



Preschool children's experiences with virtual exchange in the language classroom¹

Experiencias del alumnado de educación preescolar con el intercambio virtual en clase de lenguas

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Abstract:

This study investigates a Virtual Exchange (VE) project carried out between two preschool classes in Portugal and Austria involving children aged 3-5 over a period of eight months. The study sheds light on children's experiences of VE. The research draws on classroom video recordings of live online exchange sessions, interviews with two preschool teachers, the teacher-researcher diary and multimodal learner texts. Following thematic analysis, four major themes related to the children's experiences were identified: emotional engagement, real encounters, building connections and finding common ground. The findings show the potential of VE for young language learners and allow conclusions to be drawn for future implementation of VE in the preschool classroom.

Resumen:

Este estudio analiza un proyecto de intercambio virtual (IV) llevado a cabo durante ocho meses entre dos aulas de educación infantil de Portugal y Austria con alumnado de entre 3 y 5 años. El estudio explora las experiencias del alumnado en relación con el IV. Para ello, se analizaron grabaciones en vídeo de las sesiones, entrevistas con dos docentes de educación infantil, el diario de la docente-investigadora y textos multimodales elaborados por el propio alumnado. A partir de un análisis temático, se identificaron cuatro temas principales relacionados con la experiencia del alumnado: la implicación emocional, la autenticidad del encuentro, la creación de vínculos y el descubrimiento de elementos en común. Los resultados ponen de manifiesto el potencial del IV para los aprendices de lenguas de corta edad y of-

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Keywords:

Virtual exchange; preschool; pre-primary; young learners; EFL.

recen orientaciones para su implementación en el aula.

Palabras clave:

Intercambio virtual; educación infantil; etapa preprimaria; aprendientes jóvenes; inglés como lengua extranjera.

Résumé:

Cette étude analyse un projet d'échange virtuel (EV) mené pendant huit mois entre deux classes de maternelle du Portugal et d'Autriche avec des élèves âgés de 3 à 5 ans. L'étude explore les expériences des élèves relatives à l'EV. Pour ce faire, des enregistrements vidéo des séances, des entretiens avec deux enseignantes de maternelle, le journal de l'enseignante-chercheuse et des textes multimodaux réalisés par les élèves eux-mêmes ont été analysés. À partir d'une analyse thématique, quatre thèmes principaux liés à l'expérience des élèves ont été identifiés : l'engagement émotionnel, l'authenticité de la rencontre, la création de liens et la découverte de points communs. Les résultats mettent en évidence le potentiel de l'EV pour les très jeunes apprenants de langues et offrent des orientations pour sa mise en œuvre en classe.

Mots-clés:

Échange virtuel; éducation enfantine; niveau préscolaire; jeunes apprenants; anglais langue étrangère.

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Although virtual exchange (VE) is becoming more frequent in young language learning contexts, little is known about how young children experience these types of exchanges. In a VE project between a French and a German primary school, in which the authors of this article were involved, one German child became so excited that - for no apparent reason - he suddenly took off his shoe and waved it to the French partners during a videoconference. The French children interpreted this behaviour as a German saying-goodbye-custom and did the same at the next video meeting. This incident shows that teachers and educators might not be aware of how children experience VE, what they make of this experience, and which impact such a project has on their perception of the exchange partners. Based on a case study in an Austrian pre-primary classroom which engaged in a VE project with a Portuguese preschool, this study aims to find out how preschool children experience VE.

Theoretical framework: VE with young language learners

VE, also referred to as telecollaboration or online intercultural exchange, has become an increasingly prominent approach in technology-enhanced language learning (Gutiérrez & O'Dowd, 2025, p. 248). It generally involves structured online interaction between groups of learners in geographically distant educational contexts under the guidance of educators. It aims to foster linguistic development, intercultural competence, and collaborative learning through digital communication (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021; O'Dowd, 2018).

In recent years, a substantial body of empirical research has investigated the learning outcomes associated with VE. Studies conducted in secondary and higher education show that telecollaborative exchanges can support the development of communicative competence, intercultural awareness, and digital literacies (e.g., Dooly & Vinagre, 2021; EVOLVE project team, 2020). Research has also highlighted motivational benefits of VE, as learners frequently report increased engagement and willingness to communicate when interacting with authentic audiences beyond their local classroom (e.g., O'Dowd, 2021).

