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Polish-Italian virtual exchange. Learners as teachers of their native languages

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Abstract

This article presents the position of virtual exchanges and telecollaboration in higher education, as well as the advantages of their implementation. They are a part of virtual mobility and can supplement or replace physical mobility. Advantages that follow from virtual exchanges correspond to the latest guidelines on education provided by the European Union. Moreover, telecollaboration requires less time and money than participation in physical exchanges. Therefore, its implementation makes it possible to develop varied skills (e.g. language, digital and intercultural competence), regardless of the financial and personal situation of students.

The second part of this study presents the course and structure of the Polish-Italian virtual exchange that took place in the academic year 2018/2019 between Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin and the University of Turin. As part of it, learners of Italian and learners of Polish acted as teachers of their native languages. The purpose of research was to determine whether this form of virtual exchange can be successfully implemented among students of first-cycle degree studies. What was analyzed were online tools chosen by students to complete their tasks, the form in which language issues were presented to partners and code-switching during the exchange. The research material consisted of the students' written assignments and the forms of presenting knowledge used to complete tasks in the virtual exchange. On the basis of this material, it was concluded that giving the participants freedom to switch between codes did not have a negative impact on the project. However, it was also noted that students were not adequately prepared to assume the role of teachers. Despite their knowledge of various online tools, they tended to select those that were not suited to the digital environment, whereas the presented language issues turned out to be too complex for people with no teacher training to successfully explain them to their exchange partners.

Keywords: virtual exchange, telecollaboration, virtual mobility, Polish as a foreign language, Italian as a foreign language, online tools, code-switching, student as a teacher

Introduction

This article presents the course of the Polish-Italian virtual exchange between Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin and the University of Turin, as well as the results of research based on this exchange. The purpose of the first part of the article is to show both the position of virtual exchanges in higher education as an alternative to physical mobility and the advantages of their implementation. The next part of the study shows the structure of the Polish-Italian virtual exchange at the university level. In this exchange, learners acted as teachers of their native languages. What was examined were three specific issues of significance to the course of the project: linguistic problems regarded as the most difficult by the participants, their choice of online tools and the moments when they switched codes in communication with their partners.

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Virtual mobility as an alternative to physical mobility

In foreign language teaching, effective verbal communication remains the overriding objective of teaching activities undertaken by teachers. Verbal communication as such is a complex process. It requires learners to use various strategies, understand the texts they read or hear and adequately react to them in speech or in writing, which means that it involves all language skills (Council of Europe, 2001, chapter 4.4). For learners, one of the best tests of communicative effectiveness is meeting native speakers of the target language. Some students have this possibility thanks to Erasmus+, a program which promotes physical mobility. It enables trips abroad, which often lead to an improvement in competences useful in an international setting, contribute to the development of language skills and intercultural knowledge, and support personal and academic development (European Commission, 2018a, p. 10). Participation in the program gives learners an opportunity not only to gain experience, but also to achieve their communication goals in a foreign language. However, not everyone can benefit from Erasmus+: its reach is limited and even though many students go abroad thanks to this initiative, they are still the minority. On the one hand, the cause of this situation is financial: even though the budget of the program is regularly increased, it currently makes it possible for about 4% of young people to participate in the program (European Commission, 2019, p. 9). On the other hand, many students do not apply to the project due to their personal or economic situation. According to the latest report of the European Commission for the academic year 2017/2018, 15,266 people in Poland took the opportunity to study or do an internship abroad under the Erasmus+ program (European Commission, 2020, p. 2). According to data published by Statistics Poland (GUS) on the total number of students that year (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2018, p. 1), it can be concluded that little more than 1% of all Polish students participated in the project.

Without a doubt, physical mobility has a prominent place in European education. In 2009, the communiqué published after the conference of European ministers responsible for higher education in countries with the Bologna system emphasized the benefits of physical mobility and called on Member States to invest in physical mobility programs, so that at least 20% of students take the opportunity to study or do an internship abroad by 2020 (European Commission, 2009, p. 4). As shown by the above data, the actual figures differ significantly from those projected a decade earlier. Therefore, it can be concluded, also due to the fact that Erasmus+ is the biggest driver of mobility within the academic community, that only a small percentage of young people have an opportunity to develop their communication skills in target languages through contact with native speakers as part of formal higher education.

