

15 Implementing E+VE at the University of Bordeaux within English for specific purposes courses

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Abstract

This case study reports on an Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (E+VE) course at the University of Bordeaux. VE enables students to develop communication skills in an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) environment (Helm, 2016; Kohn & Hoffstaedter, 2017). The present study reports on student language and content learning experiences through E+VE, where L2 users of English interacted with a more culturally diverse group of peers than they would likely meet in their local area. Our students' perspectives echo the E+VE impact report (Helm & Van Der Velden, 2019) and place a particular emphasis on English language learning outcomes.

Keywords: English as a lingua franca, English for specific purposes, intercultural communication, internationalisation at home, virtual exchange.

1. Context

This case study reports on the implementation of E+VE at the University of Bordeaux within the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. The University of Bordeaux is a multidisciplinary university organised into

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different disciplinary colleges. Students in this study were enrolled in a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes (ISCED³ Levels 6 and 7) at the College of Health Sciences, the College of Human Sciences, and the College of Science and Technology. In all these programmes, the study of English as a second language is compulsory. None of the students involved in this study were majoring in English or language studies. At an institutional level, the university is engaged in a process of pedagogical transformation and there is a strong strategic drive towards the internationalisation of the curriculum and internationalisation at home.

The needs of learners following ESP courses are however diverse, with the majority of undergraduates entering our university with an A2 or B1 level of English⁴ and only a minority entering with a B2 level or above. For this minority of students with a higher than average level, the challenge is to offer them meaningful interactions in English and learning opportunities that allow them to go beyond the language skills they have already acquired. From 2018 to 2019, 120 of these students reading biology, chemistry, dentistry, education, physics, psychology, public health, and sociology were therefore encouraged to participate in E+VE's pilot scheme. They followed Sharing Perspectives Foundation's (SPF) flagship course *Cultural Encounters* instead of attending their mainstream English course with their local peers.

We discovered E+VE through a connection with SPF in January 2018, when we received a call for participants to join the first *Cultural Encounters* interactive Open Online Course (iOOC) exploring the theme of European refuge/s. In each edition of this iOOC, participants explore a current affairs topic through an original lecture series, reflective writing, and a community engagement video project, and, crucially, weekly online meetings with a diverse peer group. These *facilitated dialogue sessions* are the cornerstone of the iOOC experience. Led

3. International Standard Classification of Education

4. Levels described by Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/>). On the global scale, A2 refers to an upper basic user of English and B1 to a lower independent user of English. A B2 level refers to an upper independent user of English and is the target level for school leavers (<https://www.coe.int/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/table-1-cefr-3.3-common-reference-levels-global-scale>).

by trained facilitators, facilitated dialogue engages diverse groups in meaningful interaction to achieve an intercultural understanding of complex and controversial issues such as migration, nationalism, and populism. The opportunity for our students to explore both topical and meaningful content through facilitated dialogue appealed to us. We therefore sought ways of integrating *Cultural Encounters* into our current offer.

For the first pilot, we decided to offer the programme to C1/C2 level second-year sociology students (about 5% of a cohort of 230) instead of following the mainstream English course. Three of these students took up the offer. We also offered it as an option to C1/C2 level first-year biology students (one student) and as an optional course to second-year psychology students.

The initial return from these five students was overwhelmingly positive, motivating us to extend the reach of the programme to a further 115 students. A workshop on international collaboration through VE at our university and dissemination of the initial pilot through the university's language network helped us engage a small number of language teachers, who in their own sectors promoted E+VE to students and faculty. From Year 2, the offer of E+VE was widened in some sectors to recruit students with a B2 level or above or who expressed a strong motivation to join the exchange to the programme.

2. Aims and description of the project

In all the ESP sectors where E+VE was offered, there was a strong motivation to give students an opportunity to interact in ELF settings while at the same time gaining intercultural learning (Helm, 2016; Kohn, 2018; O'Dowd, 2018). Communicating in ELF contexts is one of the major learning outcomes targeted by our English programmes because many of our students are destined to professions where English will be used at home or internationally. However, the majority of our ESP programmes have a tradition of being strongly anchored in the disciplines the students major in, with a focus on disciplinary literacy –

communicating in the academic and professional contexts of the students' area of study. Intercultural Learning Outcomes (ILOs) have not always been made explicit, though they are now part of a wider institutional strategy. As ESP curriculum designers, we have given ILOs greater attention in recent years, working from a perspective of global citizenship education (O'Dowd, 2019). E+VE aligned, therefore, with our own intended ILOs and satisfied the personal goals of advanced students of English who were looking to broaden their perspectives by learning about and discussing topics not related to their course of study.

From 2018 the exchange was promoted across the health sciences, human sciences, and science and technology. The authors of this study acted as local language teacher coordinators in their respective communities by disseminating information about the exchange and about how to mentor students through the enrolment process at the start of term. Given national and institutional accreditation constraints, the exchange could not be offered as a standalone accredited course in its own right. Students were therefore recruited to follow the exchange instead of following their mainstream English course.

