different skills ranging from "digital competence to foreign language competence, communication skills, media literacy and the ability to work in a diverse cultural context" (Evolve Erasmus, 2023).

By way of conclusion, we state that the term "virtual exchange" does not necessarily mean just the exchange of knowledge, opinions and ideas. It is a much deeper process of growing an entirely new identity of the young people with a strong awareness of involvement, responsibility and a feeling of self-significance, all of which result in a better performance while doing a project, as well as developing trustworthy relationships during a virtual dialogue.

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ONLINE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING APPROACHES IN TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES TO STUDENTS

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The advancement of technology has revolutionized the way we teach and learn foreign languages. Online collaborative learning approaches in foreign language teaching involve learners working together in a virtual environment to learn and practice a foreign language. This approach has become increasingly popular as it allows learners to collaborate with their peers and educators from different cultural backgrounds, regardless of their physical location. That is why the study of this approach is a relevant task.

Military students face unique challenges when it comes to learning a foreign language. They often have limited time, resources, and opportunities to practice and use the target language in authentic contexts. Online collaborative learning approaches can provide military students with opportunities to practice and develop their language skills while also promoting teamwork, communication, and intercultural competence. The aim of this paper is to explore different online collaborative learning approaches that can be used in teaching foreign languages to military students.

Virtual immersion is an online collaborative learning approach that provides military students with opportunities to practice and develop their language skills in a simulated real-world environment. Virtual immersion programs use technology to create scenarios and simulations that allow learners to practice their language skills in authentic contexts. For example, military students learning English can use virtual immersion programs to

practice their language skills in simulated scenarios such as ordering food at a restaurant, conducting a security checkpoint, or negotiating a peace agreement.

Online tutoring provides military students with personalized language instruction from a language tutor. Online tutoring programs can be conducted through video conferencing or chat rooms, and they provide military students with opportunities to receive feedback and guidance on their language skills from a trained language tutor. Online tutoring programs are effective in promoting language proficiency and confidence, as learners receive personalized instruction that is tailored to their individual needs and goals (Reeves et al., 2004).

Collaborative projects are another approach that gives military students opportunities to work together in a virtual environment to complete a project or task in the target language. Collaborative projects can be set up as group assignments or individual assignments that require collaboration with other learners. Collaborative projects promote teamwork and communication skills while also enabling learners to apply their language skills to real-world situations.

Social media language learning communities provide military students with opportunities to practice their language skills with other learners and native speakers through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Social media language learning communities are effective in promoting language proficiency and intercultural competence while also providing learners with opportunities to connect with other learners and native speakers from different countries. For example, military students learning English can join an English language learning group on Facebook and engage in conversations with other learners and native speakers.

Pair work and group work are effective and can be used to teach foreign languages to military students. These approaches involve learners working together in pairs or small groups to complete language learning tasks and activities.

Pair work and group work allow military students to practice and develop their language skills while also promoting communication, collaboration, and teamwork. In pair work, learners work together in pairs to complete language learning tasks such as practicing dialogues, asking and answering questions, or correcting each other's language errors. The most effective way for students to engage in classroom activities is through teaching their knowledge to their peers and participating in collaborative group activities, as these methods allow them to learn from one another. In order to promote a positive motivational environment in the classroom, it is important to focus on developing strong group dynamics. This can be achieved through two key aspects: group cohesiveness and group norms. By creating a cohesive learning group and establishing positive, learning-

oriented group norms, students can be highly motivated to learn and ultimately achieve success as individuals within the group.

Pair work allows learners to receive feedback and support from a peer, which can help them build confidence and improve their language proficiency. Group work, on the other hand, involves learners working together in small groups to complete language learning tasks and projects. Group work can be used to promote communication and collaboration among learners while also providing opportunities to practice language skills in authentic contexts (Reeves et al., 2004). For example, military students learning English can work together in groups to plan and organize an English-themed party, where they can practice their language skills while also learning about British culture. Pair work and group work can be enhanced by incorporating online tools such as video conferencing, chat rooms, and shared documents, which allow learners to collaborate and communicate more effectively. These tools can also facilitate the sharing of resources and ideas among learners, which can help them learn from each other and build their knowledge of the target language.

Peer review involves learners providing feedback and constructive criticism of their peers' written or oral work. This approach is effective in promoting critical thinking and self-reflection skills while also providing learners with an opportunity to learn from their peers. Peer review can be used in various contexts, such as writing assignments or oral presentations. It allows learners to receive feedback from different perspectives, which can lead to the improvement of their language skills. In the context of collaborative learning, the individual motivational beliefs, attitudes, and aspirations of each member play a significant role in determining their performance in group activities. This emphasizes the importance of considering the unique perspectives and contributions of each individual within the group dynamic, as their level of motivation can greatly impact the overall success of the collaborative learning experience (Reeves et al., 2004).

The *virtual exchange* allows learners to interact with their peers from different parts of the world through various virtual communication technologies. This approach enables learners to engage in online activities and tasks, which helps them to develop their language and intercultural communication skills, such as listening, speaking and pronunciation (Sokyrska & Buha, 2021). The virtual exchange has become increasingly popular in recent years, as it provides learners with authentic language learning opportunities that were not previously possible. Learners can interact with native speakers of the target language and engage in real-life communication scenarios that can help them to develop their language skills in a meaningful and practical way. One of the key benefits of virtual exchange is that it promotes intercultural understanding and communication. Learners are exposed to different cultures and perspectives, which can help them to

develop a more open-minded and tolerant attitude toward other cultures. This can be particularly valuable for military students who may be required to work with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Learners can work together on online projects and tasks, which can help them to develop their communication and collaboration skills. This can be particularly valuable for military students who may be required to work in teams during their military service.

Virtual simulations involve learners engaging in a simulated environment to solve real-world problems. This approach is effective as it enables learners to apply their knowledge to real-world situations. Virtual simulations can be used in various contexts, such as business simulations or science experiments.

Online collaborative learning approaches are effective in promoting language proficiency, intercultural competence, and global citizenship skills among military students learning a foreign language. The approaches discussed in this paper, including virtual immersion, peer review, online tutoring, virtual exchange, collaborative projects, and social media language learning communities, provide military students with opportunities to practice and develop their language skills in authentic contexts while also promoting teamwork, communication, and intercultural competence. These approaches can help military students overcome the challenges they face in learning a foreign language.

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DIGITAL TOOLS TO ENHANCE STUDENTS' MOTIVATION AND COLLABORATION

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Ukrainian teachers have been forced to work remotely for three years now due to the coronavirus pandemic and the war in the country. Some universities offer the possibility of blended learning, but the online component is still present and sometimes crucial. Therefore, teachers are mastering various digital technologies and selecting the most optimal ones for their disciplines and learning objectives. Thanks to digital technologies, teachers have the opportunity to participate in online internships and professional development in different educational institutions around the world, share ideas, achievements, and experiences. Our goal is to analyze digital technologies that lead to motivating students and improving their interaction during practical language classes for students of non-linguistic specialties in technical universities.

In 2021, a project "The Digital Competence Framework for Pedagogical and Scientific-Pedagogical Workers" was developed in Ukraine based on the European conceptual and reference model developed for EU citizens – "The Digital Competence Framework for Citizens with eight proficiency levels and examples of use." The project includes 5 levels of digital competence:

Level A.1. "Novice in using digital technologies". Despite understanding the importance of using digital technologies, the teacher uses them rarely, under pressure from management or during distance learning.

Level A.2. "User of digital technologies". The teacher realizes the potential of digital tools, is interested in their application, but does not use them consistently and systematically.

Level B.1. "Integrator of in-depth use of digital technologies". The teacher applies technologies in various fields and for different purposes, creatively introducing them into practice. However, there is no clear understanding of which tools are most effective in different situations and how to adapt digital technologies to them.

Level B2. "Creator-experimenter in the use of digital technologies". The teacher confidently and creatively operates a range of technologies, carefully selecting only those that are necessary for a specific learning situation. A key characteristic is an openness to new ideas and a recognition that there is still much to learn.

Level C. "Leader-innovator in the use of digital technologies". The teacher consistently and comprehensively approaches the application of technologies, having a significant range at his disposal; he always finds the most appropriate solution for any learning task. The leader-innovator employs the latest and most complex technologies and develops new methods and techniques (Conceptual-reference framework for the digital competence of pedagogical and scientific-pedagogical workers, 2021).

Digital technologies necessary for effective online learning, depending on the goal, are divided into: platforms for conferences and webinars, interactive whiteboards, tools for testing and interactive exercises and quizzes, resources for creating digital content.

The main features of platforms for video conferencing are: security, number of participants, and involvement of the audience, screen sharing, recording and analytics. For safety, special unique links for conferences and the "waiting room" function are meant, where the organizer manually grants access to each participant. Regarding the number of participants, it varies depending on the paid or free version, but sometimes it's up to 100 people, which is sufficient for practical classes. Engaging participants is done as in face-to-face learning: students raise their hands, answer by turning on their microphones, debate, react to statements by pressing corresponding reacting symbols, work in groups, write comments in the chat, etc. The "screen sharing" function allows the instructor to demonstrate any necessary materials for work, such as text, video, audio, presentations. Similarly, students can share their screen with any content if needed. Video conferences can be recorded to provide access to students who missed a class or for analysis by the instructor or other students.

There is the great number of services for organizing online conferences: Zoom, Google Meet, Skype, MyOwnConference, WebEx, Proficonf, and Microsoft Teams. We will focus on describing some of Zoom's features, due to which we chose this platform for conducting classes.

Breakout rooms provide an opportunity to involve all students in problem-solving, discussing a situation, conducting a small investigation, working on a project, creating a quiz, role-playing dialogues, conducting interviews, or even writing a story, and much more. It is an online version of group work, where all group members are accountable for the outcome, thus requiring each individual to contribute. With this feature, the instructor can divide the group into any number of breakout rooms, usually randomly, but also has the option to assign students to a specific room. Students can even choose their own

conversation partner, although this may take some time. By working in breakout rooms, students not only master the material and develop language skills but also learn to collaborate, assign roles, help each other, listen to each other, learn new things about their classmates, and develop communication skills. If there is a need to work with someone individually, that student can be separated from the group, and you can go over all the nuances of the learning material with him. The tasks for each breakout room can vary, and then each subgroup will present its results to the entire group of students. Recently, during the lesson on the topic "Operating systems", first-year students of the Faculty of Applied Mathematics, in breakout rooms, prepared mini-presentations for just 15 minutes on various topics: 1. Windows and its editions. 2. Linux, history and main features. 3. Linux distributions. 4. Mac OS. 5. Android and delivered them. Thus, the class time was used effectively and all the students were engaged in this activity. During the work of the students in breakout rooms, the teacher visits various virtual rooms and observes the process.

A chat box is a great tool for sharing not only ideas but also materials, links to tests, or additional resources.

Private chat can come in handy if you need to support or praise a student, and can also be used for games when some students have certain information that others need to learn (Waterston, n.d.).

The virtual background sets the students in a working mood and also helps to introduce the theme of the lesson.

The Whiteboard is a multifunctional board that provides not only a whiteboard for notes, but also a range of templates that are selected depending on the topic, and then students work in groups or individually simultaneously, and everyone sees their results.

Digital technologies help to enhance students' involvement, motivation and commitment due to gripping activities, cooperation and peer –to-peer interactions which resembled the work in the real classroom.

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CROSSING BORDERS WITH IBUNKA
INTERNATIONAL WEB-EXCHANGE PROJECT: UKRAINIAN EXPERIENCE

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Doing an English course online during wartime is not only about attending Zoom sessions, completing home assignments and self-studying, but solving technical and logistical problems, copying with stress and anxiety, volunteering and building plans for the future. The war brought challenges on a scale not experienced before like access to the internet, electricity, water, central heating, leaving your home (Lavrysh et al., 2022, p.4). For Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute students, taking part in an international project during wartime meant developing their writing skills, communicating with English-speaking peers, learning more about cultures of other countries and sharing their own cultural identity while overcoming difficulties on a daily basis.

Project Ibunka (different cultures), aimed at providing a safe space for English language learners to communicate with their peers purposefully and promote cultural understanding, was launched in 2000 (Watanabe, 2020, p.202). There are different approaches to solving the problem of authentic communication, as completing written assignments intended for a wide audience, which in reality are read by teachers, is demotivating for students. Coming a long way from using Local Area Network (LAN), group discussion via email exchanging to the usage of Internet technology, the founder of Project Ibunka, Prof. Watanabe developed the key concepts of the project: individual goals for partner institutions, using themes and sub-themes, moderation by instructors (Watanabe, 2020, p.204). Involving about 400 students every year, one of the main features of Project Ibunka is the diversity of students and partner teachers' dedication (Watanabe, 2020, p.204). Relative autonomy for partner institutions means that it is not required for them to evaluate students separately, or transfer their points, teachers and students are free to use their own assessment policy (Watanabe, 2020, p.210). Moreover, even within one partner institution teachers are free to choose their own way of motivating students and assessing them. All the participants enjoy the freedom of choices when they submit their posts on one of the themes, the diversity of which ensures voluntary participation. Teachers have the same rights as their students, just more responsibilities, especially during the registration process. According to the research, teachers should guide and monitor web-exchange projects, not only contributing to the discussion, but

also preventing potential misunderstanding or inappropriate behaviour (O'Dowd, 2021, p.11).

Safety is one of the priorities of Project Ibunka, which is ensured by creating individual accounts for the participants, who use their real names, photos and affiliations. Ethical code is the basis for creating a supportive environment, where teachers and students have the same rights to express their opinions and share their cultural experiences presenting their countries. Sharing their real life problems, the participants receive constructive feedback, which makes such communication authentic, maybe even therapeutic. Studying English during wartime means exploiting social and emotional learning (SEL) by creating a supportive atmosphere, guiding students to describe their emotions for them to see the connections between their feelings and actions (Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021, p.8-9). Such an atmosphere of curiosity and trust is definitely student-centered, when teachers are not supposed to lecture or provide instructions, but reflect on their experiences instead, sharing their memories of the times they witnessed, closing that generation gap between digital natives and digital nomads. Surely, such transformation is beneficial for establishing a balanced relationship between teachers and students during traditional classes of English.