In light of the quoted information, it seems necessary to find an alternative that would give a bigger group of recipients access to benefits similar to those offered by the Erasmus+ program in the course of higher education. The answer to this need may be virtual mobility, treated as an addition to physical mobility or as a separate activity when it is impossible to travel abroad (Commission of the European Communities, 2009, p. 18). This type of activity is gaining popularity in the academic community and gives learners an opportunity for multi-dimensional development as part of language classes, but most importantly, it enables authentic communication with native speakers. One of the ways of implementing this type of mobility are virtual exchanges.

Virtual exchanges: definitions and benefits

Virtual exchanges appeared in higher education for the first time in the 1990s (O'Dowd, 2007, p. 4). They have been gaining popularity ever since. There is also an increasing volume of research on different aspects of virtual exchanges (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016b, p. 25) and in 2018 they became the axis of a flagship European project, Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (European Youth Portal, n.d.). Robert O'Dowd, one of the promoters of virtual exchanges[1], and Tim Lewis define them as follows: "[it is] the engagement of groups of learners in extended periods of online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programmes and under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators" (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016a, p. 3). Steven Thorne, another scholar who deals with different forms of telecollaboration projects, adds that it is also "a form of language-mediated social action that brings the complex reality of communicating across cultural and linguistic (as well as social class, gender and religious or spiritual) borders into direct experience" (Thorne, 2016, p. IX). In another article, O'Dowd emphasizes that those who participate in an exchange are at the center of the learning process because the responsibility for a successful interaction lies mostly with themselves, whereas the elements required to succeed are autonomy and reciprocity (O'Dowd, 2016, p. 293). Attention was drawn to similar issues also by Breffni O'Rourke back in 2007, when he wrote about different models of telecollaboration (cf. O'Rourke, 2007).

Researchers emphasize certain aspects of virtual exchanges, such as learning through social interactions, the learners' responsibility for the teaching

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[1] Other terms used in similar contexts include: virtual exchange, online intercultural exchange, telecollaboration, e-tandem and collaborative online intercultural learning. They are often treated as synonyms to simplify terminology. Robert O'Dowd (2018) writes about subtle differences in their meanings.

process, communication based on reciprocity, autonomy, the use of technology in teaching and the direct experience of communicating across divides, which correspond to the latest educational objectives set by the European Union.

In the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (hereinafter referred to as CEFR), the ability to learn includes the ability to use new technologies (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 108). However, the topic of communicating via these technologies was not discussed in detail. The changing role of new technologies in language teaching is evidenced by the fact that one of the most important changes in the previous system, introduced in CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2018), which is an addition to CEFR, concerns the addition of the third category, i.e. online interaction, to previous interactive activities and strategies (or rather extracting this new category from the existing ones). In the past, they included only spoken and written interaction (Council of Europe, 2001, ch. 4.4.3). Online interaction consists of two elements: online conversation and discussion and goal-oriented online transaction and collaboration (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 82).

It needs to be emphasized that the objectives of participation in virtual exchanges overlap with many of the eight key competences. They were determined for the first time in 2006 and have been updated every year since then. Currently, they include the following skills (European Commission, 2018b, p. 2):

- literacy;
- multilingualism;
- numerical, scientific and engineering skills;
- digital and technology-based competences;
- interpersonal skills, and the ability to adopt new competences;
- active citizenship;
- entrepreneurship;
- cultural awareness and expression.

Activities involved in virtual exchanges contribute to the development of IT skills because they take place in the digital environment. Their tools are foreign languages used to communicate with partners. Contacts with groups of students from different backgrounds increase the participants' awareness of and sensitivity to cultural differences. Finally, online collaboration leads to the development of social skills, whereas a high degree of autonomy in this process and placing the learner at its center has a positive impact on the ability to learn.

The document describing key competences emphasizes that each of them makes use of such transversal skills as critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, communication and negotiation skills, analytical thinking, creativity and intercultural skills (European Commission, 2018b, p. 2). The above mentioned elements overlap with the positive effects of virtual exchanges: the report from 2018 on their impact on students who participated in the European Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange program, states that there was an increase in digital skills, language skills, openness

and cultural sensitivity, teamwork skills, collaborative problem solving and critical thinking skills (Helm & van der Velden, 2019, p. 7).

