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Virtual Exchange with Young Learners: Experiences of Preschool and Primary English Language Teachers[1]

Intercambio virtual con aprendices en edad escolar: experiencias de profesorados de inglés de educación infantil y primaria

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Abstract:
The study examines the perceptions of experienced virtual exchange (VE) practitioners regarding the use of VE with young learners, an area that has received comparatively little attention. The study utilises semi-structured interviews with eleven English language teachers working

Resumen:
El objetivo de este artículo es examinar las percepciones de profesorado de educación infantil y primaria con experiencia en intercambio virtual sobre el uso de este método con alumnado en edad escolar ya que se trata de un ámbito que ha recibido relativamente poca atención. El estudio se

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in preschools and early primary education across various European countries. Through thematic analysis, it explores the benefits and challenges of conducting VE programmes with young learners and identifies how teachers perceive the areas of children's language development supported by VE projects. Teachers valued VE as an opportunity for their own professional growth through international collaboration, although some initially had doubts about their ability to conduct such projects. Teachers reported significant benefits for students' intercultural awareness and linguistic development through authentic communication contexts, with VE fostering curiosity about other cultures and meaningful language use. However, substantial challenges emerged, including technical difficulties, maintaining the engagement of young learners virtually, and managing cross-border logistical complexities. Teachers emphasised the importance of scaffolding, shorter sessions, and multimodal elements. The study points to the need for targeted teacher preparation and age-appropriate frameworks in early language education contexts.

Keywords:
Virtual exchange; young learners; early language education; in-service teachers; professional development; intercultural awareness; language development.

basa en entrevistas semiestructuradas a once docentes de inglés que trabajan en centros de educación infantil y primaria de varios países europeos. Mediante un análisis temático, se investigan las ventajas y los retos de implementar programas de intercambio virtual con este tipo de alumnado. También se identifica cómo el profesorado percibe las áreas de desarrollo lingüístico del alumnado mediante los proyectos de intercambio virtual. Los y las docentes valoran el intercambio virtual como una herramienta útil en su propio crecimiento profesional mediante la colaboración internacional, aunque algunos cuestionan inicialmente su competencia para facilitar este tipo de proyectos. El profesorado señala importantes beneficios para la conciencia intercultural y el desarrollo lingüístico del alumnado impulsados por los contextos de comunicación auténticos, ya que el intercambio virtual fomenta la curiosidad por otras culturas y el uso significativo del lenguaje. Sin embargo, surgen retos importantes, como las dificultades técnicas, la necesidad de mantener el interés del alumnado de forma virtual y la gestión de las complejidades logísticas transfronterizas. El profesorado destaca la importancia del andamiaje, de las sesiones más cortas y de los elementos multimodales. Este estudio apunta a la necesidad de una formación docente específica y marcos adecuados a la edad en contextos de aprendizaje temprano de idiomas.

Palabras clave:
Intercambio virtual; jóvenes estudiantes; educación lingüística temprana; profesores en activo; desarrollo profesional; conciencia intercultural; desarrollo del lenguaje.

Résumé:
L'objectif de cet article est d'examiner les perceptions d'enseignants de maternelle et du primaire ayant une expérience de l'échange virtuel quant à l'utilisation de cette méthode avec des élèves d'âge scolaire, s'agissant d'un domaine qui a reçu relativement peu d'attention. L'étude repose sur des entretiens semi-structurés menés auprès de onze enseignants d'anglais exerçant dans des établissements de maternelle et du primaire de plusieurs pays européens. Au moyen d'une analyse thématique, les avantages et les défis liés à la mise en œuvre de programmes d'échange virtuel avec ce type d'élèves sont étudiés. L'étude identifie également la manière dont les enseignants perçoivent les domaines de développement linguistique des élèves grâce aux projets d'échange virtuel.

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Les enseignants apprécient l'échange virtuel en tant qu'outil utile pour leur propre développement professionnel par le biais de la collaboration internationale, bien que certains remettent initialement en question leurs compétences pour faciliter ce type de projets. Le corps enseignant souligne d'importants bénéfices pour la conscience interculturelle et le développement linguistique des élèves, stimulés par des contextes de communication authentiques, dans la mesure où l'échange virtuel favorise la curiosité pour d'autres cultures et l'usage significatif de la langue. Cependant, des défis majeurs émergent, tels que des difficultés techniques, la nécessité de maintenir l'intérêt des élèves en virtuel et la gestion des complexités logistiques transfrontalières. Les enseignants mettent en avant l'importance de l'étayage (*andamiaje*), de sessions plus courtes et d'éléments multimodaux. Cette étude met en évidence la nécessité d'une formation enseignante spécifique et de cadres adaptés à l'âge dans les contextes d'apprentissage précoce des langues.