Celebrating success, and assessing and recognizing active participation are crucial for motivating students. Seeing their pictures and posting in Ibunka Newsletters is not only rewarding for participants, but it indicates the importance of what they do. At the very beginning of the project, students knew what kind of contribution was required, and very often they exceeded the expectations. It was possible to widen the audience by checking the Ibunka website and choosing the most interesting postings during the lessons of English with other groups of students. After reading the postings on the website students had discussions or shared their own written comments expressing agreement or disagreement with somebody's point of view, their peers from other countries.

Crossing borders happens in any case boasting such a diverse geographical representation of the participants, but Project Ibunka is also about crossing borders within its partner institutions. For universities like Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute, communication between different faculties and departments is rather limited, however, through this common Project Ibunka experience students and teachers could learn more about each other, share their hobbies, academic successes, as well as survival strategies during wartime. Ukrainian participants wrote about the genocide of Ukrainians and other atrocities of wartime so that other participants learned a lot from their peers, not from the Internet (Project Ibunka 2022, Social Issues, 2022). Ukrainian students chose topics related to the war of their free will, citing Taras Shevchenko and other Ukrainian poets and writers, writing about the importance to be politically active, about their life which

was divided by the war "into before and after", about Ukrainian people who became "volunteers, journalists, hackers, cooks, drivers, craftsmen" in their struggle for freedom and independence of their country. When just a few participants from Ukraine manage to get connected for a Zoom meeting because of power outages after a massive shelling, when a teacher from Ukraine speaks from her dark room lit by a torch, using a netbook with a dying battery, such an experience is much more meaningful for other participants than news reports.

To conclude, for Ukrainian participants taking part in an international web-exchange project Ibunka during wartime meant developing their writing skills, communicating with English-speaking peers, learning more about cultures of other countries and sharing their own cultural identity while overcoming difficulties on a daily basis. In addition, by sharing their experiences as witnesses of war crimes, they contributed to spreading the word about what is happening in Ukraine.

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THE ROLE OF VIRTUAL EXCHANGE IN LANGUGE LEARNING AND CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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The twenty-first century is witnessing extraordinary dynamics of global change. Today brings significant challenges to society. COVID-19 has clearly demonstrated that all the achievements in offline education were not entirely effective, and we had to learn to work in the educational space in a new way, namely remotely. Virtual exchange is now considered not only as an auxiliary element of the educational process or as one of the options for its implementation, but also as one of the possible ways to organize the continuity of learning. The introduction of modern innovative educational technologies into the distance learning process of a higher education institution creates new opportunities for the implementation of didactic principles of individualization and differentiation of learning, positively influences the development of students' cognitive activity, creative activity and consciousness (Arkorful, Abaidoo, 2015).

Virtual exchange certainly has a lot of advantages over audio and video courses, providing a wealth of information, a variety of services, affecting the sensory channels of information perception in a comprehensive manner, allowing individualized learning and self-education, etc. The global Internet provides access to information in the world's scientific centers and libraries, it creates perfect conditions for self-education, broadening of the worldview, and professional improvement.

The virtual exchange creates a unique opportunity for learning foreign languages by using authentic texts, listening to and communicating with native speakers, i.e. creating a natural language environment.

Different Internet resources help the teacher to make an atmosphere of real linguistic communication, filling the lack of a natural language environment. Learning foreign

languages for business communication is impossible without learning the culture of its speakers, i.e. without familiarizing yourself with national realities and mentality, with the language of non-verbal communication used by representatives of a given linguistic culture, without understanding their communication behavior. Watching movies, reading newspapers, literature, communicating with peers from other countries, etc. provide high-quality visual material for understanding the culture of the country of the target language.

Internet technologies offer great opportunities for international and intercultural communication. These include e-mail, blogs, Internet conferences and teleconferences. Communicating with peers in a foreign language helps students better understand the mentality of representatives of other cultures and overcome existing socio-cultural stereotypes. This, in turn, contributes not only to the formation of socio-cultural competence, but also to the development of students' socio-cultural tolerance. With the help of these services, a student can not only improve his or her conversational skills, and expand vocabulary on professional topics, but also have a constant practice of business communication.

Some researchers say that the increase in the number of information sources is a key factor in the virtualization (and digitalization) of society. Television and the computer have become symbols of modernity. On the one hand, a person sitting in front of a screen can collect information on almost any issue from around the world, download various images and audio recordings to the computer's memory, send e-mail, and exchange information with other Internet users. Modern media open up unprecedented opportunities to access vast cultural and intellectual resources, such as music, painting, literature, science, philosophy, and politics. The things which in the past required an appropriate education, social status, free time and material resources are now becoming publicly available.

If you use the information resources of the Internet and properly integrate them into the educational process, you can more effectively solve a number of didactic and socio-cultural tasks:

• to develop reading skills directly using online materials of different degrees of complexity;

• to improve listening skills based on authentic audio texts on the Internet;

• to improve monologue and dialogic speaking skills based on a problem-based discussion of materials presented by a teacher or one of the students on the network;

• to improve academic writing skills individually or write responses to partners, participating in the preparation of abstracts, essays and other epistolary types of creativity;

• to replenish both passive and active vocabulary, the vocabulary of modern languages, which reflects a certain stage of development of the people, its socio-cultural social system;

• to get acquainted with the concepts of Regional Studies, which include language etiquette, characteristic features of the linguistic behavior of peoples in terms of communication, peculiarities of the country's culture and traditions, and experience of written communication (Berge, 1995).

Using virtual exchange students can

• transmit information of any volume, of any type (visual and sound, static and dynamic, textual and graphic) over any distance extremely quickly;

• quickly access and change information via the Internet from their workplace;

• store this information in the computer memory for the required period of time, edit it and print it;

• organize electronic conferences, including real-time, computer audio conferences and video conferences;

• interact with any partner connected to the Internet (Тавгень, 2003).

It should be noted that 57% of US teachers believe that the results of virtual exchange are much higher than the results of traditional classes. 33.3% of the surveyed teachers believe that in the coming years, the results of virtual exchange will surpass the results of classroom learning. Accessibility and openness of learning are other of the main advantages of virtual exchange. This type of learning gives us the opportunity to study remotely from our place of study without leaving our home or office. This allows a modern specialist to study almost all his or her life. Another advantage of virtual exchange is access to quality education. The freedom and flexibility of this method of education provide new opportunities for choosing a course of study. It is very easy to choose several courses at different universities in different countries. You can study in different places at the same time, comparing courses with each other. It is possible to study in the best educational institutions, using the most effective technologies, with the most qualified teachers.

Thus, participation in virtual exchange programs and the purposeful and qualified use of Internet resources in teaching and learning foreign languages, significantly increase the efficiency of the educational process and provide the creation of foreign language linguistic and interpersonal competence of the students due to the accessibility of the learning process and its communicative and linguistic orientation.

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DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY FOR VIRTUAL EXCHANGE PROGRAMS PROVISION

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Digital technology plays a crucial role in virtual education and in providing virtual exchange programs by enabling remote learning, facilitating collaboration between all the participants of the study process, providing access to resources both to students and tutors and enhancing the overall educational experience. They have transformed the landscape of virtual education by providing a plethora of tools and resources to enhance teaching and learning experiences.

During the last years, different aspects of implementing virtual exchange programs in universities have been studied by scientists all over the world, among them Lanham, C. D., & Voskuil, C. M. (2022), Bauk, S. (2022), Bartsch, S., Kittirath, P., Müller, H., & Youyabouth, C. (2021) and many others.

Facilitating virtual exchange and collaboration in university exchange study programs requires leveraging appropriate technology and tools. Let us analyze some essential technologies and tools that can enhance the virtual exchange experience.

Video Conferencing Platforms. Such video conferencing platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, GoToMeeting, Cisco Webex, Adobe Connect, Blackboard Collaborate, and others enable real-time video and audio communication, allowing students to participate in virtual classes, discussions, and group meetings. These platforms support screen sharing, breakout rooms, and chat features for effective collaboration between tutors and students and between students themselves. All these video conferencing platforms provide a range of features and functionalities that facilitate virtual education. It is important to choose a platform based on the specific needs and requirements of the educational institution or program. Factors to consider include the number of participants, ease of use, integration with other tools, security features, and cost.

Learning Management Systems (LMS). Learning Management Systems are software platforms designed to facilitate the management, delivery, and tracking of educational

courses and programs. LMS platforms provide a centralized space where instructors can organize course materials, deliver content, interact with students, and assess their progress. Learning Management Systems platforms such as Moodle, Canvas, Blackboard, Schoology, or Brightspace offer communication tools, discussion forums, and grade-tracking features to facilitate online learning and engagement.

Virtual Collaboration Tools. Virtual collaboration tools play a crucial role in facilitating effective communication, collaboration, and project management in virtual education and remote work environments. Such collaboration tools like Microsoft Teams, Google Workspace (formerly G Suite), Slack, Microsoft Office 365, Trello, Asana, GitHub, or Dropbox Paper enable real-time document editing, collaborative writing, and group project management. Students can work together on shared documents, make comments, and track changes, thus fostering teamwork and productivity.

Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR). Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality technologies are increasingly being integrated into various fields, including education and exchange study programs. They can provide immersive experiences that simulate real-world environments and cultural contexts. Students can explore virtual museums, landmarks, or historical sites, enhancing their understanding of different cultures and enhancing intercultural communication. Some programs may provide access to VR/AR equipment and resources, while others may incorporate VR/AR experiences into specific courses or workshops.

Social Media and Communication Platforms. When it comes to exchanging study programs, social media and communication platforms can play a crucial role in connecting and engaging with fellow exchange students, staying updated on program information, and sharing experiences. Platforms like Facebook Groups, WhatsApp, GroupMe, Telegram, Instagram, LinkedIn Slack, or Discord facilitate informal communication and community building among students. They can create dedicated groups or channels for discussions, resource sharing, and networking, fostering a sense of belonging and collaboration. At the same time, they give tutors the possibility to communicate with students in groups and individually. Exchange program coordinators typically provide guidance on the preferred communication channels to facilitate effective information dissemination and community-building among participants.

Online Language Exchange Platforms. Online language exchange platforms provide a convenient way for language learners to connect with native speakers of the language they are learning. These platforms facilitate language practice, cultural exchange, and mutual learning. Among the most widely used online language exchange platforms are Tandem, iTalki, HelloTalk, or ConversationExchange, Speaky, MyLanguageExchange,

Polyglot Club. Students can engage in language learning and intercultural communication through voice or video calls, language exchange events, and language forums.

Virtual Whiteboarding Tools. Virtual whiteboarding tools are digital platforms that simulate the experience of writing, drawing, and collaborating on a physical whiteboard. These tools are especially useful for remote teams, online education, brainstorming sessions, and visual collaboration. Whiteboarding tools like Miro, Jamboard, MURAL, Limnu, Conceptboard, Explain Everything or Microsoft Whiteboard enable collaborative brainstorming, diagramming, and visual ideation. Students can work together on virtual whiteboards to organize ideas, solve problems, and present their work visually.

Virtual Peer Review and Feedback Tools. Virtual peer review and feedback tools provide a platform for individuals or teams to share their work and receive constructive feedback from their peers. These tools facilitate collaboration, improve the quality of work, and enhance the learning experience. Online platforms like Peergrade, Turnitin, or Google Classroom's peer review feature facilitate peer assessment and feedback on assignments. Students can review and provide constructive feedback on each other's work, promoting critical thinking and improving the quality of their work.

Simulations and Serious Games. Simulations and serious games offer interactive and engaging learning experiences. Platforms like Labster, Kahoot!, or Quizlet provide virtual labs, quizzes, and gamified activities that promote active learning, knowledge retention, and collaboration.

Virtual Networking and Career Platforms. Platforms like LinkedIn, Meetup, Handshake, or alumni networking platforms enable students to connect with professionals, alumni, and industry experts. These platforms provide opportunities for virtual networking, mentorship, and career development, enhancing students' professional growth.

It is important to select technologies and tools that align with the specific needs and goals of the virtual exchange program. By carefully considering the needs of the program, providing technical support, and offering training and orientation, the adoption and utilization of technologies in a virtual exchange program can be enhanced, resulting in a more seamless and successful experience for all participants. Additionally, providing technical support and training to students and instructors is crucial to ensure the smooth adoption and utilization of the technologies.

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ACTING OUT: HOW ROLE PLAY HELPS DEVELOP LANGUAGE AND SOFT SKILLS

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In the late 1970s, English teaching methodology shifted from the grammar-translation method to the communicative method that accentuates the significance of speaking practice and encourages interaction and the use of language in realistic scenarios. In ESP teaching, the communicative approach is motivated by the need of learners to converse in day-to-day or professional life. Within this approach, an effective technique to immerse students in real-life situations is role play. Being focused on the specific needs of learners, role play helps acquire a second language and develop soft skills in situations students understand and find interesting.

Soft skills are a set of non-specialized, ultra-professional competencies. Unlike professional competencies (hard skills), soft skills are not related to a specific field of human activity and encompass a range of personal traits, including effective communication, teamwork, leadership, adaptability, critical thinking, problem-solving, decision making, time management, stress resistance, creativity, emotional intelligence, etc. Soft skills "allow people to respond more effectively to workplace situations, especially those involving interactions with others and/or a degree of personal judgment and sensitivity" (Schutt & Holloway & Linegar & Deman, 2017). Although soft skills are often considered intangible and difficult to measure, their impact on individual and organizational success is undeniable.

This article examines the effectiveness of role-play as a means of language and soft skills development, its functions, types, peculiarities as well as benefits for learners.

Yen, Huei, & Kuo (2013) define role play as a technique that centers on the learners' ability to speak and communicate by playing various roles in a genuine situation. According to Chen-jun (2006), role play is a learning activity that provides students with an opportunity to improve real-life spoken language in the classroom. Khaydarova (2018) believes that role play is a technique that helps students practice communicating in different social contexts and social roles. Ladousse (2004) elaborates on the definition,

stating that in "role play" the term "role" means that learners play a part (someone else's or their own), while "play" implies that the part is played in an atmosphere which facilitates learners' playfulness and inventiveness. In Richards and Rogers' opinion (2001), the term "role" does not only refer to the part learners are expected to play, but also to the social and interpersonal relationship between the participants. Jhaveri (2022) states that role play is a means of improving soft skills through situational awareness.

Role play is a simulation activity that involves the imitation of real-life situations. It is a communicative and interactive activity that enables learners to use language in context. In ESP teaching, role play provides learners with the opportunity to practice their language skills in authentic situations related to their field of study or profession. This approach facilitates the development of language proficiency and enhances learners' ability to communicate effectively in their respective domains.