In contrast to the growing research base in higher education, relatively few studies have examined VE in early language education contexts. Although there are some reports on VE projects in primary school (e.g., Abe & Beecroft, 2024; Bejarano Sánchez & Giménez Manrique, 2018; Monts & Masats, 2018), research involving younger learners has been “lagging behind” (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021, p. 396) and remains comparatively limited. Some small-scale studies in primary school report increased learner engagement and motivation:

We put forward that two of the intrinsic virtues of VE in a school context are that learners are enthused by the possibility of meeting peers of their own age from different countries and are motivated by the realisation that they can communicate in English, possibly for the first time, with people who do not speak their language” (Pennock-Speck & Clavel Arroitia, 2022, pp. 128-129; see also Innes & Huang, 2021; Kratzer et al., 2025).

These studies also identified emerging cultural awareness among primary school children (e.g., Abe & Beecroft, 2024; Okumura, 2020; Reader, 2024; Walton, 2019) and instances of spontaneous target lan-

guage use during virtual interactions with international peers (e.g., Okumura, 2025). Furthermore, existing research on VE with young learners examines the role of the teacher, the task design and learner autonomy for successful online communication (e.g., Birsak de Jersey et al., 2025; Pennock-Speck & Clavel Arroitia, 2022; Wigham & Whyte, 2024; Whyte & Wigham, 2025) as well as questions of teacher agency (Weiss et al., 2026). In particular with young learners, multimodal learner texts – such as drawings and videos – are being proposed as valuable elements for successful VE projects (Weiss et al., 2025).

The only study on VE in pre-primary that the authors of this paper are aware of is a qualitative classroom action research project involving preschool learners in Turkey and Nigeria. It demonstrates that story-based telecollaboration activities can facilitate engagement with intercultural topics and elicit spontaneous use of formulaic target-language expressions (Ak & Dakat, 2026).

A research gap can also be identified regarding children's perspectives on VE. Most research relies on the researchers' and the teachers' perspectives without giving a voice to the participating children. In one of the few studies, Okumura (2025) examined how Japanese and Australian primary school pupils perceived VE with synchronous online meetings. The results showed that many pupils noted improvements regarding their language comprehension and intercultural understanding and reflected positively on communicating with peers abroad.

In recent years, several European initiatives have sought to expand the implementation of VE in early language school education. One example is the Erasmus+ project *INVITED* (Integrating Primary and Pre-school Virtual Exchange Projects into Language Teacher Education), which aims to promote the use of VE in primary and preschool language classrooms and to develop teachers' competences for designing and implementing telecollaborative projects (INVITED, 2024).

The literature review to date has shown that there are almost no empirical findings on VE in pre-primary settings and on young children's experiences of VE. To contribute to the expansion of the field, the present study is guided by the following research question: How do preschool children experience a VE project with peers from a different country using English as the lingua franca?

Method

Research context and participants

The research was conducted in an English-immersion preschool in Austria where all the staff members are native speakers of English. English serves as the main language of communication and therefore is used consistently throughout the day. The various routines of the day (e.g., calling the register or "circle time"), are used to consciously integrate the English language in a natural way. Two preschool groups comprising 16 and 14 children between the ages of three and five took part in the VE project. Most children spoke German as their first language. While the three-year-old children had begun to learn English a month and a half before the project started, the four- and five-year-olds had been exposed to English for one to two years. Their receptive English language competence was well developed, and it was natural for them to use the language on a daily basis.

The teacher-researcher facilitating the VE project was present for two mornings each week, during which the primary implementation of the project took place. These sessions predominantly took place within the established circle-time routine, which follows a task-based language learning approach in which language is used meaningfully to complete age-appropriate tasks and projects. This provided a focused context in which the children could engage with the topic of the VE project. The other teachers involved in the project also integrated project-related activities at various points throughout the week, for example through craft activities or songs.

The VE project was implemented with a partner class comprising 19 children from a preschool in Portugal. While Portuguese was the main language of instruction, the children had English lessons once a week. Additionally, English was integrated into their daily routine. The children were familiar with the teacher speaking mostly English during the lessons and had a good understanding of what was being said, while overall their language competences were lower than the children's in the Austrian preschool. The teacher in Portugal was the class teacher throughout the week. Alongside integrating it into her daily routine, she set aside specific times for the project. Both teachers communicated regularly through videoconferencing and a messenger app to keep each other up-to-date, plan project activities and show each other their learners' work.