Mots-clés:
Échange virtuel; jeunes apprenants; éducation linguistique précoce; enseignants en exercice; développement professionnel; conscience interculturelle; développement du langage.

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Introduction

In recent years, Virtual Exchange (VE) has developed as a teaching approach that promotes the development of intercultural competence and language skills through online collaborative exchanges among learners from different parts of the world (O'Dowd, 2018). Connecting classrooms across national contexts, VE places pupils in situations where they need to use the shared foreign language to communicate with learners from other countries and cultures (Helm, 2015). Research has shown that VE can support language development and build learner confidence, partly because the target language functions as a genuine communicative tool (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021). The popularity of VE has grown with the development of digital applications and platforms used for distance learning, and the introduction of policies supporting internationalisation into education systems (O'Dowd, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Most research on VE to date has focused on secondary and higher education (O'Dowd, 2018), raising the question of how this approach can be applied to children who are not yet fully literate.

Early childhood and primary education are especially important periods for language learning and for shaping attitudes towards other cultures (Enever, 2011). Young learners tend to engage with unfamiliar cultural

content with openness, especially when tasks are built around play and social interaction (Pinter, 2017) – this tendency makes early childhood a good time to undertake intercultural work. Teaching VE to this age group nonetheless brings real constraints: young children's attention in online settings is short-lived, their literacy is still developing, and they depend on structured, multimodal activities to keep engaged (Shin & Crandall, 2014).

Primary and preschool teachers who have used VE note that younger pupils actively engage in lessons when task design reflects their developmental stage and when participation is supported through modelling and scaffolding (Cutrim Schmid & Whyte, 2015; Pennock-Speck & Clavel-Arroitia, 2022). The practical frameworks developed by European projects such as INVITED, E-LIVE, EVALUATE, and EVOLVE also reflect this observation: their guidelines emphasise scaffolded task design, multimodal activities, and sustainable collaboration between teachers as prerequisites for effective VE with young learners (Birsak de Jersey et al., 2025; Wigham & Clavel-Arroitia, 2025).

The quality of VE projects depends to a large extent on teachers' digital competence, their pedagogical knowledge, and capability to facilitate intercultural communication (Grau & Turula, 2019). With young learners, these demands are even greater, as teachers must also ensure the engagement of children who are easily distracted in online environments and require adult support to participate actively in lessons. An analysis of the needs of primary and secondary school teachers found that most primary practitioners reported a lack of technological training for VE, and were unsure which tools and applications best support these projects (Wigham & Clavel-Arroitia, 2025). Institutional conditions matter, too. Apart from teacher readiness, the success of digital innovation in education depends on leadership support and access to resources (Ingrisch-Rupp & Symeonidis, 2025), and as this study's findings show, such conditions remain unevenly available to early years teachers.

Teachers' perspectives on VE are important because their opinions often determine whether new approaches are implemented in education and sustained in the long term (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010). Experienced VE teachers can provide practical accounts of what works in practice, including essential adjustments when working with younger students (Dagarin Fojkar et al., 2026; Dooly & O'Dowd, 2018; Marchlik & Brzosko-Barratt, 2026). Empirical evidence from professionals is fun-

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damental for developing both instructional recommendations and teacher training programmes that go beyond the scope of secondary and higher education.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews with English language teachers from several European countries who have conducted VE projects with young learners, this study explores teachers' perceptions of VE use in preschool and early primary language education, analysing the apparent advantages, difficulties, and language development areas supported by such projects. By centring practitioner voices, the study adds to the emerging body of work on VE at early learning levels, where systematic evidence is lacking.

Literature review

The conceptual foundations of VE derive from recognised concepts in second language acquisition, in particular the interaction hypothesis (Long, 1996), which emphasises the importance of conversational face-to-face interaction with negotiation of meaning in language learning, and from the sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), which views learning as a process which takes place through interaction with others (Poehner & Lantolf, 2024). In online environments, learners have the opportunity to encounter language input from various sources, and to obtain feedback that supports both interpretation and creation (Gass & Mackey, 2014). Such forms of language learning can help pupils develop communication skills in authentic social contexts (Dooly, 2017; Dooly & Vinagre, 2021). These theoretical perspectives provide a basis for VE in early language education, where interaction and meaning-making through authentic communication are central pedagogical concerns.