Each role-play should contain specifications of aims, stages, problematic situations, participants' roles and functions, rules and assessment criteria.

Based on the degree of role play's flexibility, Byrne (1998), Harper-Whalen and Morris (2005) classify role plays into scripted, semi-scripted and unscripted.

- Scripted role play features a detailed script of what to say, what language to use or involves oral interpretation of a textbook dialogue.

- Semi-scripted role play features the semi-detailed script of the participants' actions and what language to use.

- Unscripted role play (also known as free role play or improvisation) enables learners to create their own dialogue; they are free to decide how to hold the conversation and what language to use.

In the majority of cases, the choice of the role-play type depends on the learners' language proficiency and experience. However, the more flexible role play is, the more creative, inventive, decisive, and playful its participants become.

In role-play, learners engage in informational, organizational, and communicative interaction.

- Informational interaction implies the exchange of information between the learners.

- Organizational interaction refers to cooperative problem-solving.

- Communicative interaction means that by acting out their roles, learners communicate in the target language.

The above-mentioned types of interaction develop learners' personalities and their soft skills as well. Role play brings learners out of their shells and motivates them to speak. It is considered a rehearsal where learners communicate in the middle of attention. The presence of peers helps learners boost self-confidence, and develop the ability to

work individually and in a team, conflict management, creative thinking, critical thinking, decision making, effective communication, and listening skills. Role play helps practice a wide range of vocabulary and syntactic structures in real-life and job-related situations. It enables learners to "integrate the newly acquired knowledge through actively seeking new and creative solutions, addressing different problems, exploring alternatives" (Kovacs, 2014).

Thus, role play is a teaching technique that has a variety of useful functions. They are:

- communicative (role play facilitates students' ability to communicate in real-life and professional situations);

- instructional (students learn to apply their language, professional and communicative skills);

- educational (role play teaches students to behave in a proper manner in real-life and job-related situations, to respect other students' opinions etc.);

- compensative (it makes up for the lack of communication in a real English language environment);

- entertaining (role play becomes a fun and enjoyable activity that arouses students' interest in English and technical disciplines);

- motivational (students not only enjoy the process of playing and learning, but they also realize the importance of the obtained knowledge in their real-life and future careers) (Kotkovets, 2016).

Serving a number of crucial functions, role play has several benefits. Firstly, it provides learners with a safe and controlled environment to practice their language skills. Students can experiment with language without the fear of making mistakes, which can lead to a more positive attitude toward language learning. Secondly, role play provides them with the opportunity to use language in context, which enhances their language acquisition and retention. Learners can relate the language they are learning to real-life situations, which facilitates the transfer of knowledge to practical use. Thirdly, role play encourages students to interact with their peers, which promotes collaborative learning and enhances learners' social skills.

Role play can also promote learners' critical thinking skills. Learners are required to think critically and make decisions based on the information presented to them in the role play scenario. This approach enables students to apply their knowledge to real-life situations and develop problem-solving skills, which are valuable in their future professions.

Role play can facilitate the development of learners' intercultural competence. Students can practice using language in different cultural contexts, which enables them

to understand and appreciate different cultures. This approach promotes empathy and tolerance, which are essential qualities for effective communication in today's globalized world.

To conclude, the benefits of role play in ESP teaching include enhancing second language acquisition and developing a range of soft skills such as effective communication, teamwork, leadership, decision-making, critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, emotional intelligence, etc. Thus, role play can be a valuable tool in ESP teaching and educators should consider incorporating it into their teaching practices.

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METHOD OF ORGANIZING STUDENTS' INDEPENDENT WORK WITH INTERNET RESOURCES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES AT THE INITIAL STAGE OF EDUCATION

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As an information system, the Internet recommends a variety of information and resources to its users. Today's English language learning is provided by means of the Internet. The main means of the Internet can include various communication channels, for example, digital mail, Skype, Viber, etc.; video conferences; creating a personal home page (homepage) and placing it on the Web server; access to information resources; reference catalogs; search organizations; conversation or correspondence on the network (Chat); WWW - Internet navigation; active channels for website subscriptions, etc [2, p.136].

There are many different online information resources and training courses that you can use about the English language. Yes, there is a problem of selecting the necessary material. Before we briefly describe individual Internet resources that are intended for language work, we will emphasize the recommendations on the feasibility of creating a digital catalog of useful links on the university's own website. In the same catalog, you can place links to other educational and information materials located in the library or media library of your own university, which students and teachers can use. Let's start with the resources, which, on the one hand, can be used for communication purposes in class, and on the other - as a reference (with copyright protection) when creating training courses for the Internet.

Educational Internet resources are a set of useful both for teachers and for links to portals containing information from various disciplines and education in general. It also includes research, news, dictionaries and online translators.

As a result of the search and analysis of educational Internet resources, which are intended for learning a foreign language, we can make a table containing the names and headings of the best websites for learning English.

Table 1.1

«Educational Internet resources»

Name of the website	Headings/Type of online resource	Comments
1	2	3
RUTRACKER rutracker.org/forum/viewforum.php	Website for downloads, multimedia scrapbook.	Contains links to download textbooks, dictionaries, adapted books, cartoons, and various programs for the formation of listening, speaking, writing, and reading skills at the initial stage. Almost all material is carefully selected and commented on by people.
ENGLISHTIPS http://englishtips.org/	Website, multimedia scrapbook	Contains links to textbooks, books, games, mini-lessons of the English language.
LEARN AMERICAN ENGLISH ONLINE http://learnamericanenglishonline.com/	Website, multimedia scrapbook	Contains various lessons, exercises, questionnaires, tests, dictations, text, video, audio materials for learning English and building speaking competence for both elementary and high school students.
BRITISH COUNCIL http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/	Website, multimedia scrapbook	It has many games, stories, videos, listening exercises and grammar exercises for elementary English students.
ГОЛОС АМЕРИКИ http://www.golos-ameriki.ru/archive/learning-english/latest/1641/1641.html	Website	Various plans for conducting English language lessons are posted, and supporting text material for teaching is provided.
MANYTHINGS http://www.manythings.org/	Website, multimedia scrapbook	Contains various games, puzzles, crosswords, tests, polls, texts, audio materials, exercises, and songs for the formation of listening, speaking, writing, reading skills at the initial stage.
LEARN ENGLISH WITH PICTURES AND AUDIO http://www.my-english-dictionary.com/	Website, multimedia scrapbook	Contains graphic and audio materials for learning English vocabulary and forming elementary-level lexical skills and abilities in children.

As practice shows, out of the various existing means of teaching, ICT "fits" better into the structure of the educational mechanism, satisfies didactic requirements and brings the English language learning mechanism very close to real conditions. Internet resources can provide new information, and in a certain way help students process it and make decisions, can repeat graphic images, audio and video materials, that is, fully provide students with the necessary information. The use of web resources significantly expands the opportunities of teachers to individualize learning and activate the cognitive work of

English language students, which helps to adapt the learning process to the individual characteristics of students [1, p. 8-17].

In the initial stage of learning, mental factors such as perception, memory, thinking, and memorization continue to improve throughout existence. That is why it is important to take into account these nuances when learning a foreign language at the initial stage of education.

When working with those who study at the initial stage, it is necessary to pay considerable attention not only to some separate mental process or level of mental formation, distracting it from other features, such as the main work of students at this age and the complexity of technical procedures, and teachers should work with them in a complex. The best result is expected only with this work tactic [3, p.224].

The Internet helps students to become active and test their own strength in written language by participating in debates or recommending their article, judgment, report for publication and discussion on The Young Voices of the World website. This is an open forum, a publishing house where anyone can publish their own works. All works are accompanied by a digital address of the author, which allows feedback for disputes.

In addition to formal written language experience, it is unacceptable to deny the development of students' intercultural skills. Moreover, it can be argued that today the use of various communication channels of Internet resources is the most rational and accessible way of mastering cross-cultural literacy in the conditions of real written language.

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TERMINOLOGY OVERVIEW FOR VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

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Nowadays globalization is no longer a fancy world. It has already brought the increased interconnectedness and interdependence of economies, societies, and cultures across the globe, which have been facilitated by advancements in technology, transportation, communication, and trade. Globalization has enabled easier movement of people, goods, services, and ideas across national borders and has had significant impacts on the world, including increased economic growth, job opportunities, and access to goods and services. However, globalization has also brought about challenges, such as social and economic inequality, cultural clashes, and environmental degradation. Currently, globalization is characterized by both acceleration and fragmentation, with certain regions and groups benefiting more than others. Thus, it seems to be logical that universities all over the world are becoming increasingly concerned with preparing graduates to be active and responsible global citizens in a world that is inherently digital, globalized, and multicultural. (O'Dowd, 2017). At the same time, such challenges as pandemics, and war conflicts intrude with the process of internalization and study abroad programs. Therefore, higher education institutions are turning to "internationalization at home" (IaH) as a way to integrate international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students (Beelen & Jones, 2015). As part of their IaH initiatives, more universities are utilizing Virtual Exchange which involves online intercultural interaction and collaboration projects with partner classes from other cultural contexts under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators.

Over the past few years, virtual exchange methods have developed in various educational contexts with differing organizational structures and pedagogical goals. Although, as R. O'Dowd (2018) points out, their development happened with a certain level of isolation. At first glance it seems to be a rather drastic description of the conditions under which the phenomena evolved nevertheless it means that depending on the educational context and the focus of the practitioners, this activity has been referred to by various names and terms. Thus the aim of this paper is to study the variety of idioms used to describe the process of online collaborative learning which involves groups of learners from different cultural contexts or geographical locations working together in a coordinated manner.

The first instances of online collaborative projects between classrooms across the world began to surface within a few years after the internet became widely spread over the planet. So over the years, the number of approaches to virtual exchange as well as the terms that would describe the process have emerged significantly. The overview of existing terminology can be seen in Fig. 1.
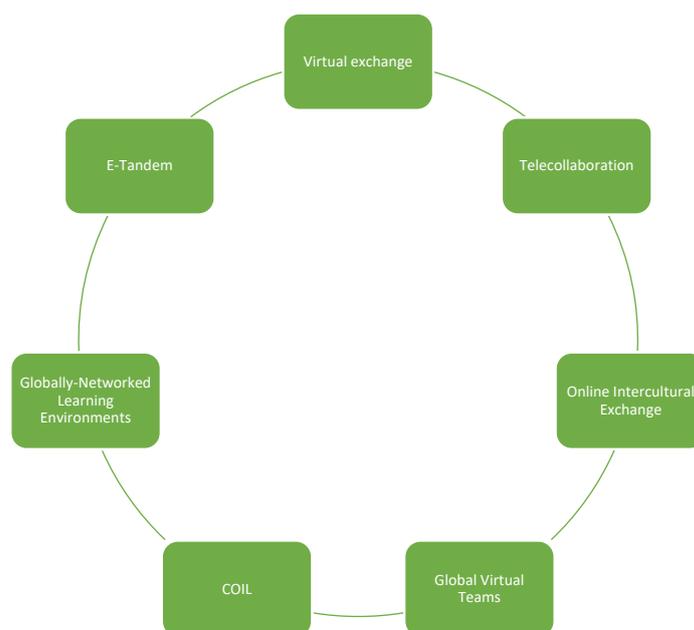
Figure 1. An overview of terms

According to M. Dooly (2017), telecollaboration in education refers to the utilization of computer and/or digital communication tools to facilitate learning through social interaction and collaboration. This method allows the learning process to transcend the physical boundaries of classrooms.

Concurrently, the OIE is an effective tool for enhancing students' intercultural communication skills, as it facilitates interaction and collaboration among individuals from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds in a virtual environment, allowing them to exchange ideas and viewpoints on a range of topics (Lee & Markey, 2014). Rather a similar approach can be seen with a global virtual team since it can be defined as a transient workgroup characterized by cultural diversity, geographical dispersion, and electronic communication (Kristoff et al., 1995).

Collaborative online international learning' (COIL) was coined in 2006 (Rubin, 2017) and is a pioneering method of education that enables educators and students to engage in cross-border communication and cooperation via online platforms. By utilizing cutting-edge online pedagogies and internet-based tools, COIL cultivates significant

dialogue and collaboration among teachers and students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, despite being geographically distant (Naicker et al., 2022).

Globally-Networked Learning Environments are regarded as collaborative partnerships that encourage students' collaboration and knowledge acquisition with peers in classrooms located in other parts of the world (Starke-Meyerring & Wilson, 2008).

The utilization of various Web 2.0 tools allows for communication with individuals who are native speakers from around the globe, as well as the ability to collaborate, exchange information, work together from a distance, and facilitate online learning and e-tandem projects (Pomino & Gil-Salom, 2016).

Overall, it is safe to assume that virtual exchange covers all of the above mentioned aspects as it refers to the involvement of learner groups in extended periods of online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from diverse cultural contexts or geographic locations. Moreover, this practice is integrated into students' educational programs and guided by educators and/or skilled facilitators (O'Dowd, 2018).

Collectively, these studies indicate that despite the slightly variable approaches, it is logical to address the form of education that involves extended online intercultural interaction and collaboration between learner groups from different cultural contexts or geographic locations as virtual exchange and use other terms as interchangeable in specific contexts.

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CRITICAL THINKING ADVANCEMENT IN ONLINE ESP CLASSES FOR THE PURPOSE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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This paper studies critical thinking development in the scope of professionalism cultivation in online ESP classes. The thesis considers the characteristics of professionalism with their transfer to students using the example of an online ESP lesson on the topic *"Problem Solving"* from the e-book *"Professional English: Business Communication"* (Kolosova & Narodovska, 2021). The subject of the work is professionalism based on its characteristics according to Weggeman (2007), taking into account the requirements that modern education puts before us during the virtual exchange of knowledge and skills with students.

Before getting to work, a professional must be prepared and have an education in a certain field. Special knowledge, skills, and competencies must be mastered at a level that is sufficient for work (Weggeman, 2007). Any manager constantly faces problems and pressing issues that must be resolved in such a way as to maintain neutrality and satisfy all parties. The most effective way to solve a problem is to have adequate background knowledge and consistency in solving problems. And if the problem needs to be solved in a foreign language (in our case, English), then the task becomes more difficult. That is why the development of a standard plan with further practice in solving certain problems in English becomes an effective tool for developing critical thinking skills, which is a mandatory component of the future specialist's professionalism. So, let's move on to the plan for the online lesson *"Problem-Solving"*:

Warming-up: Speaking "Quiz: How good are your problem-solving skills"
Main part: Speaking-Listening-Vocabulary activation
Task 1. Problem-solving steps – discussion.
Task 2. Famous failures of the most successful people. Video discussion.
Task 3. Reading: Tips to efficient problem-solving.
Task 4. Problem-solving in groups – situations in the office.
Practice: Between rock and a hard place. How to find a solution to a problem.