The Bird project

The VE project “Meet and tweet” between the two preschools in Austria and Portugal was centred around the theme of birds. This provided a common topic that both groups of children could relate to and explore, as both countries are home to many of the same species. The project began with the teacher from Austria going over to Portugal to meet her partner teacher and the children. This created an initial sense of familiarity and connection between the partner teachers and the classes, which helped to establish a natural and relaxed starting point for the VE project. It was conducted over a period of eight months, starting in October, when birds are still present but less active, and continued into May, when there are noticeably more birds around. This duration enabled the children to observe changes over time and hear different bird songs. It also meant that project activities could become a natural part of preschool life that was continued and gradually built on.

The VE project combined asynchronous and synchronous activities. Asynchronous activities were carried out during circle time in the Austrian preschool. The children learned about birds that differ between the two countries as well as those shared with the partner class through books, activities, games and songs. With the help of a large map, they learnt about different countries the children and staff came from and where Portugal was. They were introduced to the daily life of the partner class as well as traditions they follow, such as carnival and pyjama-day.

During circle time, the teacher also prepared the synchronous meetings. The children worked on drawings and craft activities to show the partner class and practised the songs that they wanted to sing with them or to them, which were mostly associated with the topic of birds. Another asynchronous activity was sending a parcel to the Portuguese class. The children drew pictures for the Portuguese children and decorated the wrapping paper to wrap up a wooden bird as a present. These sessions also gave the children time to look at shared photos and pictures, thereby getting to know each other at their own pace. They had time to think about what they wanted to share with the partner class and to develop a sense of excitement and anticipation before the live meetings. In addition to circle time, bird-related project activities were also included in the daily routines of calling the register, doing art activities, participating in the singing circle and playing movement games. Photos and pictures were put up on the wall to make the project visible throughout the dura-

tion of the project. In the Portuguese preschool, the project was also integrated into established everyday routines. Similarly, the group prepared for the meetings through drawing and craft activities, taking photos, an art project on an Austrian artist and they practiced songs to share.

The synchronous meetings lasted for around 20 to 30 minutes. The two teachers planned the content and the type of interaction beforehand, but instead of following a detailed step-by-step plan, they left enough room to flexibly respond to the needs and the ideas of the children. The meetings were conducted with the whole group using videoconferencing software. Individual children or small groups of children showed drawings, objects and crafts to the partner class. Group contributions were singing songs to each other or together. The teachers guided the sessions and supported the flow of interaction, thereby talking to each other and to the children of the partner class and making sure everything ran smoothly. This kept the meetings structured, while still allowing the children to share and respond in a natural and engaging way.

Data collection

Research with preschool children presents several challenges, including difficulties in obtaining meaningful informed consent, young children's limited verbal abilities, short attention spans, and the tendency for adult-led contexts to overshadow children's authentic perspectives (e.g., Einarsdóttir, 2007; Sun et al., 2023). Preschoolers may feel intimidated in formal research settings or provide socially desirable answers, which can compromise data validity (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). Furthermore, meaningful contributions from the children often occur outside planned data collection moments. Much of what children express emerges in the moment, often during everyday routines or spontaneous conversations rather than in clearly structured research settings. These moments can provide valuable insights into how children think and feel, particularly when they react to something that triggers a memory or a connection. In addition, ethical concerns—ensuring children's comfort, autonomy, and understanding—are especially prominent when working with very young participants (Pinter & Kuchah, 2021) as well as giving children a voice in the sense of conducting research *with* children, not *on* them (Butler & Pinter, 2025).

To address these issues, a flexible approach to data collection is neces-

sary. Researchers recommend play-based, arts-based, and child-centred methods such as drawing, role play, or storytelling, which allow children to communicate in developmentally appropriate ways (e.g., Blaisdell et al., 2019). Flexible session structures and extended rapport-building further support children's agency and help create environments where their voices can emerge naturally and safely. Given the methodological challenges of eliciting reliable data from preschool-aged children in formal research settings, data collection often draws on naturally occurring interactions in early childhood classrooms, captured through systematic video- or audio-based observational methods (e.g., Flewitt, 2006; Speldewinde & Campbell, 2024).

