Intercultural exchanges among pre-service teachers in Israel and Sweden as a path of introduction into the epistemology and practice of teaching

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Abstract. This paper presents the outcomes of a short intercultural exchange project involving pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher training establishments in Sweden and Israel. The project comprised three online meetings recorded in *Zoom* in which student teachers gave feedback on each other's project assignments involving lesson planning and the use of spoken English in the classroom. The sessions were moderated by a highly experienced teacher trainer with contributions from other teacher trainers in the institutions involved. With restrictions imposed on physical meetings and student mobility by the Covid-19 pandemic, the exchange helped to shed light on a number of perennial issues in English language teaching methodology and offers a feasible model for future sustainable virtual exchanges in EFL teacher training.

Keywords: intercultural exchange, intercultural digital literacy, teacher training.

1. Introduction

This paper reports on the outcome of an intercultural exchange involving two pre-service EFL teacher training institutions, one in Sweden, the other in Israel during the autumn 2020 term. The project aimed to highlight key issues in language teaching through online discussion. With the current economic and socio-political constraints generated by the Covid-19 pandemic, the value of online exchanges in

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the enrichment of pre-service teacher training programmes has assumed greater importance, serving to shed light on contrasting perspectives on global language teaching epistemologies and practices. The study reports on the affordances and culturally-enacted tensions emerging as students in Israel offered feedback to their Swedish peers on various assignments: two lesson plans, a 90-minute lesson plan, and a longer three-month series of lesson plans. In return, during the virtual workshops, students in Israel were introduced to speaking and practical techniques that could be implemented to promote speaking in the foreign language classroom.

Virtual exchanges have received extensive attention in the Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) literature (e.g. Dooly, 2011; O'Dowd, 2018). Within the context of international educational initiatives, virtual exchange has been one of the European Union's most successful mobility programmes, leading to the launch of the *Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange* (EVE) project in 2018.

2. Method

The exchange consisted of three separate online meetings, during November 2020. The group of Swedish trainee teachers consisted of nine women and eight men aged between 20 and 25 years at high C1/C2 CEFR[5] levels, all in initial teacher training with a view to teaching English at secondary or upper secondary level. The Israeli group on the other hand was made up of 21 female and two male students in the third year of a four year Bachelor of Education programme with an English language proficiency judged to be B2 to C2 levels.

The interactions between the groups of students took place using the *Zoom* video conferencing tool. A summary of each meeting's initial agenda/focus is included in Table 2 below. Central to the planning of each meeting was the giving of feedback on a number of assignments within the Swedish and Israeli course modules. These assignments are summarised in Table 1 below.

Having two groups of trainee teachers working specifically with course assignments gave this telecollaboration project a particular focus, which is often difficult to achieve. Rather than the cross-cultural differences being the focus of the interaction, the students discussed the specific assignments in small groups in breakout rooms. In each meeting the groups spent approximately 20 minutes in breakout rooms discussing the Swedish students' assignments and learning about

5. Common European Framework of Reference for languages

each other's schools, levels of English, and cultural contexts, as well as discussing issues of general interest to students (such as study loans and social lives). After this, the groups met in recorded plenary sessions with Israeli and Swedish participants giving their impressions about the discussions in the breakout rooms. These were often opportunities to discuss specific issues relating to the teaching of English, such as ways of encouraging students to speak English in class, rather than their L1.

Meetings typically involved around 25 trainee teachers plus the four co-authors of this article and an additional teacher trainer from Israel. The sessions were led/moderated by David Richardson with additional contributions from the other teacher trainers during the course of the sessions. Sessions would begin with an introductory overview, followed by group sessions involving Swedish and Israeli students and taking place in dedicated breakout rooms (circa 20 minutes) for discussion of the assignments outlined in Table 1. Teacher trainers were not present in the breakout rooms and these individual group discussions were not recorded as part of the main session. Finally, student teachers returned to the main session for a plenary discussion of the issues raised.

Table 1. Summary of assignments within the Swedish and Israeli course modules respectively

Country	Assignment	Description
Sweden	1	Describe your planning for a 90-minute English lesson at upper secondary level, giving reasons for the choices you make. You need to choose a main focus for the lesson and describe how you would develop the students' language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) in relation to this focus. Mention any teaching aids you are going to use and any use of technology.
Sweden	2	Describe how you would develop a series of lessons linked to a theme over a three-month period. Your lessons need not be the only English lessons the class has during that period, but there needs to be a theme running through them.
Israel	1	Learn as much from your Swedish partners about how teaching speaking is incorporated into the syllabus in all grades.

Table 2. Summary of meetings and respective focuses

Meeting 1 (3rd November)	Getting to know you activities for the students; Swedish students present their module and expectations; Israeli students present a brief outline of their course – teaching speaking

Meeting 2 (10th November)	Israeli student teachers present feedback to their Swedish counterparts on Assignment 1; Israeli students have focused questions to ask about teaching speaking
Meeting 3 (17th November)	Israeli feedback to Swedes on Assignment 2, Israelis brainstorm with Swedes about how to adapt Swedish speaking pedagogy for an Israeli context

3. Results and discussion

Discussion of the results in the form of a thematic analysis of the Zoom plenary recordings will mainly focus on Meetings 2 and 3, which were the most productive in terms of responding to the three assignments which had been given to the two groups of student teachers by their host institutions. Session 1 was mainly devoted to 'getting to know you' interactions which were characterised by polite but often quite superficial interactions involving national and cultural comparisons. This was to be expected given the fact that the groups had never interacted before and that none of the trainee teachers involved had travelled to the corresponding country.

Session 2 was by far the most productive as it focused on language teaching methodologies and classroom practice. Discussion of the teaching of spoken English was brought up in the light of Israeli perceptions of high oral proficiency in English among the Swedish population. This discussion led naturally to a consideration of whether this high Swedish proficiency was the result of the success of a communicative pedagogy in the Swedish school system or alternatively high exposure to extramural English outside of the classroom. Students took with them a better understanding of the beneficial role of extramural exposure in a country like Sweden in raising proficiency levels. Israeli students outlined the preference for translation in Israeli schools and the dominance of grammatical study rather than communicative interaction. In the course of the discussion, David Richardson's experience in teaching beginner Turkish communicatively led to an appreciation among the Israelis that a foreign language can be successfully taught without translation.

As part of their assignment, Swedish student teachers had to produce lesson plans which were reviewed by their Israeli counterparts. A number of Israeli trainees felt that the plans submitted lacked sufficient procedural detail of classroom activities which led to revisions of the originally submitted outlines. These reflections prompted a discussion relating to the level of detail involved in the planning of lesson components; one of the teacher trainers present (Christopher Allen) raised the relatively detailed lesson plan template outlines designed as part

of the international EFL teacher training courses such as the TKT and CELTA programmes. Swedish student teachers came away with a greater awareness of the need to make the language focus, classroom procedures, and technical requirements more transparent.

4. Conclusions

Overall, the series of Zoom meetings demonstrated the benefits of online interaction involving two teacher training organisations from widely disparate geographical and cultural contexts. By carefully targeting methodological themes and aspects of classroom practice in advance under the direction of experienced teacher trainers, valuable intercultural perspectives on international teacher education can be gained. Such perspectives can help student teachers to critically appraise pedagogical practice and methodological orthodoxy in their own contexts. The outcome of the project points the way ahead to a feasible and sustainable model of virtual collaboration.

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