The lesson begins with a survey of skills that students have in solving problematic issues. Already at the *Warming-up* stage, future specialists begin to realize their weaknesses as professionals and focus on new vocabulary on a given topic.

New knowledge is formed in the process of carrying out the task itself. By applying the knowledge and skills that the teacher has during the virtual exchange, it is easy to find that the relevance, appropriateness, and results are slightly different than the teacher expected. Or, it may turn out during the actual training that the students are not so well prepared or motivated, or conversely, that some are already experts in topics that most have yet to learn. Individual creativity generates new knowledge on the spot (Weggeman, 2007). That is, at the *Warming-up* stage, it is discovered which of the students is more competent in the specified topics, and who is less. However, the next assignment in the plan helps to even things out by allowing students to rely on their intuition, without any background knowledge. The next task on the topic *"Problem Solving"* sounds like this: *"Together with a partner look through different steps in the problem-solving process and put them in the correct order. Explain why you have chosen exactly this order of problem-solving steps."* The students are faced with the task of arranging the stages of solving the problem in the correct order and explaining their choice. Relying on one's own opinion and intuition is an important step in forming the critical thinking of a future specialist. Again, the assignment is based on students' intuitive choices, regardless of the presence or absence of background knowledge on the topic.

As a consequence of the previous characteristic, the future specialist needs to have the professional freedom to act. A professional teacher must have the autonomy to adequately respond to non-standard situations. Decisions have to be made on the spot to act professionally in various ways, sometimes without time to think (Weggeman, 2007). Thus, the teacher shows by his example what exactly is meant by professionalism, thereby stimulating students to autonomy in making their own decisions on problematic issues. Therefore, the next task on the topic *"Problem Solving"* is aimed at triggering students' critical thinking in professionally defined problem situations. At this stage, through a discussion, students have to find solutions for the described problems in groups (for example, *"Problem 4. Staff motivation is very low and it negatively affects the working process"*).

There is a need to clearly distinguish between a specialist and a group of specialists (Weggeman, 2007). So, in the matter of critical thinking, it is clear that it is necessary for a specialist in any field of activity. But is it obligatory for some, while for others it is optional? It is probably impossible to get a clear answer to this question. Therefore, it is crucial to develop critical thinking skills yourself. An appropriate example of training for solving a problem situation and stimulating critical thinking is the exercise *"Practice: Between rock and a hard place"*. Even with the opportunity to consult with others, the student must still make the final decision when solving the problem independently. This leads to the activation of critical thinking, which is based not only on the advice of others but, first of all, on one's

own opinion. To structure advice and his own thoughts student is provided with auxiliary information, the gaps of which he must fill in:

Between a Rock and a Hard Place!

I need to decide: _____

Why I am up in the air: _____

Choice A pros/cons: _____

Choice B pros/cons: _____

What should I do?!

Groupmate 1: _____

Groupmate 2: _____

What I will probably do: _____

My deciding factor: _____

Will this lead to negative consequences?   YES   NO

This example shows how the process of organizing thoughts is adjusted to avoid chaos and facilitate the analysis of the received information.

In conclusion, an important issue for the development of critical thinking among students during the virtual exchange is the cultivation of professionalism in ESP classes, which includes the following characteristics: 1) obtaining an education in a certain professional field at the level necessary to be sufficiently prepared for work; 2) formation of new knowledge based on the teacher's knowledge and skills with an emphasis on the individual creativity of each student, his own opinion and intuition; 3) freedom and autonomy to act professionally without sufficient time for a detailed assessment of the situation; 4) delineation of specialist and group of specialists.

Why are considered exercises in online classes important for the development of critical thinking? Firstly, students get the opportunity to practice the persuasion of others. Secondly, teamwork obliges students not only to express their own opinion but also to take into account the position of other colleagues to achieve the goal, namely, to solve the problem. All components of such tasks are aimed not only at the opportunity to give everyone a word, but also at the importance of hearing others, analysing data, and arriving at the most effective strategy – these are the necessary components for virtual exchange in the ESP classes aimed at developing critical thinking skills.

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DEVELOPING STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE VIA PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN VIRTUAL EXCHANGE ENVIRONMENT

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In recent decades, intercultural competence has become a key factor in the successful internationalization of higher education. The growing number of students studying abroad requires new learning approaches that help develop intercultural skills. One such approach is project-based learning in a virtual exchange environment.

Project-based learning in a virtual exchange environment allows students to collaborate with their colleagues from other countries and cultures using video conferencing, e-mail and other online tools for communication and collaboration. This approach encourages students to develop intercultural competence, that is, the ability to interact with representatives of other cultures, take into account their peculiarities and understand differences in cultural inheritance (Deardorff, 2009). The project-based learning has been widely implemented in many countries of the world, because, based on the principles of the communicative approach, it allows to integrate the knowledge of students from different fields to solve one problem and gives students the opportunity to put the acquired knowledge into practice, while generating new ideas, developing the skills of target and autonomous learning.

In the process of project-based learning, students work on joint tasks, which contributes to the development of communicative and intercultural skills. They study the peculiarities of the culture of their partners, exchange experience and information, develop creative and critical thinking. This approach to learning ensures the active participation of students in the learning process and helps them understand cultural differences and develop skills for interacting with representatives of other cultures.

It is important to note that for the effective development of students' intercultural competence through project-based learning in a virtual exchange environment, preparation and proper organization of the educational process is necessary. For example, students need to familiarize themselves with the specifics of the partner's culture in advance and learn intercultural communication. It is also important to have proper support and coordination from teachers and scientists who can help students solve complex tasks and provide quality

scientific support (Dervin & Gross, 2016). The task of the teacher is to create conditions for students to understand the purpose of the project, to provide professional assistance and control, to support any initiative, to guide students in selecting a task and to help them choose such methods of its implementation, under which they would feel as comfortable as possible and feel interested in the preparation and presentation of their works. The teacher must comment on the completed work, analyze the positive features, identify errors and shortcomings, provide an opportunity to correct and refine them.

Preparation of joint international projects is a creative and analytical process, therefore it is important to take into account the following components when preparing a project: common interests of project participants; the role of the teacher as a facilitator and stimulator of analytical activity; learning the peculiarities of dialogic communication in virtual environment and establishing a connection between students of different cultures; clear planning, organization and control over the performance of the main tasks of the activity; stimulation of cross-cultural tasks, bringing them to uniqueness and diversity; study of cultural artifacts; discussion of current issues of modern life; study of the content of the results of joint activities; determination of project implementation deadlines and criteria for evaluating the activities of students from both countries.

There are different types of projects which can help develop students' intercultural competence in virtual exchange environment. Among them are research projects, creative projects, game projects, information projects, practice-oriented projects, cultural projects, etc. All types of projects create conditions of a real learning environment where students are engaged in exploring world problems, developing their own voice and design identity, creating inspiring solutions. They have significant potential for professional development, career training and continuing education.

Project-based learning in a virtual exchange environment has many advantages. First, it allows students to learn in real time and work with their colleagues from other countries, which expands their opportunities and experiences. Secondly, this approach stimulates students to actively participate in the learning process and develops intercultural competence in them. Third, it promotes the development of new technologies and learning methods that can be applied in various fields and professions.

Today, there are many studies that confirm the effectiveness of project-based learning in a virtual exchange environment for the development of students' intercultural competence. One such study is the article "Virtual exchanges in higher education: developing intercultural skills of students across borders through online collaboration" (Bassani & Buchem, 2019). It examines virtual exchanges as a way to develop intercultural skills in higher education students through online collaboration. The authors explore how such exchanges can contribute to the development of communication skills and cooperation

between students from different countries and cultures. The article includes an analysis of previous research in the field of virtual exchanges and describes the practical aspects of conducting such exchanges, including the use of online platforms and tools to ensure effective communication and collaboration. The authors of the article describe the positive impact of virtual exchanges on the development of students' intercultural competence, in particular on their ability to understand and accept different cultural approaches and practices, on increasing their confidence in intercultural communication and on their ability to cooperate with colleagues from different countries. It also mentions some of the challenges that teachers and students may face during virtual exchanges, such as insufficient preparation of students to work in an online environment, different levels of technical training, difficulties in keeping students motivated.

In conclusion, intercultural competence is becoming increasingly important in higher education as the number of students studying abroad grows. Project-based learning in a virtual exchange environment is an effective approach to developing intercultural skills, allowing students to collaborate with colleagues from different countries and cultures. This approach promotes active participation in the learning process and helps students understand cultural differences and develop skills for interacting with representatives of other cultures. However, proper preparation and organization of the educational process are necessary to ensure its effectiveness. Despite some challenges, studies confirm the positive impact of virtual exchanges on the development of students' intercultural competence and the promotion of new technologies and learning methods that can be applied in various fields and professions.

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ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT AND EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE: NAVIGATING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY IN THE VIRTUAL TEACHING LANDSCAPE

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Virtual teaching has become increasingly prevalent in the educational landscape, propelled by advancements in technology and the global shift toward online learning. In this digital era, maintaining academic integrity in virtual teaching is of utmost importance for upholding the principles of scholarship, ensuring the credibility of educational outcomes, and fostering a culture of ethical conduct among students and educators.

The significance of academic integrity in virtual teaching stems from several key reasons. Firstly, academic integrity ensures the authenticity and originality of students' work. By upholding ethical principles such as honesty and the responsible use of information, students demonstrate their commitment to intellectual rigor and contribute to the overall quality of the educational experience (Barberena-Cerda & Parnther, 2022). Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty undermine the integrity of virtual teaching, compromising the educational process and diminishing the value of students' accomplishments (Hillman et al., 2022).

Secondly, maintaining academic integrity in virtual teaching is essential for fair assessment and evaluation. In an online environment, where assignments and assessments are often submitted electronically, the potential for unauthorized collaboration or the misuse of external resources is heightened. Adhering to academic integrity principles helps to ensure that each student's work is a genuine reflection of their knowledge and skills, allowing educators to accurately assess their progress and provide meaningful feedback (Brown & Martinez, 2020).

Additionally, academic integrity in virtual teaching cultivates a culture of trust and respect within the learning community. By practicing ethical conduct, students uphold the principles of fairness, intellectual honesty, and the acknowledgment of others' contributions. This creates an environment where academic ideas are shared, respected, and built collaboratively. Students learn to appreciate the work of others, engage in constructive dialogue, and foster an atmosphere of academic excellence (Kestler, 2020).

To promote academic integrity in virtual teaching, several strategies can be implemented.

Primarily, educational institutions should establish clear policies and guidelines that outline expectations regarding academic honesty, proper citation practices, and the responsible use of digital resources. These policies should be communicated effectively to students and educators, emphasizing the ramifications of academic dishonesty and the benefits of upholding integrity.

To effectively communicate these policies, institutions can utilize various channels such as student handbooks, course syllabi, and online platforms dedicated to academic integrity. It is crucial that students are made aware of the potential consequences of academic misconduct, including disciplinary actions and damage to their academic and professional reputations (McGee, 2013). By emphasizing the ramifications of academic dishonesty, institutions can instill a sense of responsibility and encourage students to uphold the highest standards of integrity in their academic pursuits.

Furthermore, institutions should emphasize the benefits and value of upholding academic integrity. Students should be made aware that academic integrity is not merely a set of rules and regulations, but a fundamental aspect of their personal and intellectual growth.

Fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment can contribute to the promotion of academic integrity. Encouraging open dialogue about the importance of ethics, providing guidance on responsible research and writing practices, and creating opportunities for students to discuss and reflect on the value of integrity can enhance students' understanding and commitment to academic honesty.

Educators play a pivotal role in providing guidance on responsible research and writing practices, helping students navigate the complexities of virtual learning. They can emphasize the significance of proper citation methods, the importance of accurately attributing sources, and the avoidance of plagiarism (Hillman et al., 2022). Providing students with clear guidelines on how to properly integrate and acknowledge external information equips them with the skills necessary to maintain academic integrity in their work.

In addition to classroom discussions, educators can establish online forums or platforms where students can seek guidance, ask questions, and engage in conversations related to academic integrity. These platforms provide students with a sense of community and support, allowing them to connect with peers who share similar concerns and seek advice from experienced educators. Through these interactions, students develop a greater awareness of the importance of academic integrity and the resources available to support their ethical academic journey (Brown & Martinez, 2020).

Moreover, it is essential for educators to lead by example and demonstrate their own commitment to academic integrity. By modeling ethical behavior in their teaching

practices, such as providing proper citations in instructional materials and maintaining high standards of integrity in assessments, educators serve as role models for students. This helps create a culture where integrity is valued and expected, reinforcing the importance of academic honesty in the virtual learning environment (Barberena-Cerda & Parnther, 2022).

Integrating educational modules or workshops on academic integrity into the virtual teaching curriculum serves as a proactive measure to address academic integrity concerns and equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills. These modules can be delivered through interactive online platforms, incorporating multimedia resources, case studies, and self-assessment tools. By utilizing engaging and interactive instructional methods, educational institutions can effectively capture students' attention and facilitate their understanding of academic integrity principles.

These modules can focus on various aspects of academic integrity, such as the proper use of sources, citing references, paraphrasing, and understanding different forms of academic dishonesty. Additionally, providing students with resources and tools, such as plagiarism detection software and citation management tools, can support them in maintaining integrity throughout their academic journey (Hillman et al., 2022).

To ensure the effectiveness of these modules, it is crucial for educators to regularly assess students' understanding and application of academic integrity principles. Assignments or quizzes that require students to demonstrate their knowledge of proper citation practices and ethical research methods can be incorporated into the virtual teaching curriculum. By providing timely feedback and addressing areas of improvement, educators can reinforce the importance of academic integrity and guide students toward developing responsible research and writing habits (McGee, 2013).