As shown by the above-mentioned documents, virtual exchanges give their participants an opportunity for multidimensional development as part of language classes. Thanks to them, learners can acquire both hard and soft skills. They develop not only their language and intercultural skills, but also digital literacy. The multidimensional nature of the discussed projects makes it possible to place students at the center of the learning and teaching process, so it also enables teachers to set teaching objectives befitting the 21st century for themselves and their students.

The last decade has definitely witnessed the greatest popularity of virtual exchanges. At that time, scholars published many studies on different aspects of virtual exchanges in higher education, for example their impact on learner autonomy (see e.g. Fuchs et al., 2012; Nogueira de Moraes Garcia et al., 2017) and the development of language and intercultural skills (see e.g. O'Dowd, 2011; Schenker, 2012) or digital skills (see e.g. Hauck, 2019; Helm, 2014).

In their works, researchers often addressed the topic of tools used in virtual exchanges. What is also popular are the criteria behind their selection. Robert O'Dowd (2007) draws attention to the complexity of this seemingly simple task, whereas Melinda Dooly (2007) describes factors that influence an adequate selection of tools in telecollaboration. The same author analyzes the capabilities and limitations of selected solutions, such as emails, websites, blogs, Internet forums, chats and video conference software. The positive and negative aspects of using specific applications are addressed by many authors: Sarah Guth and Michael Thomas (2010) look into tools that appeared with the emergence of Web 2.0, Francesca Helm (2015) presents the most popular programs and applications used by teachers in virtual exchanges, Ana Sevilla-Pavón (2016) analyses selected Google products from the perspective of students and Theresa Schenker and Fiona Poorman (2017) analyze the learners' opinions on emails, text and voice chats, forums and video conference software. The above examples show the popularity of research focusing on the perception of online tools that were previously chosen by teachers. In this article, one of the aspects which was analyzed concerns tools chosen by the students themselves. What is the closest to this perspective are studies on virtual exchanges in the context of educating teachers of the future. In such projects, learners come up with tasks as part of telecollaboration and select appropriate tools themselves (see e.g. Grau & Turula, 2019; Kurek & Müller-Hartmann, 2017). In this case, contrary to what is presented in this study, the target group does not consist of exchange partners, but hypothetical future students.

Another aspect discussed in this article is code-switching in virtual exchanges. There are many publications on this phenomenon in direct interactions in language classes, but works on code-switching in the online space are rather scarce. Researchers tend to

focus on the most important function of code-switching, i.e. the negotiation of meaning (see e.g. Bower & Kawaguchi, 2011; O'Rourke, 2005) and often disregard other aspects of this phenomenon. Jane Hughes (2010) writes more broadly about the possible reasons for code-switching in online interactions. Two reasons overlap with those identified in this work: switching to the native language to accelerate communication and due to insufficient language competence in the target language. This study presents an asynchronous virtual exchange, whereas publications on code-switching during telecollaboration focus mostly on exchanges based on synchronous tasks. One of these works presents a project in which learners have in advance determined the language they were supposed to use in online tasks (Kötter, 2003). This type of a virtual exchange was proposed by the author, who relied on the assumption that freedom to choose the language may lead to the insufficient use of one of them, but research results presented here do not confirm this correlation.

Virtual exchanges in the context of teaching Polish as a foreign language at the University of Turin

The virtual exchange described here became a part of classes in Polish as a foreign language at the University of Turin, due to organizational reasons and the specific nature of the language in question. The learners of Polish at the University of Turin are mostly first-cycle degree program students majoring in linguistic mediation. The curriculum of this major involves choosing three languages, referred to as A, B and C, the first two of which (A and B) are the leading languages taught for three years, whereas language C is taught for only two semesters. Students tend to choose languages such as English, Spanish or German as their leading languages and if they decide to learn Polish, they usually choose it as their language C. Therefore, Polish teachers have to face quite a challenge: how does one schedule the teaching process in this short period (limited to less than five months of classes) in such a way as to give learners a sense of success and the ability to effectively communicate at a basic linguistic level?

Yet another problem is the specific nature of the Polish language. In the case of Romance or Germanic languages, students relatively quickly acquire skills needed to freely communicate at a basic level. In Polish, it takes much more time to achieve this level of competence, mainly due to the inflectional complexity of this language, which requires learners to master a range of different grammatical structures to participate in basic interactions.