Due to the action research approach that the bird project followed, the children were very familiar with the teacher-researcher who is a member of the teaching staff. Further rapport-building activities were therefore not necessary. Data collection was carried out as non-intrusively as possible. In addition to classroom videos, interviews with teachers and learner texts, it relied on spontaneous interactions between the children or children and teachers which were documented in the teacher-researchers' diary. This approach was used to capture unplanned moments and spontaneous interactions. Since many of the activities in the kindergarten are videotaped for professional development reasons, the presence of the camera did not present a new situation for the children.

CLASSROOM VIDEOS

Over the course of eight months, five videos of the synchronous meetings were recorded, documenting the real-time interactions between the two classes. A camera in the classroom was positioned in a way that the recordings captured the participation of the children in the Austrian preschool, their communication, gestures and facial expressions when looking at the screen and interacting with their partner class in Portugal. Therefore, the video recordings show how the children expressed their ideas and experiences not only verbally, but visually and physically when they participated in singing songs, 'show and tell' and conversations. All sessions were recorded with the parents' written consent.

TEACHER-RESEARCHER'S DIARY (RD)

After each lesson, the teacher-researcher took reflective notes documenting her observations of the interaction between the children and key

classroom events as well as notable children's comments and spontaneous reactions. This RD produced a contextualised account of practice while also supporting ongoing reflection on teaching and learning processes (Alaszewski, 2006; Borg, 2001). It allowed the teacher-researcher to record impressions close to the moment of observation, helping to preserve detail and meaning that would have otherwise been lost. The diary allowed for the documentation of children's responses to the project that was not restricted to a particular moment or setting. They took place during circle time, play, storytelling, art sessions, group projects and during casual conversations.

TEACHER INTERVIEWS (TI)

Another source of data was two interviews that the teacher-researcher conducted with two of her colleagues. Both colleagues participated in the synchronous meetings. One colleague, who was minimally involved in the project and was usually responsible for leading the singing-circle-routine with the children, led the songs that the children sang to the Portuguese group, as well as the songs that they sang together. This provided both teachers with ample opportunities to observe the children's behaviour and actions in the synchronous meetings. The interviews (TI1 and TI2) were conducted in the preschool, audio-recorded and then transcribed.

LEARNER TEXTS (LT)

To include the children's perspectives, data was collected in a reflection session on the project. The teachers showed the children a range of photos from the project (their drawings and crafts, activities, the feeder in the garden, the books on birds, pictures of the Portuguese children and the synchronous meetings) and asked them to draw something relating to the project. Afterwards, the teachers asked the children what they had drawn and wrote their answers on the drawings. These documents were intended to give insights into what the children remembered from the project, what they thought was most relevant or most enjoyable. The set of data consists of 23 learner texts.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022), taking account of the open-ended and dynamic nature of a

VE project in early childhood settings, where children's understandings and interactions are not easily anticipated in advance or captured by pre-defined categories. The analysis of the material included the following steps: Both researchers watched the videos, read through the teacher interviews and the teacher-researcher diary and studied the learner texts multiple times to become familiar with the data. They took notes on interesting observations by the teacher-researcher and her colleagues, utterances of the children, but also on their facial expressions, non-verbal cues and body language in the videos that gave insights into how the children experienced the VE. In a second step, initial codes were developed focusing on the children's responses to the VE project as recorded in the different types of data. Based on the initial codes, meaningful patterns related to the research question were developed. In several revision loops, these themes were reviewed until reaching the final themes.

Findings

Four major themes relating to pre-primary children's experiences of VE were identified: The children in the Austrian preschool showed a high degree of *emotional engagement* in the VE. They perceived the project as a "*real*" *encounter*. Through various means and activities, they were *building connections* with the partner class which allowed for *finding common ground*.

EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT

During the project, the children showed very strong emotional reactions to the project. In the video recordings of the meeting their smiles, laughter and body language indicate a huge degree of excitement. During the partner classes' presentations, they displayed sustained attention. Most children kept looking at the screen and at various points they tried to move closer or stood up to get a better view of what was happening on the screen. This is confirmed by the teacher in the interview when she says, "I only saw smiles and laughter" (T11, l. 360f.) and "I found that the children, they smiled a lot. They waved at the other children, even the/you know. Both sides waved at each other, very excited to see each other. They would say 'hello' or they would smile more" (T11, l. 20-22). They clapped not only after the presentations of the partner class, but also spontaneously at the end of one synchronous meeting when the video conference had already come to an end, indicating that they had expe-

rienced the online meeting in a positive way. The teacher describes how the feelings developed over the course of the project:

It was progressive. So, the first time was maybe a little bit quieter, maybe a little bit shy, a little bit reserved, a little bit held back because they maybe weren't sure exactly what was going to happen. I mean, you put a camera in front of me and I'd be shy, but they were / they were open. (...) Then the second time they were, they were happy and excited to see the group and to see what they were going to do this next time. And then the next time it was even more so. (...) And so the excitement each time was a little bit more (T11, l. 57-58).

This positive experience led to the children looking forward to the next meeting:

You could see from the way they sat on their chairs, they were sitting forward a little bit. So that gave that sort of, you know, excited kind of feeling—"Oh, okay, here they come". You know, this kind of anticipation and excitement (T11, l. 22-25).

In their drawings on the project, many children use bright colours and symbols like hearts, flowers, the sun and rainbows which indicate a positive attitude towards the exchange.

"REAL" ENCOUNTER

A second theme identified in the data is the perception of the VE as a "real" encounter among the children in Austria. Their comments and the interactions with the partner class showed that the children in Portugal were perceived as real people with their own lives and routines in their kindergarten, not just as "children on the screen" (RD, l. 39/40). Comments such as "Are the Portugal children in their garden too?" (RD, l. 34f.) or "Are they going outside, too?" (RD, l. 44) give a glimpse into how the children see their partner class. Instead of perceiving them as distant or separate, they include them in their own everyday experiences. After one of the online meetings, one child even asked - while putting on her coat to go outside - whether the Portuguese children could come and play with them. In a circle time discussion one child told a teacher who had not been present at the online meeting "we have new friends" (RD, l. 49), as if the Portuguese children had been in the same room with them.

The teacher shares this perception of the partners as friends when she describes the children's feelings before one of the online meetings: "And they knew these now are their friends, you know what I mean? They/ they knew that they were coming to see their friends online" (T11, l. 56-57).

The fact that seeing their partners on a screen did not diminish the sense of a "real" encounter became evident when the children in Austria watched how their partners in Portugal opened the package sent from Austria and discovered the children's pictures. The children in Austria immediately reacted by calling out, "Where's mine, where's mine?" (RD, l. 58). When the children in Portugal expressed their thanks, the children in Austria instantly replied, "You're welcome," without any teacher prompting. This spontaneous reciprocity suggests that the children perceived the exchange as an authentic social interaction and that they were aware of what was happening on both sides of the screen.

In the learner texts, this aspect is shown by comments such as "I want to play with them" (LT 13), "I want to give this to the Portuguese children" (LT 21) or a drawing called "Us and the Portuguese children" (LT 14) in which a group of children is standing below a rainbow with no physical or spatial barrier between them (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Learner text



BUILDING CONNECTIONS

A major part of the children's experience of the VE is characterised by their attempts to build connections with the partner class. This could be seen at various instances in the classroom videos: they tried to establish contact through waving or showing the partners the mascot that the children in Portugal were familiar with. This connection was strengthened through shared activities. In the first synchronous meeting, the children in Portugal performed "fireworks" - a ritual they engage in to show their praise, excitement and joy. It was reciprocated immediately by the children in Austria, repeated in subsequent synchronous meetings and quickly adopted into their preschool life. By making the ritual their own, the children showed that they understood and enjoyed what the other children were doing and connected it with positive feelings. This aspect of building connections is also reflected in one of the teachers' comments:

And it was really cute to see their eyes light up when they saw that both/ each of the groups were looking at each other and doing the same thing, because they also know that they don't necessarily speak the same language as them. So all of a sudden they see that they can share their activity with this group, even though they probably don't speak the same language (T11, l. 65-68).

Another hint at the strong connection the children built is the observation that they were very eager to show each other their work. They were approaching the screen to give the partners a better view of what they had done and listened very attentively to the partners' presentations. The observations from the video are confirmed by one of the teachers:

And you could see that the excitement would build and that they were getting more relaxed because now they're/ they're ready to show things. They want to show off whatever they can do. (...) whenever you meet new friends, you always want to show them your new coats and your new shoes. It's the same thing here. The kids want to show them the new song, or they want to show them some artwork that they did, or they want to show them, you know, the project that they did (T11, l. 92-99).