The paramount importance of preserving academic integrity in the context of virtual teaching cannot be overstated. Upholding ethical principles such as honesty, responsible information use, and the originality of students' work is essential to maintain the credibility and value of educational outcomes. By mitigating instances of plagiarism and academic dishonesty, the integrity of virtual teaching is upheld, ensuring the sanctity of the educational process. Moreover, by fostering a culture of academic integrity, characterized by fairness, mutual respect, and collaborative knowledge exchange, students are equipped with the necessary skills for intellectual growth and success. However, significant work remains to be done in this area, necessitating the implementation of clear policies, effective communication strategies, and the cultivation of inclusive learning environments to promote and reinforce academic integrity in virtual teaching.

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VIRTUAL EXCHANGE IN EDUCATION: EXPLORING TYPES AND ACTIVITIES FOR INTERCULTURAL LEARNING AND GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT

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In an era of globalization and digital connectivity, it is crucial for educational institutions to provide opportunities for students to engage in intercultural learning and develop the skills needed to navigate a diverse and interconnected world. Virtual exchange, also known as online intercultural exchange or telecollaboration, has emerged as an innovative approach to fostering intercultural learning and global engagement in educational settings (Abrahamse et al., 2014). The virtual exchange has emerged as a promising pedagogical approach that harnesses the power of technology to connect students from different cultural backgrounds and facilitate cross-cultural learning experiences (O'Dowd, 2018). This paper aims to examine the various types of virtual exchange programs and suggest activities that can be incorporated into these programs to enhance intercultural competence. We provide an overview of synchronous and asynchronous virtual exchange formats and discuss the potential benefits and challenges associated with each approach. Furthermore, we propose a range of suggested activities that can be integrated into virtual exchange programs to facilitate intercultural understanding and collaboration. These activities encompass both structured and open-ended formats, enabling participants to engage in meaningful dialogue, collaborative projects, and reflective practices. By leveraging the power of technology, virtual exchange offers a unique opportunity to transcend physical borders and promote intercultural learning in an increasingly interconnected world.

Types of Virtual Exchange Programs

1 Synchronous Virtual Exchange

Synchronous virtual exchange programs involve real-time interactions between students from different locations. This can be achieved through video conferencing platforms, online discussion forums, or collaborative virtual environments. The synchronous nature of these exchanges allows for immediate cross-cultural communication and collaboration. Examples of synchronous virtual exchange formats include telecollaborative projects, online debates, and virtual cultural exchanges.

2 Asynchronous Virtual Exchange

Asynchronous virtual exchange programs, on the other hand, do not require simultaneous participation. Participants engage in activities at their own convenience, utilizing online platforms such as discussion boards, blogs, or shared document repositories. Asynchronous exchanges provide flexibility and allow for in-depth reflection and thoughtful responses. Examples of asynchronous virtual exchange activities include e-mail exchanges, discussion forums, and multimedia-based storytelling projects.

3. Language Exchange: Pair students from different linguistic backgrounds to engage in language learning and practice. They can communicate through video chats, voice messages, or written exchanges, allowing them to improve their language skills while also learning about each other's cultures.

4. Case Studies and Simulations: Present students with real-world scenarios or cultural dilemmas to analyze and discuss collaboratively. This encourages critical thinking, empathy, and cross-cultural problem-solving.

Among open-ended activities that we consider meaningful we can define:

1 Reflective Journals: Encourage students to maintain reflective journals throughout the virtual exchange experience. They can document their observations, thoughts, and personal growth, fostering self-awareness and deepening their understanding of intercultural dynamics.

2 Online Forums and Discussion Boards: Establish online platforms for participants to engage in asynchronous discussions on various cultural, social, or global topics. This encourages the exchange of ideas, perspectives, and experiences, promoting intercultural dialogue.

3 Virtual Mentoring: Facilitate virtual mentoring relationships between students from different cultural backgrounds. This allows for personalized guidance and support, as well as the exchange of knowledge and experiences.

4 Digital Storytelling: Encourage students to create digital stories or multimedia presentations that highlight their cultural identities, traditions, or personal narratives. This activity promotes self-expression, cultural sharing, and empathy-building.

Structured activities are

1. Virtual Debates: Engage students in structured online debates on topics of global significance, allowing them to explore diverse perspectives and develop argumentation and negotiation skills.

2. Collaborative Projects: Facilitate cross-cultural collaboration through joint research projects, virtual presentations, or multimedia productions. This fosters teamwork, problem-solving, and intercultural communication skills.

3 Cultural Exchanges: Organize virtual cultural exchanges, where students share aspects of their own culture through presentations, videos, or virtual tours. This promotes intercultural understanding and appreciation.

Benefits and Challenges of Virtual Exchange

Virtual exchange offers numerous advantages for intercultural learning, including increased cultural awareness, enhanced language skills, improved digital literacy, and the development of critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. It provides a platform for students to engage with diverse perspectives, challenge stereotypes, and develop empathy and tolerance toward others. The virtual exchange also fosters the development of international networks and promotes global citizenship (Caluianu, 2019).

Despite its potential benefits, virtual exchange faces several challenges. These include technological barriers, such as limited internet access or technical difficulties, as well as differences in time zones, language proficiency, and cultural norms. Establishing effective communication and managing intercultural dynamics can also be challenging, requiring careful facilitation and intercultural training for participants and instructors.

Conclusion

Virtual exchange programs offer educators a valuable means of promoting intercultural learning and global engagement. By leveraging synchronous and asynchronous formats, educators can provide students with diverse opportunities to engage in meaningful cross-cultural interactions. The suggested activities outlined in this paper, whether structured or open-ended, enable participants to develop intercultural competence, foster collaboration, and gain a deeper understanding of global issues. It is important for educators to consider the benefits and challenges associated with virtual exchange and design programs that are inclusive, supportive, and culturally sensitive. As technology continues to advance, the virtual exchange holds great potential to foster intercultural understanding and prepare students for a globally interconnected world.

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APPROACHES TO VIRTUAL EXCHANGE AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Telecollaboration, or 'Virtual Exchange' is an application of online communication instruments to bring together classes of learners in geographically distant locations with the aim of developing their foreign language skills, digital competence and intercultural competence through online collaborative tasks and project work. Recently approaches to Virtual Exchange have evolved in different contexts and different areas of university education and these approaches have had, at times, very diverse organizational structures and pedagogical objectives. Here are different models and approaches to Virtual Exchange that are currently being used in higher education and some outline how the activity has contributed to internationalizing university education to date.

Universities are increasingly concerned with the task of preparing graduates to be active and responsible global citizens in a world that is intrinsically digitalised, globalized and multicultural in nature. For many years, international mobility programmes were considered the most effective way to prepare students to be 'global citizens' and develop their 'capacity to critique the world they live, see problems and issues from a range of perspectives, and take action to address them' [Leask, 2015, p. 17]. However, the number of students who have engaged in study abroad programmes remains stubbornly low and there is a limited impact of study abroad on students' intercultural attitudes and awareness. This has led educational institutions to look increasingly at 'internationalization at home', defined by Beelen and Jones (2015) as 'the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments'.

A growing number of higher education institutions are engaging their students in Virtual Exchange or telecollaboration – a rich and multifaceted activity which refers to online intercultural interaction and collaboration projects with partner classes from other cultural contexts under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators. Virtual Exchange has had a long history in university language education and, over the past two decades, approaches to Virtual Exchange have evolved in different contexts and different areas of university education and these approaches have had, at times, very diverse pedagogical objectives. For example, approaches in foreign language education have explored the development of autonomy in language learners, foreign language

competence [O'Rourke, 2007] as well as aspects of intercultural competence [Belz, 2002].

In university second language education, there is also a growing interest in online platforms that provide 'ready-made' virtual exchange experiences for their students. These platforms function in different ways but the majority connect learners with native speakers in videoconferencing sessions, usually in exchange for a fee which can be paid by the institution or the students themselves. They then provide the students and/or their teachers with recordings of the conversations which can later be used as part of students' course evaluation. This 'outsourcing' of virtual exchange takes a considerable organizational and technical burden off the teachers who no longer have to look for appropriate partners for their students but there is currently a lack of reliable research as to how learners can develop their linguistic and intercultural competences through such un-mentored and often decontextualized virtual conversations with native speakers.

It is not surprising that one of the disciplines to most eagerly take up Virtual Exchange as a learning tool has been foreign language education. From the beginnings of the Internet in the early 1990s, foreign language educators have seen the potential of connecting language learners with counterparts in other countries in order to engage them in interaction with native speakers of other languages and to give them semi-authentic experiences of communicating in these languages.

Virtual Exchange in foreign language education has traditionally taken the form of one of two models – each one reflecting the principal learning approaches prevalent in foreign language education at the time. The first well-known model was e-tandem, which focused on fostering learner autonomy and learners' ability to continue their language learning outside of the language classroom. The second model is usually referred to as Intercultural Telecollaboration or Online Intercultural Exchange and reflects the emphasis in the late 1990s and early 2000s on intercultural and sociocultural aspects of foreign language education.

In the e-tandem model, two native speakers of different languages communicate together with the aim of learning the other's language, and messages are typically written 50% in the target and 50% in the native language, thereby providing each partner with an opportunity to practice their target language and, at the same time, provide their partner with authentic input.

These exchanges are also based on the principle of autonomy, and the responsibility for a successful exchange rests mainly with the learners, who are expected to provide feedback on their partners' content and/or on their foreign language performance. In this sense, tandem partners take on the role of peer tutors who correct their partners' errors and propose alternative formulations in the target language. The role of the tutor or class

teacher in the e-tandem model is usually minimal. For example, learners are often encouraged to take on responsibility for finding their own themes for discussion, correcting their partners' errors, and keeping a learner diary or portfolio to reflect on their own learning progress.

Although the model is now over 20 years old, e-tandem continues to be a very popular form of Virtual Exchange in foreign language education. In the late 1990s, a second model or approach to Virtual Exchange in foreign language education began to appear which was characterized by a stronger focus on intercultural aspects of language learning and communication and by a greater integration of the online exchanges into classroom activity. This form of Virtual Exchange was to become broadly known as 'telecollaboration'. The telecollaborative model of Virtual Exchange strives to integrate online interaction comprehensively into the students' foreign language programs and involves international class-to-class partnerships in which intercultural projects and tasks are developed by partner teachers in the collaborating institutions. For example, students' contact classes are where online interaction and publications are prepared, analyzed, and reflected upon with the guidance of the teacher. Foreign language telecollaboration also places the emphasis on the exchanges on developing intercultural awareness and other aspects of intercultural communicative competence, in addition to developing linguistic competence.

There is great variety in the type of tasks which educators have used to develop intercultural approaches to telecollaboration. Some of the better-known tasks involved requiring students to work together with their international partners to produce websites or presentations based on comparisons of their cultures.

In conclusion, the future of Virtual Exchange would appear to be bright yet still unclear in many respects. While it is clearly beginning to gain recognition at national and trans-national policy-making levels, there is still a lack of communication and coordination among the many initiatives and organizations and this undoubtedly hinders the further dissemination of this educational approach among the wider academic community. Agreeing to use one term, such as Virtual Exchange, may be a first step in the right direction, but even this proposal is likely to be rejected by many specialists.

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DIGITAL LEARNING TOOLS AND TECHNOLOGIES IN EDUCATION

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Nowadays all universities incorporate technologies into their curriculum in some form. They have digitized their whole education system by recognising the function of digital classes. More and more aspects of today's world become digital because of the advancement of the internet, mobile phones, mobile apps, tablets, laptops, and other gadgets, Digital education is replacing conventional education in classrooms at many universities and colleges. The use of technology has grown significantly at the universities in recent years. Blackboards have been replaced with PowerPoint presentations, online courses, and videos.

Technological advancement has boosted distance learning education. It provides easy access to all learning resources and allows for convenient interaction with the teacher. Instructors can quickly create and manage groups using learning tools and technologies, such as social learning platforms. Digital technologies in education have given rise to various Learning management systems (LMS). They have promoted virtual classrooms where a teacher can interact with students in real-time, share his resources, deliver his lecture, assess students' learning, collect feedback, and reply to their queries.

Students collaborate to solve ongoing educational challenges using online platforms. Hackathons have emerged as successful event to find the solutions to many challenging problems. Students can express themselves and collaborate on activities by sharing their thoughts and ideas. Using learning tools and technologies, students can build self-directed strong learning abilities. They can figure out what they need to know, locate and use online resources, apply what they have learned to the problem, and even analyse comments. As a consequence, they have increased their production and efficiency.

The integration of technology into education provides students with an engaging learning experience, allowing them to stay more interested in the subject matter without being distracted by extraneous things. The use of projectors, computers, and other modern technical equipment in the classroom can make learning exciting and interesting for students. Learning can be made more dynamic and interesting by setting tasks in the classroom that includes technological resources, oral presentations, and group participation. Participation can go beyond oral communication (Kovács et al., 2015).

The use of computers and other devices in combination with digital tools allows students to play a more active role and be at the center of the process. The teacher becomes

a guide in this process and can evaluate the effectiveness of learning. Using a variety of digital resources, students can upload the necessary information or their own content. Web 2.0 technologies (wikis, podcasts, blogs, etc.) help students to create content, collaborate with others, evaluate each other's work, and move to collaborative learning. Digital technologies make it easy to use classroom tactics, such as gamification or flipped classroom approaches that optimize learning. Learning landscapes have evolved as a didactic tool that combines several methods and allows for a different route to be presented to each student (Kumar et al., 2022). Thus, technology makes learning more inspiring and meaningful.

Technologies break down all educational barriers, allowing students and teachers to communicate in real-time and learn across time and place. A complete and thorough learning process adds a new dimension to their learning and helps them to achieve academic success. Students have access to a wide range of online resources and journals related to their studying topics through their computers and portable devices, allowing them to obtain additional information to complete assignments. Furthermore, digital platforms provide reliable and high-quality data from their computers, anywhere and anytime. In addition to information resources, educational technologies allow students to connect with academic professionals around the world.

Thus, in the context of modern technological development, teachers have to use a variety of gadgets, such as smartphones and tablets, available online resources; specialized learning products such as animation, games, or artificial intelligence-based systems, to make their materials lively, interesting, and relevant. The compatibility of e-learning systems with new smart devices is an important element for easier access and faster uptake of digital learning. Technological innovations help to facilitate learning for different age groups and topics. The importance of big data and the use of analytics in education is an important part of technology. Educational institutions realize the value of comprehensive data on student and faculty performance as they expand the use of virtual classrooms, e-learning platforms, and online exams.