Due to a limited time to learn Polish and its high level of difficulty at A1, it was decided to include a virtual exchange in the beginner course. An additional motivation was knowing that in everyday life, most students do not have direct contact with Poles, which means that university classes are often their only opportunity to communicate in the target language.

Polish-Italian virtual exchange: description of the project

In the academic year 2018/2019, the project involving a bilingual Polish-Italian virtual exchange was completed. Its participants were first-year students of linguistic mediation attending Polish language classes at the University of Turin and first-year students of Romance studies learning Italian at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. When the virtual exchange started, both student groups were attending A1 language classes. The exchange consisted of two stages, one per semester. Each of them took from four to five weeks. The first stage involved thirty students in total (eleven Italians and nineteen Poles), who worked in three-person groups (there were ten groups in total). Due to the fact that some students decided not to continue their studies and because participation in the exchange was voluntary for Polish students, the second stage involved sixteen students (eight from each university), which made it possible to work in pairs. There were seven groups in total, whereby one group resigned during the course of the project. The exchange was scheduled outside university classes, so for students it was an extracurricular and yet mandatory activity, whereas tasks planned to be completed as part of it were asynchronous, so it was not necessary for partners to be online simultaneously. The main channel of communication with students were private groups on Facebook. General information on both stages is presented in Table 1.

This article concerns the second stage of the project[2], completed in April 2019. It consisted of three larger tasks, divided into constituent tasks:
TASK 1.
1. Introducing yourself to your partner.
2. Informing the partner about the biggest difficulties in learning the target language so far.
3. Informing the partner about the preferred forms and strategies of learning.
TASK 2.
1. Presenting knowledge about the problematic linguistic issue identified by the partner.
2. Preparing an exercise to consolidate knowledge.
3. Preparing a communication exercise.
TASK 3.
1. Checking exercises done by partners.
2. Doing a communication exercise prepared by the partner.

[2] Results of research conducted in the first stage of the project were presented at the PL-CALL conference in Kraków in 2019.

Table 1

Summary of general information on both stages of the exchange in the academic year 2018/2019

	1st semester 2018/2019	2nd semester 2018/2019
Participants	11 students from Italy 19 students from Poland	8 students from Italy 8 students from Poland
Division into groups	3-person groups (10 groups)	2-person groups (8 – 1 = 7 groups)
Online tools	Chosen by teachers: Padlet, Google Docs, FB groups for posting photos, videos and comments	Every student could freely choose tools
Task deadlines	Precise deadlines for individual tasks	General deadlines for sets of tasks
Role of the teacher (project coordinator)	Regular contacts with the project coordinator, close monitoring of task progress	Occasional interventions of the project coordinator, task progress assessment after the completion of the whole project
Research interests	Task design, tools (adequacy, difficulty of use), resulting problems	Learner autonomy, forms of transferring knowledge, resulting problems

Source: author's own work.

Research questions and an analysis of materials

Both stages of the virtual exchange completed in the academic year 2018/2019 were pilot schemes. Due to the complexity of such teaching activities, as well as their complicated organization and dependence on multiple external factors, the research interests of the project coordinator in the first stage of the project focused on identifying problems that could make it impossible or more difficult for the coordinator to guide students through both stages of the exchange. In the second stage, completed in the summer semester, the overriding research question was whether it was justified for students to act as teachers. It was assumed that such an exchange can be deemed successful if students are capable of presenting the teaching material in an attractive form (understood as innovative, interactive and clear), and if linguistic issues identified by the partners as difficult do not turn out to be too complicated to be analyzed by students without teaching training. At the same time, the participants were free to choose the language of communication, which supported their independent decisions in the learning process. There were only general deadlines for the completion of tasks, so that every student could manage their time individually.

In order to find an answer to the question of whether the presented structure of the second stage of the virtual exchange was justified, the author has identified three research problems related to the linguistic issues identified by students and activities taken by them while learning the target language and teaching the native language:

1. What basic linguistic problems in learning the target language will be identified by the learners? Will these problems be predominantly grammatical or lexical? → How will it influence their role as teachers?