At the start of each term, mailings were sent out to students via the institutional learning platform (Moodle) by their own English course coordinators and classroom teachers, who had received this information from the local coordinators. Some teachers also identified students interested in the exchange during a first classroom session. In parallel, information sessions were held at university language centres by the local E+VE coordinators, during which the requirements for validating English course credits (three ECTS) through participation in the exchange were also explained to the students. Students who passed the E+VE course (60% pass mark) would also pass their English course. Their grade could be raised depending on the quality of the English used by students in their reflection journals, which they had to submit to their own teachers for assessment, or lowered if students did not pass the exchange. From Year 2, and with the signing of a memorandum of understanding, we were able to factor the scores given by SPF into the grading of our students. In some cases, where ESP courses had both a continuous assessment component and a

final exam component, students were still required to sit the final exam for their English course, which was unrelated therefore to the exchange.

Students were recruited mostly based on their level of English, identified through placement tests at the start of term. In some cases however, students' test scores did not indicate an above average level of English, but they expressed a strong personal motivation to engage in the exchange. It was therefore agreed that they could follow the programme. We noticed that students seemed to come into the exchange for different reasons. Some students were looking to be “more intellectually challenged” than they felt they would be in their English course, while others had less ambitious motivations and were looking to tailor their schedules by being exempt from coming to face-to-face sessions at university. Many of them wanted to develop their English skills further than they felt they could in a mainstream English class.

3. Activities and tools

Once students had signed up for the exchange, and as they were exempt from face-to-face sessions, we did not follow their progress on a week-by-week basis. SPF took care of organising them into seminar groups according to their algorithms.

A few weeks into each exchange, we would ‘check in’ with the students by mail, but it was often at the end of the exchange, when they submitted their reflection journals, that we gained insights into their experiences. General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) prevented SPF from sharing student submissions with us. We worked round this by asking students to submit their reflection journals directly to their English course coordinators.

From the spring term 2020 we sought to implement a more structured system that allowed teachers to better follow progress on a week-to-week basis. A space dedicated to E+VE was set up on the institutional Moodle platforms where students could upload their reflective journal, (the same one they submit to SPF),

after their weekly online facilitated dialogue sessions. This enabled teachers to mentor them more closely.

These reflective journals have helped us to gain insights into our students' experiences of the exchange. They have also incited us to widen the reach of the exchange through outreach with colleagues in other departments. Finally, the journals helped cement the engagement of our language colleagues, who, on reading their students' writing for assessment purposes, were able to discover the positive feedback expressed by students.

4. Evaluation, assessment, and recognition

E+VE was evaluated before, during, and after the programme using a variety of complementary methods. The objective was to evaluate E+VE throughout the duration of the programme. This was to ensure the wellbeing of the students and address any issues, in close association with our SPF correspondents, as quickly as possible. Our evaluation methods enabled us to monitor and ensure our students enjoyed and benefited from the E+VE programme.

The E+VE programme was evaluated using pre and post online questionnaires. The analysis of the diaries by the Bordeaux research team provided a micro representation of a wider parallel study of learner diaries during VE (Helm & Baroni, 2020). The diaries were qualitatively analysed for emergent themes which gave us greater access to the participants' experiences of E+VE.

Five one-hour interviews were held with individual students for further in-depth analysis of their E+VE experience. One focus group was held with 15 E+VE participants during Year 2 when they were halfway through the programme. Student participation was monitored throughout the programme by an attendance and assignment register which the SPF managers shared with us. This sharing of information, through a memorandum of understanding, enabled us to monitor whether the students were attending the E+VE programme and whether they were handing in their assignments.

The evaluation of the participants' experiences in terms of intercultural and language learning outcomes was key to this study. This was because the students were learning about content (namely nationalism, populism, and immigration) which was not associated with their major discipline. Our focus was on what the students gained in terms of transferable communications skills which could then be applied to their scientific disciplines and beyond. As the exchange replaced the students' home English module, we were also interested whether the exchange had initiated any English language learning gains.

Perceived⁵ English language progression was assessed through the analysis of the questionnaire responses, the diary entries, and the interviews held with the students. This includes changes in confidence and stance as much as progression in identifiable language markers. On the whole, the students perceived a progression in their English communicative skills, the most identifiable areas of self-perceived language progression were as follows.

4.1. English language improvement

The students reported that their English improved thanks to participating in E+VE. Listening was referred to as the skill which improved the most through E+VE, especially adjusting to and understanding different accents. The students also referred to learning new vocabulary (i.e. 'patriotism' and 'nationalism'). The group appeared to agree that reading and writing did not improve as much as speaking and listening (despite the journal and chat function).

4.2. Difference of English language learning environment

The students highlighted many differences between the ESP classroom and the E+VE exchange. The E+VE 'classroom' was described as more convenient as most of the participants participated from home.

5. In terms of actual language improvement, the study revealed that the students, tested with the ELAO test (Efficient Language Assessment Online), and did not jump from one CEFR level to another during the ten-week course. According to Cambridge Assessment English (2020), a jump to a higher level can only be expected after 200 hours of guided learning.

“At home you can do research on the side and you are more comfortable and relaxed”.