Educational technologies improve a student's performance by systematically approaching instructional resources. It recognizes individual needs by incorporating technologies into classroom instruction and tracking a student's progress. Instructors must appropriately expose conditions or select an appropriate technology for the curriculum delivery and track outcomes to determine the success of the measures.

Digital learning tools and technology engage students and improve critical thinking skills, the foundation for developing analytic reasoning. Because they require students to observe the rules and conventions to play, interactive social skill games effectively teach them discipline. Students experience feelings of accomplishment due to gaining new

knowledge and skills through digital learning tools, which give them the confidence to pursue new interests.

There are many apps that teachers can use to take classroom collaboration to the next level with engaging interactive tools (Walsh, 2014). The potential to collect structured feedback instantly is a powerful aid to learning, and with the proliferation of internet-enabled devices, it has never been easier. High-tech or low-tech, it's easy to collect student opinions and feedback in today's classroom. Here are some tools and methods for doing so:

1. Polls (using any device with internet access): When an instructor uses web-based survey tools, users can often participate from any device with internet access. SurveyMonkey is a popular web-based survey tool that allows you to conduct small surveys for free. Doodle, Polldaddy, and SurveyAnyplace are a few other alternatives.

2. Clickers: These devices, also known as student response systems, make it very easy to collect student feedback. Click here to read a story about a contest winner we had on our site in 2022 who used clickers to improve their FCAT scores.

3. Plickers: This is a relatively low-tech and very affordable alternative to clickers that does not require students to have electronic devices.

4. More advanced, education-specific tools: Apps like Socrative are great examples of the mature set of tools available to educators.

5. Twitter is a unique, fun way to collect feedback when students are able to tweet. An educator can create a unique hashtag and ask students to use it in their tweets to make their own student tweet stream.

Nowadays education has become more flexible and accessible. Online degrees and mobile learning are more popular, physical boundaries have been removed, and technologies can help their employees pursue their education. These are excellent way for teachers to teach students how to keep organised and simplify their tasks right from the start. In addition, by giving students access to information, modern technology has the potential to excite and empower them.

The education system at the Universities has become much more accessible, with a wide choice of learning techniques. Teachers should think about why students want to use technology in the classroom rather than need it. It will surely assist educators in tracking a student's progress and developing innovative lesson strategies. Students who learn using technology can build skills that will help them to succeed in the future.

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AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATION: CONSIDERATIONS IN ONLINE COURSE DESIGN

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With the numerous advancements that have taken place in recent years, it could be seen as insincere to mention the lack of attention given to audiovisual translation (AVT) in current academic research since it is one of the fastest-growing areas in the scope of Translation Studies. In recent decades, higher education translator training programmes began including AVT training as a compulsory or optional subject in their curricula. Prior to that, professionals were trained outside educational institutions, mainly in the workplace. This was due to "ever changing market needs, which required translators to learn new skills with urgency, but also because universities lacked the capacity to offer suitable training to cater for those emerging needs" (Díaz Cintas, 2008, p. 3–4).

As a result of high demand within the industry and the global proliferation of media, AVT has consolidated as an academic discipline taught within the scope of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in face-to-face and online modes of delivery. Besides, recently the industry experienced the emergence of specialised online platforms, such as AVT Masterclass, offering non-degree modular courses in various branches of AVT, including subtitling proper, subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH), as well as the fundamentals of translation for dubbing and voiceover.

When adhering to the competence-based training approach, the starting point for developing a course involves establishing the intended learning outcomes to be attained. The principal challenge of course design in AVT lies in the necessity to address multiple general and industry-specific competences. Having analysed the extensive body of literature on translation training, Cerezo Merchán (2019) summarised the relevant AVT competences under the following groups:

contrastive competence, including complete mastery of the target and source languages;

extralinguistic competence, involving, on the one hand, profound expertise in the cultures relevant to the translation process; on the other hand, this competence entails a certain familiarity with different audiovisual genres and media;

methodological and strategic competence, encompassing mastery of an array of professional techniques applied in translation, such as voicing techniques, creative use of

language resources, synchronisation and spotting in subtitling etc., as well as theoretical knowledge of different AVT modes;

instrumental competence, covering mastery of professional software for subtitling, dubbing, audio-description, and speech recognition.

translation problem-solving competence, encompassing project management skills and the ability to effectively employ translation strategies and techniques to render various audiovisual genres (p. 471).

The set aims and learning outcomes predefine the structure and content of a course in AVT. Owing to the multi-faceted scope of the subject, acquiring the necessary AVT competences entails working with a variety of AVT modes, including dubbing, voiceover, subtitling, subtitling for the deaf and the hard of hearing (SDH), surtitling, audio-description, video games etc. Discussing the design of his course in subtitling, Diaz Cintas (2008) suggests that concise theoretical background information pertinent to the class topic should be introduced prior to its practical stage: "after a brief introduction, learners are then exposed to practical translation hands-on tasks early in the programme of study so that they can start learning from their own experience" (p. 92).

Adopting a viable teaching methodology is essential to foster the development of the aforementioned competences. Focusing on the most effective types of classes for AVT training, Chaume (2003) singles out the participative lecture for theoretical input, as well as discussion groups or seminars and tutorials for practising translation techniques. The suggested activities include step-by-step discussions, problem-solving tasks, seminars about texts, presentations prepared by students, case studies or simulated translation commissions and task-sharing (p. 291–293).

It is also essential for AVT specialists to develop skills in using professional software when working with different AVT modes. Traditionally, the main focus is placed on honing students' mastery of computer-assisted translation software tools, translation memory software specialised software for subtitling, dubbing and voiceover.

Although there is a number of full-fledged postgraduate programmes in AVT offered by globally acclaimed universities (Translation and Technology (Audiovisual) MSc from University College London, Audiovisual Translation and Localisation MA from the University of Leeds, MA Audiovisual and Literary Translation from the University of Essex, the UK, University Master's Degree in Audiovisual Translation from Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona, Spain, to name a few), most of them provide only on-campus training with some opportunities to study online or in a distance mode.

However, due to the ongoing trend of online learning and virtual exchange in education, higher education institutions will likely focus on adapting programmes with traditional face-to-face mode of delivery to online learning environments. For example,

Instituto Superior de Estudios Lingüísticos y Traducción, Spain, successfully launched a master's degree programme Master's in Audiovisual Translation: Localisation, Subtitling and Dubbing available in both online and onsite modes serving as a use case example to illustrate the versatility of this approach.

The programme is divided into the module and final phases. According to the programme description provided on the official website, the module phase covers the following courses:

Subtitling and dubbing: principles and theory;

Current difficulties posed by language correction in the field of audiovisual translation;

Translation techniques applied to subtitling;

Translation techniques for the hard of hearing and deaf;

Translation techniques for dubbing;

Synchronisation techniques;

Audio description techniques for the blind;

Translation techniques applied to localisation. (Instituto Superior de Estudios Lingüísticos y Traducción, n.d.)

Study materials are delivered through the online platform according to the schedule. The final phase includes the applied and TFM (dissertation) modules, entailing individual research and internship.

In conclusion, it is noteworthy that the field of AVT is constantly evolving, and online programmes allow for greater flexibility in adapting to changes in the industry; they also provide better accessibility for students who may not have access to traditional face-to-face programmes due to geographical or time constraints; online programmes can be more cost-effective, as they require fewer resources and infrastructure, this can result in lower tuition fees for students.

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ENHANCING ONLINE COLLABORATION FOR EFFECTIVE VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

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In today's remote learning landscape, online collaboration plays a crucial role in facilitating student engagement and interaction. Virtual exchanges, which enable students from different locations to collaborate on shared subjects, have become increasingly important, particularly for those who seek international learning experiences. Scientific studies of Wood E., Collins S. A., Mueller S., Stetten N. E. & El-Shokry M. (2022), O'Dowd R. (2021), Gutiérrez B. L., Glimäng M. R., Sauro S., & O'Dowd R. (2022) have shown varying satisfaction and learning outcomes among participants. Our research is aimed to investigate how tutors can design, organise, and manage students' virtual exchanges to ensure that all the students benefit from the proposed mode of online collaboration.

Virtual exchange projects utilize widely available online communication tools such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Cisco Webex, Facebook, or WeChat to facilitate collaborative learning among geographically distant students. These projects are typically supported by teachers or trained facilitators within the students' institutions and have proven to enhance learning in areas such as foreign languages, digital skills, and intercultural communication. However, not all learners experience the same benefits, and the effectiveness of online collaboration varies from student to student.

Drawing from the research conducted as part of the Evaluate project (Baroni et al., 2019), which involved 23 virtual exchanges in initial teacher education classes across 34 institutions worldwide between 2017 and 2019 there were identified three key factors that influenced students' perception of their learning outcomes:

1. Overcoming challenges and anxieties. Students' ability to overcome challenges and manage anxieties during the virtual exchange significantly affected their learning gains. Those who successfully navigated obstacles reported higher learning outcomes.

2. Expectations and learning gains. Students' expectations of the virtual exchange influenced their perceived learning gains. Higher expectations often resulted in lower reported learning outcomes.

3. Prior technological capabilities. Students who already possessed strong digital skills before participating in the virtual exchange felt that they learned less from the project. Technological proficiency seemed to influence the perceived impact of the collaboration.

According to different studies, to maximize learning outcomes for all students involved in online collaborative projects like virtual exchanges, tutors should consider the following strategies:

1. Understanding student profiles and technological familiarity. Instructors should assess students' technological competence and anxiety levels. Leveraging the diversity of students' skills, peer-to-peer support can be organized, with more tech-savvy students mentoring those who require assistance. Instructors can also provide additional support and monitor technological know-how when necessary.

2. Addressing challenges and promoting benefits. Explicitly discussing potential challenges, such as technological anxiety or the belief that technology is solely for socializing, can help students overcome these barriers. At the same time, highlighting the benefits of technology for learning is essential in fostering a positive mindset.

3. Establishing clear expectations. Providing a clear framework that outlines the objectives and limitations of the virtual exchange helps students understand what they are working towards and fosters a sense of accomplishment upon achieving those goals. Managing expectations can prevent disappointment and ensure realistic outcomes.

4. Promoting collaboration within student teams. It is obvious that encouraging open communication, both formally and informally, enhances learning outcomes. Thus, creating opportunities for students to engage in discussions, socialize, and develop interpersonal skills contributes to successful collaborative experiences.

5. Empowering students in shaping the virtual exchange. Offering multiple synchronous communication tools and facilitating discussions on group organization allows and stimulates students to actively contribute to the design and direction of the virtual exchange and their virtual studies. While collaborative feedback and adjustments ensure that the exchange aligns with the needs and preferences of all participants.

So, we can conclude that by implementing evidence-based recommendations, tutors can enhance the effectiveness of virtual exchanges and enable all students to derive

greater benefits from online collaborative projects. Understanding students' profiles, addressing challenges, setting clear expectations, fostering collaboration, and empowering student agency contribute to improved learning outcomes and a more enriching virtual exchange experience.

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VIRTUAL EXCHANGE TOOLS FOR LEARNING ENGLISH

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The recent events, especially the Covid pandemic and the war, have changed the way we teach and learn. Now almost everyone knows what distance learning is. Undoubtedly, through e-learning, we can successfully learn something. Learning online or e-learning can be a part of virtual exchange, but it is not the same, as it means that more countries and cultures are involved. Virtual exchange would be impossible if we did not have the Internet and web resources. Now we can learn a language with native speakers staying far from them. Moreover, academic degrees can be done online through virtual exchange.

First, let us define this notion. So, the virtual exchange is an application of online tools that can be used to gather students from remote locations to have classes together to develop their language, digital and other skills with the help of doing tasks in real-time. Virtual exchange can be successfully conducted when it comes to learning a foreign language. During the last three years, we have been actively turning to virtual exchange to teach and learn languages. In this work, we would like to discuss virtual exchange for learning English and give examples of tools that can be beneficial for both teachers and learners.

As distance learning has two modes of studying the material such as synchronous and asynchronous, so does virtual exchange. We would like to add that virtual exchange is very useful if people are willing to learn a language with native speakers, but when they cannot leave their homes. Moreover, it is cheaper and faster.

It should be mentioned that the way how students learn differs for every personality. We can observe some preferences for extroverts and introverts, for example. What we mean by that is that more active and outgoing students, for example, will like synchronous mode more. On the other hand, those who like to work on their own at their own pace will find an asynchronous mode more satisfying. Synchronous one is interaction in real-time. It can encompass video conferences according to the schedule, communication in the chats and so on. This mode of interaction looks like real offline communication but in front of the gadget screen. This makes it possible to communicate with teachers and groupmates, answer questions, and provide feedback.

If we compare a virtual exchange classroom, we can say it is less expensive as it needs a computer and the Internet, also certain web resources and applications can be

applied. The drawback of virtual exchange synchronously means that if you have no electricity or the Internet, you cannot join the learning environment. To work and exchange knowledge online, we can refer to *Google Meet*, *Zoom Microsoft Teams*, *Skype* and other conferencing apps. They give the possibility to exchange knowledge online without much effort. What we especially like about Zoom, for example, is the option to create breakout rooms for discussing in smaller groups. So, learners can share their knowledge regarding their culture. When it comes to different time zone, it might be a problem, though.

Let us proceed to the explanation of another mode of virtual exchange, i.e. asynchronous one. It is more convenient who people who combine work and study, who cannot join the classes according to the schedule. The asynchronous one is a more flexible mode. It has got a lot of benefits. Students can choose when to study material and how much time to devote to it. In this mode, activities are provided for students that do not require discussion with teachers instantly. When it comes to online courses (like on *Coursera* etc.), students in most cases cover material asynchronously, but live sessions can also take place. For instance, on many platforms, e.g. *NaUrok* or *FutureLearn* participants are offered to watch videos recorded by specialists in certain areas, then answer questions, and carry out some creative projects, complete a test. The list of tasks is not limited.

Let us discuss the disadvantage of this type of virtual exchange. In all cases, there is a lack of live communication and misunderstanding. At our university, we use *Google Classroom* where we can create a foreign language course with a detailed description of each class. As far as advantages are concerned, it must be said that from *Google Classroom* we can reach other resources. Teachers can easily integrate various multimedia and other resources such as *Quizlet*, *Kahoot*, *Padlet* or *Youtub*e. It is worth emphasizing that asynchronous learning creates a positive educational environment since students feel more responsible for their progress. But because they cannot receive an instant response from the teacher, sometimes students lose their motivation to study the subject. So, to eliminate all difficulties that may arise during the virtual exchange, both synchronous and asynchronous modes in virtual exchange have to be combined.