2. Which languages will the students use to communicate during the exchange? When will the students switch codes in online interactions? → Will their autonomy to choose the language of communication negatively affect the exchange?

3. Will the learners use tools from the first stage of the virtual exchange to complete their tasks? → Will the presented teaching material be attractive and suitable for online teaching?

To answer these questions, the author has gathered research material that included the students' statements from posts and comments published on Facebook and written interactions on Messenger, as well as files or other forms of presenting knowledge chosen by students. The gathered material was coded by marking categories such as the author (Turin group/Lublin group), the language (Polish/Italian), the number of the task and the tool used. Where in-depth data was required, the quality of selected statements was analyzed in reference to the context of their creation.

Linguistic difficulties in learning the target language

The first research question is directly related to the initial task in the second stage of the virtual exchange. After a short introduction to the partner, the learners were supposed to inform the partner about the most difficult element of the target language that they have encountered so far and would like to repeat, understand better or practice again. To do that, all students chose the easiest and quickest form of communication, i.e. providing written information via Messenger in a private group on Facebook.

On the basis of the author's own experience, both as a student and a teacher, she assumed that the problem identified most often by the learners of Italian would be the use of prepositions, whereas for the learners of Polish it would be the use of the imperfec-

tive and perfective aspect of verbs. This hypothesis was only partially confirmed. Five out of seven Polish students identified prepositions as the most difficult linguistic issue they have encountered so far. It is not surprising because this issue is problematic even to advanced learners. It happens due to the irregularity of this linguistic phenomenon, the difficulty of coming up with rules that could help students master it and the necessity to memorize multiple examples of use for individual prepositions. When it comes to the remaining two students, one of them pointed to problems with choosing between the auxiliary verbs *avere* and *essere* in the compound past tense (*passato prossimo* in Italian), whereas the last student focused on problems with using pronouns, but did not specify whether it referred to direct pronouns (*pronomi diretti* in Italian) or combined pronouns (*pronomi combinati* in Italian) and whether the problems occurred with their use in the present or past tense.

The author's hypotheses as to the linguistic problems encountered by the learners of Polish were less accurate. The aspect of verbs was mentioned by only two out of seven students. Their responses did not point to any leading problem and varied significantly: for two people, the biggest problem were the forms of the genitive case, for one it was the locative case and for another one it was the combination of these two cases used to express dates. The last student was the only person whose response concerned a lexical rather than a grammatical issue: the names of the months.

The responses of the learners of Polish may be varied for two reasons: the students' absence in class when the issues they identified as problematic were discussed and an insufficient interiorization of a given structure. But to confirm these assumptions, it would be necessary to conduct in-depth interviews with the students.

The language of communication: native or target language?

In the first stage of the exchange (in the winter semester of the academic year 2018/2019), every task had an instruction specifying the language in which it was supposed to be done. In most cases, it was the target language. At the same time, the students were informed that they can use their native language if they want to express a given concept and feel that their current competence in the target language makes it impossible. They were always encouraged by the coordinator, however, to make attempts to use the foreign language.

In the second stage of the exchange, the instructions for specific tasks never specified the language that should be used. A general description of the

project stated that students can freely choose the language they want to use to complete the tasks. However, the suggested language was always the target language.

The aim of the posed research question was to check whether students with full autonomy with regard to the choice of language will do what was customary in the first stage of the exchange and use the target language, also due to the desire to practice it, or whether they will opt for the speed and easiness of communication associated with the use of their native language. An additional objective set by the author was to determine when learners decide to switch the code.

An analysis of the use of language in each task showed that five out of seven groups used the target language in all situations. In the two remaining groups, the Poles always used Italian, whereas the Italians used both Polish and Italian. In group five, this ratio was 50:50 and in group seven 75:25 for the target language. Code-switching from Polish into Italian occurred in two cases. Firstly, when the speaker wanted to construct a compound sentence, which exceeded their language skills. An example which illustrates this situation can be this post from 23 April 2019, written by one of the Italian students[3]: "Cześć, Martyna! Mam nadzieję, że spodoba ci się ten wideo :) Wykonałem również krótkie ćwiczenie. Per il compito creativo potresti scrivere un breve testo dove mi racconti qualcosa in più su di te utilizzando le preposizioni :)"[4]. As can be deducted from the above post, the learner had no problems with the construction of correct simple sentences or sentences with two clauses, but when she wanted to use two subordinate clauses, one of which was additionally introduced by a participle (*utilizzando* in Italian), she switched to her native language. This choice is not surprising, because at this stage of learning, learners have limited contact with sentences that include subordinate clauses. Those that appear in classes are treated functionally, whereas active participles are not introduced at the A1 level.