The children also became eager to show their rooms, games, and toys and, specifically, the bird-feeder that was hung in a tree. This is reflected in various comments of the children in learner texts, for example "we

showed them our birdhouse" (LT 20) or "I liked making things to show them" (LT 17). It indicates that they wanted to share part of their everyday life with the children in Portugal, basically saying "this is me" and "this is my world".

Furthermore, the children were very appreciative of their partners' contribution. Each time the partner class had presented their work, they clapped and showed their praise through the ritual that they had established. The teacher comments on this:

One or two of the children would go forward to show them, oh, we've made this for you guys. And they would be like, "oh, great". And then the children would clap for this, you know, whatever it was that they'd made. And so, the excitement of seeing something new from the group, they were excited about that and having something, it's like a little present for them (TI1, l. 33-39).

This connection that is also reflected in one of the learner texts with the comment "I like it when we are seeing each other" (LT 19) could not only be observed during the online meetings, but also in between the meetings:

In between the/ the classes or in between the Zoom meetings, I should say, the children would ask about, you know, when is the next time we're going to meet them? When will that be? What are we going to do? What are we going to show them? (...) You know, they would always ask us questions or they would say, oh, I want to show them X, or I want to show them/ I want to show them a new picture. I want to see them. I want them to see my new, you know, whatever. Something interesting that the children found interesting that they thought was interesting for the children in Portugal. So, they were/ always there was a little connection still left there in their heads. Oh, we're going to see these guys again. (...). So yeah, there was definitely a continued connection (TI1, l. 106-115).

In the asynchronous phases of the project, the connection was further expressed through the interest the children showed in looking at photos of the Portuguese children. This interest also stretched into free play when they would stand and look at the pictures once they were on the wall:

I think with putting the photos/ you put the photos up that helped as well. (..) because I did see a lot of children looking at them from time to time. "Ah, good". And pointing to them and saying, "oh, that's Portugal, they're the Portuguese children" (T12, l. 19-22).

FINDING COMMON GROUND

This feeling of connectedness was very much enhanced through the children's attempts to find common ground. They liked to discover similarities in their daily routines, songs, names and to engage in joint activities. In the classroom videos, it can be seen that they were very excited to discover children with the same names in both classes. They compared which stuffed animals they had in their preschools and which activities they both did and how they said goodbye to each other. This was also enhanced through the project's topic "Birds" as one of the teachers notices:

And I found that/ that was really interesting when we could pull out the birds and they could say: "oh yeah, this is this type of bird". They have, of course, their own names for it in Portugal, and here we had our own names for it, and the kids then could relate to each other: "Oh, okay, this is a that and this is a that". So, I thought that that was a really good connection for them to have to say: "okay, yeah, we don't necessarily speak the same language or whatever, but we have these birds as a topic to share". So, it's something that they both have in common. And you both have learned about them. (T11, l. 139-145)

That the topic of birds helped the children to create this shared basis is also reflected in the learner texts as birds feature in many of the drawings. For example, one learner commented: "A bird flying to us" (LT12, see Figure 2) and others include the mascot of the partner class, "their owl" (LT10, 13).

Figure 2
Learner text



The English language contributed to this finding of common ground. The children experienced English as a means of communication that goes beyond the classroom but has a value in the world outside the preschool. One of the teachers points out:

I think because they realise that there's, it's not just this little/ this little part of [name of the town] that we speak English in. (...) It's not just us speaking English to them. (...) I think that gave them a connection, that there's obviously somebody, somewhere in Portugal, where they're speaking English, and they're learning English too. (T12, I. 81-93)

Discussion

This study contributes to the still limited body of research on VE in early language education by providing one of the first empirical accounts of how preschool children experience participation in a long-term VE project. While previous studies in primary education have

mainly documented increased motivation, intercultural awareness and emerging communicative competence (e.g., Innes & Huang, 2021; Pennock-Speck & Clavel Arroitia, 2022; Okumura, 2025), the present study complements this research by exploring how preschool children actually experience participation in a VE project. The strong emotional engagement observed throughout the project appears to have been a key driver in sustaining motivation and nurturing curiosity about the partner class. This confirms previous findings that authentic interaction with peers abroad can increase young learners' motivation (Innes & Huang, 2021; Pennock-Speck & Clavel Arroitia, 2022). The study shows how emotional engagement develops over time during an eight-month exchange. The growing anticipation before synchronous meetings, children's continued references to their partners between meetings and their emotional investment in preparing artefacts for the partner class suggest that engagement developed into a sustained interest in the relationship with the partner group.