In the past when virtual exchange began to evolve, in most cases, learners would use email for knowledge exchange. Thankfully now we have more possibilities. Let us give examples of applications or web resources that can be used for virtual exchange. The first platform we would like to recommend is *Tandem*. It is a language exchange platform that allows you to communicate with native speakers via text, audio, and video. For example, you study English and you are a native speaker of Ukrainian. The program selects for you native English speakers who are willing to learn Ukrainian. In this team or tandem, you

help each other learn languages. That is why the application has got such a name. There are about 160 languages available for mutual learning. The partner for knowledge exchange can be chosen based on filters (for instance, by age, gender, location, etc.)

Let us turn to another resource, called *HiNative*. With the help of it, you can easily ask a native speaker questions related to language and culture, and you will get the answers quickly. The most common questions that are asked on *HiNative* are 'Does this sound natural?', 'Is my pronunciation correct?' You can find an answer to a question that is not explained in textbooks. It teaches a live language, moreover, it helps to improve pronunciation, as the function of checking your pronunciation by a native speaker is available. Communication is maintained via text or voice messages.

To conclude, we want to say that virtual exchange continues to develop and change the models of getting knowledge. It is useful when it comes to language learning. In some cases, it is the only chance to talk to native speakers. Of course, there might be problems with technologies and different time zones, but at the same time, the virtual exchange can be fulfilled by applying synchronous and asynchronous modes. There are a lot of tools and resources that can be used during classes, and they can be used as an additional resource.

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VIRTUAL EXCHANGE AND ENHANCEMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Today, the field of international education has become even more open to innovative pedagogical practices. Regardless of whether it is internationalization abroad or internationalization at home (Brewer & Leask, 2012; Knight, 2008; Leask, 2015), educators and researchers have always sought to improve methods and practices that would enhance and expand the international interaction experience of both students and teachers in higher education (De Wit, 2016).

However, in many cases, the impact of innovation in international education (as in other areas of higher education) can be blocked at the institutional and political levels due to a lack of support or understanding of innovative practices. For this reason, the interest of researchers in such an innovative practice as the virtual exchange is growing in Europe.

Virtual exchange is viewed as an additional or independent type of mobility based on the potential of online learning and network communications. For example, online collaborative learning as a kind of virtual exchange is a globally networked teaching and learning methodology designed to facilitate the interaction of teachers and students with colleagues abroad through collaborative learning in intercultural online and blended learning environments. Collaborative learning in intercultural online and blended learning environments emphasizes ongoing student collaboration to develop intercultural skills. Collaborative learning in intercultural online and blended learning environments uses online technology to connect educators across any discipline across national borders and brings together any cross-cultural couples where face-to-face contact is impractical.

Also, the development of academic mobility, being one of the priorities in the formation of a global educational environment, today has become an important criterion for evaluating the work of a higher educational institution, both on the part of the legislature and on the part of consumers of educational services (Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josić & Jon, 2009). Today, it is difficult to imagine a large university that would not single out academic mobility as one of the priority areas of its work, and universities that actively use information and communication technologies in their activities have begun

to talk about the development of virtual academic mobility. Modern studies have not yet presented a unified classification of forms of virtual academic mobility. As part of the digitalization of higher education, ideas for the development of such forms of organizing exchanges as long and short-term distance courses, private lessons, online conferences, virtual tours, language training and much more are being proposed.

All in all, virtual academic mobility should be an important area of work to increase the competence of students and academic staff in their field of activity, and should become an important tool for providing up-to-date scientific knowledge to countries and institutions where such knowledge is relatively less developed. The virtual mobility of students and academic staff should be motivated and encouraged.

The introduction of virtual exchange programs requires close organizational and creative cooperation with students. On the one hand, the issue of the quality of assimilation of virtual programs by students, the sociocultural knowledge and competencies they have received has not yet been studied, on the other hand, it is the participants in mobility who can make competent recommendations for improving one or another form of remote work. That is why it seems necessary to have regular interaction with the coordinator from both the sending and the host university with the students.

Virtual academic exchange helps students function successfully in the modern information world. Young people who adapt well to the digital world exhibit characteristics that allow them to develop and maintain digital competence. Lifelong learning is a key characteristic needed to deal with rapid changes in technology and information and is therefore crucial for building digital literacy. Successful "digital" youth have a high level of self-motivation, a desire for active learning methods, and the ability to self-improve. It also contributes to developing students' intercultural competence and providing them with an international learning experience (Beelen & Jones, 2015).

It should be noted that the communication area of digital competence covers a wide range of skills that exceed the number of those that may be needed for face-to-face communication. In particular, this includes the ability to behave ethically and morally, to interact responsibly in the process of social interaction, the ability to assess the potential impact of one's actions on the Internet, as well as the skills to adequately deal with privacy and security in the online environment.

The active international activity of a higher education institution is an identifier of its effectiveness and competitiveness in the global educational market (Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josić & Jon, 2009). The necessary criteria for successful international activity include the number of foreign students studying both in basic educational programs and within the framework of academic mobility, the implementation of cooperation

agreements with foreign partner universities, joint scientific research and publications, double degree programs and international scientific and cultural events, exchange of students, administrative and teaching staff and much more.

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THE ROLE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) IN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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The field of language teaching and learning has seen a significant transformation in recent years due to the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies. AI-based systems have the potential to revolutionize the way language teaching and learning take place, offering learners and educators a more personalized and effective approach to language acquisition,

One of the key advantages of AI-powered systems in language learning is the ability to provide customized instruction to individual learners. These systems can analyze data on student's progress and provide instructions to meet specific individual needs. This can include adapting the level of difficulty, selecting relevant learning materials, and providing immediate feedback on performance.

Artificial Intelligence can be used in various ways to support language teaching and learning. Here are some ways AI can be utilized in language education:

Adaptive Learning: AI-based adaptive learning systems can personalize foreign language learning to meet the demand of individual learners. By analyzing data on students' performance and learning methods, AI can propose an individual approach that can enhance students' language skills and motivation. For example, Duolingo is a popular language learning platform that uses AI to personalize lessons and provide adaptive feedback. The system tracks students' progress and adjusts the difficulty of the content to the learner's language level. Duolingo also uses gamification and rewards to motivate students to keep practicing and improve their language skills.

Another good example of an adaptive language learning system is Babbel. It's a language learning app that uses Artificial Intelligence to personalize lessons. The platform analyzes the performance of students and offers feedback and support to help

them improve their language skills. Babbel also uses interactive conversational exercises with AI chatbots to help students practice their speaking and listening skills in an interactive way.

Language Assessment. AI is a powerful tool for evaluating learners' language skills, including listening, speaking, reading and writing. AI-based language assessment can provide an efficient and objective grading. AI can help language teachers use adaptive language assessment approach, i.e. adjust the difficulty level of tasks based on the students' performance. By using this feature of AI-based language assessment system, the teacher can also identify the areas where students need further practice. AI-powered speech recognition technology can be used in assessing students' pronunciation and fluency in a foreign language. The AI system also enables a teacher to analyze students' written works , such as essays or compositions, and provide feedback on grammar, vocabulary and style.

Language Modeling. AI can help language learners in language modeling in several ways. For example, AI language models can be used to provide predictive text suggestions as learners type or speak in a foreign language. It helps learners to write or speak more fluently and accurately as the AI system predicts and corrects the mistakes.

Language Translation: AI language translation tools can help students model the language they learn through the translation of phrases or sentences from the source language to their target language. This feature of an AI system can significantly help students understand the structure and syntax of the target language.

Automatic Transcription: At present the AI-powered spoken language automatic transcription and analysis is widely used by multiple language learners. The system can convert audio or video files to text and thus help students transcribe and analyze spoken language, such as conversations or lectures. It also helps them identify new vocabulary and improve their pronunciation and listening skills.

Language Practice: AI-based language practice tools, such as chatbots or virtual tutors, can provide learners with language practice through thematic sessions. These tools can simulate real-world conversations and provide feedback to improve learners' speaking and conversational skills.

Content Generation: This tool can help learners generate new language context, such as essays or compositions, based on their own writing or speaking samples. This feature enables learners to improve their language modeling skills by generating new language content and receiving feedback on their writing or speaking abilities.

In general, AI can help language learners in language modeling by providing predictive text, translation, transcription, language practice and content generation tools,

By using these AI tools learners can improve their language skills, model the target language more effectively and achieve their language-learning goals more efficiently.

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VIRTUAL LEARNING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND IT SKILLS (ADVANCED TRAINING)

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The events of recent years and the aggravation of historical events have opened the wide world of virtual education to teachers and students. Today, anyone who wants to gain knowledge in almost any field can study anywhere in the world with just a laptop or phone and access to the Internet. It simplifies the process of intercultural communication, exchange of thoughts and experiences, and expansion of worldview.

In our research, we propose to consider and analyze opportunities for improving the qualifications of teachers, in which you can take part remotely, and courses for the development of foreign language, in particular, vocational skills, for students. Speaking of teachers, many international organizations (*British Council, Tesol, DAAD, OeAD,* etc.) in cooperation with European institutions of higher education offer a variety of short and long-term programs.

For instance, *DAAD* in cooperation with *Anhalt University of Applied Sciences* (HSA, Germany) arranged *The DigIn.Net project* that provides an infrastructure for the effective dealing with modern ICT tools to increase the use of innovation capacity at the technical universities of Ukraine together with the expert groups in Germany and applies this infrastructure to create a transnational network of scientists working on innovative ideas. The successful implementation of the DigIn.Net project demonstrates how digitalization tools can be used to deepen the collaboration between the Anhalt University of Applied Sciences and its Ukrainian higher education partners and contribute to the internationalization of Ukrainian higher education institutions in order to facilitate the use of digital tools for the promotion of the innovation processes:

This program provides participants with an opportunity to deepen their knowledge about 1) methodological aspects of the organization of blended or distance learning: 2) digital technologies of communication and cooperation; 3) digital tools for creating educational content etc. All these skills are important and useful for organizing remote and face-to-face foreign language classes: - methodological aspects of the organization of blended or distance learning: international best practices; - video conferencing services; -
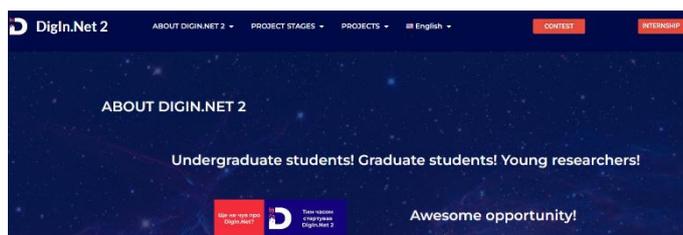
technologies for preparing scientific publications: *LaTeX*; - digital technologies of communication and cooperation (*Mentimeter, Google Forms, Slido, interactive whiteboards: Padlet, Jamboard, Conceptboard, Miro*); - a package of cloud software and digital tools for communication and collaboration (*Google applications, Moodle*); creating a personal digital profile (*mind maps, maps of thoughts; infographics*); - digital tools for creating interactive worksheets: Liveworksheets, Wizer; - digital tools for creating educational content (*Canva environment, Genially environment*); - digital tools for creating educational videos (*educational videos, Interactive Videos Powtoon*); - digital tools for monitoring the quality of the educational process, etc. [1].

Speaking of platforms and resources for both teachers and students, we consider:

iversity.org – one auxiliary, in our opinion, can be the indicated resource, which has many English language courses from various specialties, which can be interesting for students of various professions, and also has three language courses;

online.stanford.edu is a resource of professional English-language online educational programs and courses from Stanford University teachers, among which the vast majority are focused on narrowly specialized disciplines, but if desired, you can find a few courses for language students;

openuped.eu is a pan-European platform founded on the initiative of the European Commission and the European Association of Distance Learning Universities. The resource is a university community that provides and develops open online education. Its experts generate knowledge, experience, and joint action and empower academia through events and publications:

vumonline.ua is a resource of the Maidan Open University, which is aimed at civic education in more than 30 different areas. Currently, there are only 4 English-language courses on the platform, but in our opinion, they can also be used as additional resources for training foreign language skills;

www.canvas.net is a platform with English-language online courses for students and teachers. This resource offers a lot of professional development as well as narrow-profile programs developed by competent teachers; for foreign language training, language courses and a translation course will be interesting;

www.ed-era.com is an online education studio, the courses of which were created by Ukrainians in order to provide quality and affordable education in Ukraine; the resource

currently contains some English-language courses that can be used as an element of distance learning:

www.edx.org is an online platform that hosts courses in various areas (currently 24 areas). Since the training courses are designed in English, this resource can be a useful additional source for training and deepening the foreign language knowledge of students;

www.futurelearn.com is an educational platform of the Open University, which currently contains more than 20 interesting English language courses for different levels, as well as English-language programs in various specialties that can be used for students of non-linguistic fields;

www.ted.com – this resource can be of interest to students who have difficulty understanding native speakers, videos on various topics that contain Ukrainian subtitles can be effective. Such videos can be used both for additional independent work of students and as homework;

www.udacity.com is also an online platform that currently hosts more than 30 English-language courses that may be of interest to students of technical, economic and natural sciences. Accordingly, taking such a course can also be a component of a foreign language course:

All of the above resources, in our opinion, independently or in combination with other creativities can be an effective auxiliary or temporary alternative source of foreign language learning and advanced learning, but, unfortunately, in our opinion, cannot completely replace live communication, which is an integral component of high-quality foreign language training students in higher education institutions.

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THE IMPACT OF VIRTUAL EXCHANGE ON UKRAINIAN STUDENTS

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A lot of students from different universities all around the world, take part in projects aimed at intercultural collaboration. They communicate with peers in classrooms in other countries using digital technologies and this type of collaboration is considered a virtual exchange (VE). It is not a new practice in the world of education. Many scholars highlight that it has existed for about thirty years, as long as technology makes it possible. Over the past number of years, educators and policymakers brought the VE into the limelight due to its impact on the internationalization of education.

Currently WHO announced the cancelation of the COVID pandemic but during 2020-2022 VE was a valuable solution to physical mobility for many students who can't travel abroad for pandemic reasons. It brings us to the idea that VE needs deep studying in order to highlight its impact during a hard time in the international education of Ukraine.