The second instance in which the code is switched occurs when the speaker wants to react to a given situation as soon as possible and, in their opinion, using the target language would cause an unnecessary delay. The following situation can be used to illustrate this tendency: on Tuesday, 16 April at 6:00 p.m., an Italian student posted an exercise and at 7:03 p.m., her Polish partner commented on the new post. A few minutes later, at 7:08 p.m., the Italian student wrote in her native language: "Oh no! Ho visto ora che ho invertito soluzione/esercizio. Provo a correggere!"[5]. At 7:20 p.m., she added another comment: "Ok, ora è corretto :)"[6]. In the above example, the Italian stu-

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[3] The original spelling and punctuation was preserved in the quoted example.

[4] Translation: Hi Martyna! I hope you will like this video :) I also prepared a short exercise. For the creative task, you could write a short text in which you will tell me a little bit more about yourself, using prepositions.

[5] Translation: Oh no! I've just noticed that I mixed up the solution and the exercise. I'll try to fix it!

[6] Translation: Ok, it's correct now :)

dent reacted immediately after realizing that she made a mistake. The use of exclamation marks and emoji emphasizes her emotional involvement. Therefore, it seems natural that she wanted to correct her error before her partner discovered it herself. A faster and more effective tool to do it was her native language.

To sum up the above solutions, it needs to be noted that throughout the virtual exchange, all students were trying to use the target language, which may result from the continuation of the pattern used in the first stage of the exchange and the sense that in this way, they are pursuing one of the objectives of online collaboration (and language classes), i.e. the development of language skills. Rare instances of using the native language occurred when the situation demanded such use and communication skills in the target language were insufficient to achieve specific objectives set by the learners. The fact that only the Italians used their native language and there were no such situations involving the use of Polish confirms that the latter is more difficult to learn and that the language skills of the two groups differed at the same point of the academic year (which is also affected by the fact that the schedule of the academic year is different in Lublin and in Turin).

Online tools used in the exchange

In the first stage of the virtual exchange, the students used various tools available online, which were ascribed to specific tasks: Padlet to post short descriptions with photos, Google Docs to enter longer written assignments, comment on them and correct them together, and private Facebook groups to post photos and videos with descriptions and comments. A survey conducted after the first semester of the exchange showed that students had no problems with using the proposed tools, whereas using the same technology again to complete two different tasks contributed to its evaluation as easy to use by the students.

In the second stage of the exchange, students were free to choose the tools they wanted to use to complete specific tasks. The purpose of the last research question was to check whether the learners would use varied and attractive tools they got to know in the first stage of the exchange. Their choice was analyzed in two tasks, i.e. when they presented knowledge to their partners (task 2.1) and when they prepared exercises to consolidate knowledge (task 2.2).

In the first constituent task (task 2.1), nine out of fourteen students presented a given issue in a PDF file attached to a post on Facebook or described the issue in a post with links to online materials. One person prepared a PowerPoint presentation. Two students did not complete this task and only two people used tools from the first stage of the exchange: one of them used Google Docs and the second one recorded a video with a chosen issue presented as an animation.

In the second constituent task (task 2.2), which consisted of preparing exercises for the partner to enable them to consolidate their knowledge of a chosen grammatical or lexical task, seven learn-

ers prepared PDF files with gap filling, two people sent links to similar exercises found online (and one person published a set of varied materials on Google Drive to share with the partner), three students did not complete this task and two participants created interactive exercises on their own: one person used Quizlet (flashcards, gap filling, matching, games, etc.) and the other used Riddle (interactive gap filling).