The students believed that E+VE required more involvement and preparation prior to the facilitated dialogue than English classes did. E+VE also differed to ESP because the participants could speak with peers without the presence of a ‘teacher’.

“In E+VE, we don’t have the feeling that we are tested. It is like a discussion with anyone. We are talking about actual subjects, important subjects”.

The students were generally very positive about the exchange, with 85.5% of the Bordeaux participants reporting that they were satisfied to very satisfied with the E+VE programme⁶. In the second year of the E+VE pilot, we were able to better assess this result by providing the students with a pre-course questionnaire to assess their expectations before they participated in the exchange. The students’ expectations were focused on the exchange part of the programme first, and on the content second. Judging by the positive feedback concerning the exchange as a whole, these expectations were met.

Through the combined analysis of the questionnaire responses, diary entries, and interviews, the main student criticisms of the exchange were as follows.

4.3. Connection interruptions (technical issues)

The main criticism that the students voiced were related to technical issues that resulted in the breakdown of communication during webinars.

6. The results of the questionnaire data were stable over both pilot years. Year 1 (2018-19), 86% of respondents were satisfied to very satisfied with the E+VE programme. Year 2 (2019-20), 85 % of respondents were satisfied to very satisfied with the E+VE programme.

“It is a good program, but the main point is the technological problems. The human experience is great with deep conversation, but slowed down by technology” (Focus group, 13.11.2019).

The students made recommendations about improving technical aspects of E+VE webinars. The students would have liked to have had more opportunities to carry on chatting after the facilitation by leaving the portal open to chat among themselves (without the facilitators) for an extra 30 minutes. This was something occasionally made possible by the facilitators and was appreciated by the group. In terms of content input, (when preparing for the webinars), the students preferred the videos to reading articles, which echoed our own experience of student attitudes to video and text resources at Bordeaux University.

4.4. Dealing with the topic of ‘culture’

Students sometimes struggled with the exchange themes, and felt less prepared and knowledgeable about the topic of politics and ‘culture’ in general.

“It was a bit heavy on the politics. It was hard participating in debates sometimes. I usually find it hard. Not because I’m shy but because I sometimes I didn’t [sic] really have an opinion on things – I agreed”.

“E+VE is not related to science, and it is kind of hard for us to learn about culture”.

“It is difficult to answer questions about culture, I couldn’t even discuss it in my own language”.

The sense of difference, and often the status of privilege felt by the Bordeaux students was not necessarily negative, as these aspects needed to be understood in relation to cultural perspectives, as highlighted by the student feedback below:

“In Europe the connection is good but in Algeria and Syria the connection is really bad”.

“You feel lucky when compared to the others in Syria”.

“The conversations go towards the differences and the different backgrounds of the participants. The cultural difference is key, we have lots of questions about that”.

5. Lessons learnt and conclusion

Overall, our strategy for implementing E+VE within the context of ESP courses has met with success and students have generally expressed positive attitudes towards the exchange. However, the substitution of the E+VE participation grade for the Bordeaux students’ English grade was in some cases problematic for several reasons.

Firstly, there is an issue with alignment. Our students validate a set of competences through E+VE that are not fully in line with those targeted by their ESP course. For example, *Cultural Encounters* does not have English language learning outcomes. A minimum recommended CEFR level of English competence (equivalent to B2) to participate in E+VE would be useful to all future participants who are L2 speakers of English.

In addition, our current system for implementing E+VE means that it is not an accredited course in its own right, available to all Bordeaux University students. This raises the issue of equity, as not all students are given the same opportunities. Furthermore, this system may result in the more *internationalised* students⁷ opting *out* of English classes because they are more proficient in English and motivated by intercultural exchange than their domestic peers. This in turn could reduce the *internationalisation at home* experience for domestic students by reducing the diversity and authenticity of communicating in the English language class.

7. By ‘internationalised student’ we mean students who may fall into the following categories: bilingual language skills, mixed nationality, and/or previous experience with living or studying abroad.

In the spirit of internationalisation at home, it would be preferable for E+VE and non-E+VE students to meet and work together, possibly during the E+VE video project. Some of the E+VE participants did decide to interview local peers from the University of Bordeaux, but this could be further formalised. Some of the E+VE participants reported feeling isolated from their local peers. We have subsequently encouraged new E+VE participants to choose a local E+VE student delegate⁸ so that they help each other through social media spaces. Finally, further thought needs to be given to how intercultural perspectives can best fit in with the disciplines at our university.

We would recommend other educators initially experiment with a small cohort of students because the management and monitoring of the exchange group can be time consuming. Understanding the terms and conditions of E+VE is key to student success. If the students do not attend facilitated dialogue sessions or hand in the assignments, both the students and educators find themselves having to justify why they have failed. This can lead to lengthy email exchanges and meetings.

Overall, the students who chose to take part in the programme were very satisfied with the programme. Many may wish to carry on with VE and may not wish to return to ‘home English classes’. This is something educators may have to consider if they are not able to maintain participation in E+VE. Once the students have had a taste of exchanging with other students in English through E+VE, they may view home classroom interactions as ‘inauthentic’ (Kohn & Hoffstaedter, 2017, Pinner, 2016, Van Lier, 2014).

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