In light of recent events in Ukraine, students' virtual mobility is an important component of internationalization that can be realized through the participation of students in student exchange programs.

This paper is a preliminary attempt to study the impact of virtual exchange on Ukrainian students. The main limitation of the research is that it was made among bachelor students at a polytechnical university. Thus, we would focus on an overview of the virtual student exchange based on the description of the SUNY COIL project (SUNY COIL Projects, 2022), which took place at the Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute during English language classes from September to November 2022.

In general terms, COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) is considered by O`Dowd (2017) as a learning that involves student-to-student technology-enabled communication, engaging individuals from different cultural backgrounds who are geographically distant in meaningful conversations, with the support of teachers.

Many scholars defined COIL as a pedagogy that enables building collaboration among academics and students around the world (Virtual Exchange Coalition, 2019). It supports by the fact that COIL projects are designed and developed through collaboration

between academic (professors/faculty) partners in two (or more) different education institutions; and geophysical locations around the world. The project is jointly implemented by the academic partners with their groups of students interacting and collaborating.

A virtual exchange project SUNY COIL under consideration has lasted for 8 weeks (from September to November 2022). While participating in this project, academics of the faculty of linguistics from the Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute collaborated with representatives from a partner university in Wilmington, North Carolina.

The general topic of the virtual exchange program was determined by the teachers, and the topic "Sustainable development" was chosen due to its internationalisation impact and the variety of subtopics.

Thus, students researched and compared the cultural conditions for the implementation of sustainable goals in Ukraine and the United States. Every focus group included 4-5 students, there were created nine focus groups in total. After completing the introductory tasks, students worked in groups to collect and compare real evidence of the implementation of sustainable goals in Ukraine and the United States. Students were interested in such topics as Good Health and Well-being; Peace, Justice, and Strong institutions; No Poverty; Quality Education; Zero Hunger; Clean Water and Sanitation; Responsible Consumption and Production; Sustainable Cities and Communities, etc. During teamwork, students summarized their findings in presentations (a format freely chosen by groups) and shared them on the Flip platform, then during Zoom meetings, students discussed their impressions and results.

To perform tasks effectively and due to the established deadlines, project participants must be guided by the rules and norms for group interaction that are articulated during the first synchronous meeting. They can include such as planning your communication taking into account different time zones, elaborating and working for your own goal, respecting your groupmates in the team, being tolerant of cultural diversity in the team, and being aware of digital etiquette, etc.

With the support of teachers, a safe virtual space is created to build strong communication, created tolerance, and social-emotional presence when working in a team. After the project had finished students left their feedback based on the experience they had got. Most of them mentioned that it was an exciting but at the same time challenging learning time, as far as some students learn not only about others but also about themselves.

The analysis of feedback data indicated that approximately two-thirds of students agreed that working in teams on different platforms and using different digital resources would be quite helpful in increasing their digital literacy skills. Students' answers also

demonstrated that 93% of those participating in the project improved their communication skills in general, and English language skills in particular. However, only 32% of students expressed thoughts that their teamwork within the project helped them to develop empathy, critical and analytical thinking skills.

Almost all students agreed that such projects supported the development of their intercultural competencies. During the final synchronous meeting, some students mentioned that participation in the SUNY COIL project imparted them with international learning experiences within the supportive structure of their own classrooms.

Thus, this paper has presented an overview of the SUNY COIL project, which took place at the Ihor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute during English language classes from September to November 2022. It suggests that in higher education in Ukraine, VE has great potential to foster a range of 21st-century employability skills including media and digital literacy, communication skills, global awareness, foreign language skills, and intercultural competencies. In order to develop empathy and critical and analytical thinking during the VE projects teachers must think about additional activities. Further research can identify how VE can be used to supplement and enhance universities' physical exchange programs.

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VIRTUAL EXCHANGE PROJECTS TO ENHANCE CULTURAL, LANGUAGE AND DIGITAL COMPETENCIES OF TECHNICAL STUDENTS

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Introduction. Nowadays, we live in a world where globalization has become an actual reality, and English is the language of international communication. Mastery of English by a wide range of Ukrainian citizens will stimulate the introduction of global achievements in various fields, like economy, politics, culture, and education into Ukrainian society. The educational sector, as one of the main drivers of social progress, is undergoing dynamic changes either. Meanwhile, the accessibility of ICTs and the level of their mastery by both educators and students has led to the possibility of filling in cultural and communicational gaps between various partner countries. As communication with representatives of other cultures can enrich, change or improve norms and patterns of human behavior.

In a highly competitive global labour market, there is a need for these skills, which are increasingly in demand by both international and local companies that have or may have international partners [1]

The relevance of the theme is due to the fact that studying in mobility programs facilitates the students` acquisition of the above-mentioned skills and prepares them for their future successful careers.

Methods. In order to achieve the purpose of the research, the following methods were used: analysis, synthesis, and generalization.

Results and discussions. Virtual exchange (VE), being a particular type of virtual mobility, involves online collaboration between students from different countries or cultures. Virtual exchange programs typically involve a structured online curriculum that includes interactive activities, group discussions, and collaborative projects, all designed to facilitate intercultural learning and cooperation.

The major aim of virtual exchanges is to provide high-quality international and cross-cultural education, both formal and non-formal, to young people who can`t engage for some reason, in physical mobility. Although virtual exchanges cannot fully replace the benefits of physical mobility, they do offer some undisputed advantages, such as

providing international educational experiences. The pandemic has made virtual exchanges even more significant as means of addressing the global constraints on mobility. Virtual exchanges also have the potential to promote European values and, moreover, in some cases, they can prepare, deepen and widen physical exchanges, as well as contribute to new demand.[4]

Although there are various models and methods used in VE, there are specific features that distinguish VE from other forms of online education, including virtual mobility, MOOC and other online courses, and in accordance with [4] they are the following:

- The main focus is on promoting communication and dialogue between people;

- the educational objectives include the development of soft skills such as intercultural awareness, digital competence, communication, and working in groups;

- the learner-led approach, where the participants take an active role in shaping the learning experience and have the opportunity to explore their own interests and perspectives and drive the conversations and activities;

- explicit attention to international understanding and engagement with diversity;

- the members of a VE project learn about other cultures and backgrounds and are encouraged to reflect on their own cultural assumptions.

As contributors, both students and teachers benefit from participating in VE projects. As for students, one can mention the following: overcoming language and socialization barriers; cultural skills acquisition; developing adaptivity and flexibility skills; relevant information exchange; enhancing digital competency; strengthening national consciousness. Teachers, whose role might be specified as the role of moderators or facilitators, do not miss the opportunity to upgrade their digital and intercultural literacy [2].

But VE initiatives are not limited to Europe. One could mention as an example the "COIL/Virtual Exchange program that has been co-owned and executed by Japan Virtual Campus and the universities participating from Japan and abroad.

We also would like to mention the experience of National Technical University of Ukraine "Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute" in the project called "Ibunka" under the umbrella of Yokohama University, Japan. "Ibunka" was aimed to provide opportunities of authentic interaction among English language learners all over the world. The primary focus of this project was the development of essay writing skills which since 2020 has evolved into the initiative, promoting intercultural understanding and English language proficiency. Students of different countries and nationalities are proposed to create and post messages on the topics proposed by a mentor of the project. Besides, all the participants were asked to comment their partners` posts which attracted their

attention. One can mention that the participants were informed about all the requirements, rules, and themes in advance. A well-structured web-based platform and clear requirements contributed to the effective cooperation of both students and their mentors. On the completion of the project which basically lasts for twelve weeks, students of the Instrumentation Engineering faculty, who have been the participants of the Ibunka project for the second time, were asked to provide written feedback. The feedback should have included an answer to the question, specifically, which of the listed skills they could improve. Having analyzed the students` answers, we can conclude that essay writing, and cultural and intercultural competence were developed the most intensively. This was followed by reading, and only then was digital competence mentioned. This fact is most likely related to the fact that today's young people are very proficient in the vast number of digital platforms and tools. This was preceded by the enhancement of such language competence as reading.

Among the things that students would like to change and improve next time, there was noted insufficient time for communication outside the platform in the "pen pals" mood, as well as difficulties with the regularity of work on the project, caused by frequent blackouts and air alarms. Also, students unanimously expressed hope that next year they expect the situation in Ukraine to improve, which will give them the opportunity to participate more actively in this project.

To summarize, we would like to mention that intercultural communication through virtual exchange develops such important skills for future specialists as understanding the culture of different countries, breaking down language barriers, tolerance and flexibility in performing tasks, networking, and interdisciplinary approach in an international project team, and the ability to communicate with foreign peers/partners/companies. The participation of Instrumentation Engineering faculty students brought fruits from the point of view of enhancing their writing skills, specifically, structured postings, proofreading, and practicing spelling and grammar rules.

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VIRTUAL EXCHANGE AS A KEY ELEMENT OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

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Key words: internationalization of higher education, collaboration, cooperation.

Introduction. Even a decade ago, no one could have imagined this form of collaboration, such as virtual exchange, because face-to-face teaching was the norm.

Furthermore, we should keep in mind that even five years ago, online learning or teaching was something out of the ordinary. Regardless of how quickly our lives change, it is critical to keep up with the times, to create something new, and to try what is generated. Not only is online learning in universities becoming more popular, but virtual exchange (VE) is also becoming more popular.

The **aim** of this thesis is to outline the benefits of Virtual Exchange as an element of a Distance Learning System (DLS).

A mixed **method** was used for the purpose of the current study. The qualitative approach included observation and interviews.

Discussion. According to Knight's commonly recognized definition internationalization of higher education can be understood as an ongoing and continuing effort, "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (Knight, 2004, p.5). Internationalization and VE have arisen as significant but distinct tendencies in higher education (De Wit, 2016).

Virtual exchange can be defined as a practice that is supported by research and consists of ongoing, technology-enabled, people-to-people education programs or activities that promote constructive communication and interaction between individuals or groups who are geographically separated and/or from different cultural backgrounds, with the assistance of educators or facilitators. The deep influence of intercultural discourse and exchange is combined with the great reach of digital technology in VE. As

a result one of the characteristics is eclecticism and even self-awareness, because participants have to be ready to talk and listen, work and develop. Admittedly students can be more interested in creating new projects or solving some problems than in communicating with people from different cultures, because they can do it on a daily basis using social media.

Universities are increasingly concerned with the task of preparing graduates to be active and responsible global citizens in a world, which is intrinsically digitalized, globalised and multicultural in nature. For many years, international mobility programs were considered the most effective way to prepare students to be 'global citizens' and develop their capacity to critique the world they live in, and see problems and issues from a range of perspectives. However, the number of students who have participated in study abroad programs remains stubbornly low, and research has shown that studying abroad has a limited impact on students' intercultural attitudes and awareness. As a result, educational institutions are more concerned with "internationalization at home."

We consider that universities are interested in active students, and their great works as much as their own reputation, because these things are connected. Having different VE programs can be a way for universities to present themselves. Figure 1 below demonstrates the advantages of VE.
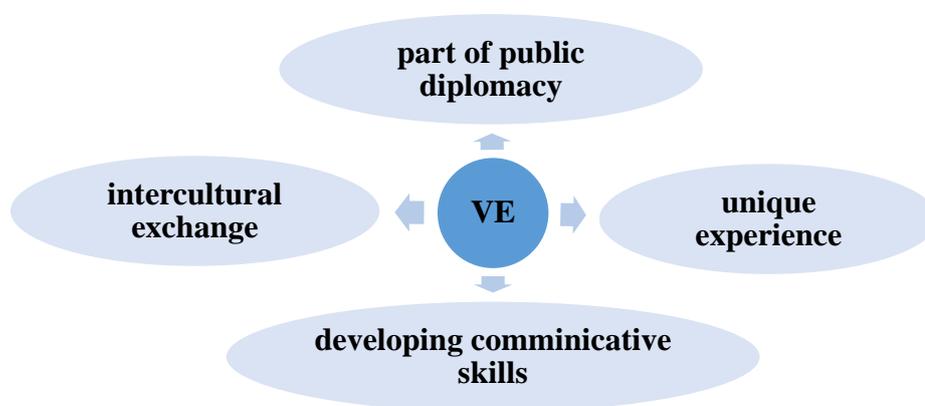
Figure 1. *Advantages of VE*

National Technical University of Ukraine "Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute" (KPI), one of the most popular and the biggest university in Ukraine, has paid attention to VE. For example, 180 students of KPI were involved in such programs in 2019. Moreover, KPI took part in Global Case Study Challenge 2022 - a great project,

dedicated to goals of sustainable development as well. Participation in such projects is also about public diplomacy, which is highly essential to Ukraine.

We can use it as a way to tell people about our culture, mentality etc. Such programs can help not to judge a book by its cover: students can learn more about other countries, cultures, languages, and educational systems and make themselves free from stereotypes. VE lets us create something unique and productive. However, there may be some issues: students who are having difficulty working online; technical problems. Teachers must take into account these issues, predict them and try to avoid them.

VE is an excellent opportunity for students to develop the skills and literacy required for transnational online teamwork. Furthermore, VE offers a great opportunity for students to acquire the skills and literacies needed for transnational online teamwork. We consider that the virtual exchange process is the main way to understand each other fully, in addition, it is an opportunity for students to develop their soft skills, and their ability to find something in common with strangers online.

Conclusion. To sum up, we can say that VE is a useful tool in the modern world, where people are ready to be helpful. For universities, it is an opportunity to build new communications and partnerships and to be active actors in educational diplomacy. For teachers it is a great way to try themselves in cooperation with foreign teachers or organizations as well, also for them it is a way to see their students' capacity and behavior in new conditions. Teachers must observe how their students interact with others, not only how they represent the institution or department, but also how students represent the country and what cultural characteristics they discuss. It may also be beneficial to learn what kind of knowledge they share and how they communicate about their profession in order to determine what to include in classes.

For students, this is a great option to find new acquaintances and friends. Students exchange experience, knowledge, and just facts. Students admit that their university cooperates and supports international activities, which also affects their perception of their institution. VE is a great opportunity to show yourself and prove that people should be one and solve various issues and problems together, only in this way we will be able to live in a better world. Therefore, it is necessary to develop and work on a better ability to organize VE, attract more partners, and generate new ideas for creating new projects.

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