The above data shows that the majority of students used text documents, usually PDFs, even though this form was not used in the first stage of the virtual exchange. Most of the exercises prepared by them were not interactive, even though this was a feature of all activities proposed by the teacher in the first semester of the project. Therefore, it can be concluded that students most probably used the forms they came across the most often in their university education, which are not very engaging or interesting for learners. Despite having contact with varied online tools and the ability to use them, confirmed in the first stage of the exchange, only two students decided to use these tools. Moreover, these two students created their own language materials, whereas the others used online resources (mostly copied without acknowledging the source). Therefore, it can be concluded that students looked for the best-known, the easiest and the quickest solutions. It seems that in order to encourage learners to use varied tools to prepare language materials, it is not enough for them to get to know such tools, try them out themselves and know how to use them. It is also necessary to directly instruct learners and ensure that they have repeated contact with such tools.

Conclusion

Having analyzed the material gathered in the second stage of the virtual exchange, which took place in the summer semester of the academic year 2018/2019, it can be concluded that the exchange fulfilled its overriding objective with regard to teaching Polish at the University of Turin: it gave students an opportunity for increased production in the target language through interactions with its native speakers. The fact that the exchange partners mostly used the target language to communicate may show that students were consciously trying to use this opportunity to improve their communication skills. Their autonomy to choose the language of interaction did not have any visible negative impact on the language production of students: they switched the code very rarely.

In the first stage of the virtual exchange, the students were prepared to use varied multimedia applications, but in most cases, it had no impact on the tools they used to complete tasks in the second stage of the project. To present knowledge, the learners used tools that were not interactive and were hardly diversified. A solution that could change this situation and encourage students to opt for more attractive online tools is a precise definition of this objective, which should be explained to learners before the

beginning of collaboration. The exchange could also be constructed in such a way as to ensure that efforts in this direction are well-structured.

When the project was completed, feedback from students showed one more important fact: all of the Italian students were dissatisfied with the time when the second stage of the virtual exchange took place (the summer semester). It was the last month of the academic year in Italy, so they were stressed out about exams and had less time because they had to study for exams. As a result, they focused on the completion of tasks rather than the quality of their work. Therefore, it is possible that the time factor had a major impact on the choice of tools.

It also needs to be noted that the issues indicated by project participants as the most difficult elements of the language code (mostly grammatical issues) turned out to be too complex for students without adequate knowledge and skills to successfully act as teachers of their native language. Their intuitive actions were insufficient to explain the selected linguistic issues to their partners in an organized and attractive way. An additional obstacle was a lot of freedom, which gave them the possibility to decide about too many elements. Even though the idea to switch the roles surely has didactic potential, it should be adequately prepared and structured. Students must have the knowledge required to carry it out, because what they lack is familiarity with the methodology used in foreign language teaching. In the author's opinion, this process would be too time-consuming and complicated to be carried out in the first year of language studies, but it is worth organizing such an exchange for students with teaching specialization in later years of study. In the beginning of first-cycle degree studies, the educational value of the virtual exchange would be higher if its program and objectives were adjusted to the level of the learners' language and intercultural competence.

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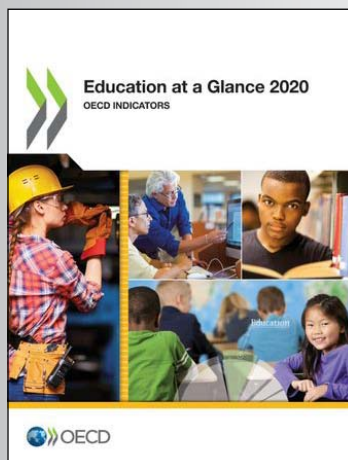
The Impact of COVID-19 on Education – Insights from OECD's Education at a Glance 2020 report

The Covid-19 pandemic has thrown the world into an unprecedented crisis. It has affected people regardless of nationality, level of education, income or gender.

However, the same has not been true for its consequences, which have hit the most vulnerable hardest. Education is no exception. This pandemic has exposed the many inadequacies and inequities in the education systems – from access to devices or technologies needed for online education, and the supportive environments needed to focus on learning, up to the misalignment between resources and needs. While students from privileged backgrounds and in cities could find their way past closed school doors to alternative learning opportunities, those from disadvantaged backgrounds and in remote areas have remained shut out when their schools shut down. This has created a huge learning gap among students across the world.

An excerpt from the overview of the report, which can be read on the EdTechRieview website at https://bit.ly/3owoArT. The online and pdf versions of the report are available for free at **https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance-19991487.htm/?refcode=20190209ig**.