

Digi-CLIL: Virtual exchange for intercultural and sustainable learning

Keywords

virtual exchange; English as lingua franca; project-based learning; pragmatics; global education

Biographical Note

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Abstract (500 words)

Background: International & Intercultural collaboration for a sustainable and just future as outlined in the SDGs 4 and 17 requires certain knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values. More recent conceptualizations of sustainability have added culture as a fourth pillar (Dessein et al., 2015), making explicit the inextricable relationship to sustainability. This project takes lessons on best practice from language education and education for sustainable development (ESD) to investigate how to support students in developing collaborative and communicative competencies in an English as lingua franca (ELF) context.

Methodology: We developed a course on the intersection of culture and sustainability centering virtual exchange with international partner universities. The pedagogical design uses experiential and transformative practices. The students used the SDGs as a framework to find examples of sustainability solution implementation in their local contexts. In small, mixed groups the students then chose a specific sustainability intervention to investigate as it is embedded in their local cultural, social, economic, and environmental contexts. Their findings were then synthesized into blog articles. They were supported by activities and materials that focused on reflection, critical engagement with concepts of culture, varying values frameworks, collaborative skills, and communication. Especially the communication activities were scaffolded with attention to language-use awareness and a pragmatic intervention focusing on feedback and politeness theory, which the learners subsequently use to provide peer feedback on the blog articles.

We used thematic analysis to investigate the students' reflections and self-evaluations. Analysis began with open coding to identify recurring themes which were used as a lens to understand changes in the students'

perceptions, expressed values, and self-identified learnings.

Main results: The virtual exchange and group work elements of the course were both motivators for participation and drivers of skills and behaviors associated with intercultural communicative competence. Students especially remarked on expanding collaborative skills and enhanced awareness of their own communication strategies. Expansion of sustainability-related understanding was mixed, depending on the students' prior sustainability knowledge. The course attracted students who already possessed values associated with global citizenship, making progress in this area challenging to assess.

Conclusions: Virtual exchange increases student motivation and enables deeper exploration of concepts of culture when combined with meaningful tasks requiring students to reflect on their own identities and assumptions. The combination of transformational pedagogies and international collaboration shows a positive synergy that lends deeper meaning to both.

Abstract (300 words)

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