The finding that the children perceive the exchange as a real encounter is consistent with using authentic communicative situations as a design principle of VE tasks (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021; O'Dowd, 2021). Their spontaneous comments, references to the partner children's daily routines and attempts to integrate the Portuguese group into their own lived experiences indicate that they did not differentiate sharply between online and offline social worlds. Instead, the virtual space became an extension of the preschool environment, enabling authentic social recognition.

The project further illustrates that connection-building among young children can unfold naturally when opportunities for reciprocity, shared rituals and joint meaning-making are embedded in the exchange design. The adoption of the partner class's "fireworks" ritual, the eagerness to show work to each other, and the ongoing conversations between meetings demonstrate how children create social bonds through collaborative engagement and mutual appreciation. These behaviours also reveal early intercultural competencies: the ability to attend to others, value different practices and find joy in shared activities despite language barriers. While previous studies have demonstrated the development of intercultural awareness in primary school VE (e.g., Abe & Beecroft, 2024; Okumura, 2025; Reader, 2024), the present findings suggest that similar processes may already emerge in preschool settings, illustrating more

broadly the potential of digital technologies to create connections between people and communities across geographical boundaries (Santos-Caamaño et al., 2021).

Finally, the children's efforts to find common ground—through comparing names, routines, stuffed animals or experiences with birds—underscore that a shared project topic may serve as a cognitive and emotional bridge, allowing children to perceive similarity within diversity and to develop a sense of belonging to a wider community of learners.

The findings furthermore point towards implications for the design of VE projects with pre-primary learners. They allow the identification of a number of classroom activities that seem to be particularly fruitful: Activities that allow children to participate and engage in joint actions, such as singing songs together or sharing and looking at pictures, can support children's participation by creating simple and familiar ways to interact across settings which give them a clear structure for taking part. This is consistent with the broader view that the educational value of technology lies not in its mere use but in the interactions and pedagogical practices that it enables (Gallardo Fernández et al., 2020).

The use of realia in VE projects can support young children's participation by linking digital interactions to something tangible and familiar. Physical objects that are exchanged between settings help to make the interaction more concrete and visible for the children. This can contribute to a stronger sense of shared experience between groups when they are not in the same physical space. Furthermore, activities that allow children to compare their experiences and find similarities and differences, both regarding their daily lives (e.g., dress code, daily rituals, children's names) and the project's topic, help them to build connections and develop cultural awareness.

Conclusion

This study explored how preschool children experience participation in a VE project with international peers. Drawing on classroom videos, teacher interviews, a researcher diary and learner texts, it identified four interrelated aspects of children's experiences: emotional engagement, the perception of the exchange as a real encounter, the development of social connections and the search for common ground. These findings

demonstrate that children as young as three to five years old can participate meaningfully in developmentally appropriate VE projects. For educators, the study highlights the importance of designing VE projects that foreground relationship-building through repeated interaction, shared activities and meaningful communication. Developmentally appropriate tasks that allow children to exchange artefacts, participate in joint routines and discover common interests appear particularly well suited to supporting young children's engagement with international peers.

As with all qualitative case studies, the findings should be interpreted in light of the specific context of the study. The children in Austria participated in an English-immersion programme and the project extended over eight months. Both the educational setting and the long duration may have shaped the children's experiences and the relationships that developed during the exchange. In addition, while the study employed multiple child-centred methods to foreground children's perspectives, the interpretation of these perspectives inevitably remains mediated through adult researchers. The study therefore provides an in-depth account of how preschool children experienced one particular VE project, offering insights that may be transferable to similar educational contexts.

Looking ahead, the results of this study point to several avenues for future research. Further studies could explore how different VE project design features (e.g., duration, frequency, task types, thematic focus) influence the depth of engagement and relationship-building. Furthermore, the role of the teacher in preparing and supporting both the synchronous and the asynchronous activities could be examined in detail (see also Clavel Arroitia & Pennock-Speck in this issue).

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