Although most VE research has focused on learners in secondary and higher education, studies on young language learners show that early language development benefits from meaningful linguistic input and interactive experiences (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019; Shin & Crandall, 2014). This can be ensured in digital environments which combine visual, auditory, and participatory elements that help children understand and stay engaged. Children are motivated by play, curiosity, and social interaction, which is why they often respond with interest to opportunities to communicate with peers from other countries, provided

that the activities are properly planned and supported. According to research on VE involving young pupils, synchronous spoken interaction can maintain children's engagement and support their autonomy, provided that teachers offer adequate support and that the tasks are within the pupils' zone of proximal development (Whyte & Wigham, 2025; Wigham & Clavel-Arroitia, 2025).

One of the goals of language education is the development of intercultural competence, which encompasses the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds (Byram, 1997). Shaping identity-related attitudes through organised intercultural interactions in early childhood can have a long-term impact (Aboud, 2008). This makes early language education an important stage in VE-based intervention, provided that the activities are practical and engaging, and, above all, customised to the children's stage of cognitive development, e.g., storytelling or collaborative tasks (Pinter, 2017). In this sense, VE can be seen as a natural extension of intercultural learning, as it enables children to interact directly with peers from other countries.

The positive impact of such interactions is also supported by intergroup contact theory, which holds that contact between people from different groups can reduce prejudice and encourage more positive attitudes, particularly when the interaction is based on joint effort and carefully structured (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Even relatively low-level exchanges within VE projects can help pupils become aware of cultural diversity and develop a more open-minded approach to the world. Research on online intercultural interaction confirms that organised exchanges can promote sensitivity and communication skills in an intercultural context (Avgousti, 2018; Dooly & O'Dowd, 2018). For younger children, these early experiences may shape attitudes in the long term. However, this does not happen automatically – successful outcomes depend on thoughtful task design and on providing learners with support in making sense of their experiences.

In VE projects, teachers act as organisers, facilitators, and mediators in both language learning and cross-cultural communication (Hampel & Stickler, 2012). They must select tools and design tasks that foster authentic communication and students' full engagement. In the case of young students, teachers must also ensure that digital tools are accessible to children who are not fluent readers or do not read yet, that sessions are short enough to hold pupils' attention, and that activities are part of

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common routines (Birsak de Jersey et al., 2025; Shin & Crandall, 2014). Teachers' pedagogical beliefs regarding digital technologies play a decisive role in the quality of technology-enhanced instruction (Koehler & Mishra, 2009; Tondeur et al., 2016). Apart from pedagogical knowledge, teachers must have strong digital competencies, encompassing technical skills and the ability to use technology to support teaching (Redecker, 2017), especially since technical and connection issues can interrupt communication and reduce learner engagement. In addition to a general understanding of technology, teachers' digital competencies include the ability to manage asynchronous and synchronous activities and to select appropriate tools that support multimodal communication (Ingrisch-Rupp & Symeonidis, 2025; O'Dowd, 2025). Teachers must also possess intercultural competence to help pupils participate in a variety of intercultural interactions during digital exchanges. This includes preventing and resolving likely confusions and creating an inclusive learning environment (Deardorff, 2006).

In practice, teachers may face multiple challenges when implementing VE. These include technical issues (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021; Calvo & Hartle, 2024; Wigham & Clavel-Arroitia, 2025), difficulties coordinating with international partners (Dooly & O'Dowd, 2018; O'Dowd, 2021; Calvo & Hartle, 2024), and institutional constraints, for example, limited time (O'Dowd, 2021; Wigham & Clavel-Arroitia, 2025), resources (Martins et al., 2024; Çalıkoğlu et al., 2025), or support from colleagues and institutions in their settings (Martins et al., 2024; Çalıkoğlu et al., 2025; Wigham & Clavel-Arroitia, 2025). Research on online collaboration in education indicates that these barriers persist, particularly in cross-border projects (Dooly, 2017; O'Dowd, 2018). In early education, VE is less established, and teachers may have less experience with digital tools and intercultural approaches (Dagarin Fojkar et al., 2026).

Existing studies show the strong potential of VE to support both language learning and intercultural development (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021; O'Dowd, 2021) by providing opportunities for meaningful interaction and communication in socially situated contexts (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021). The literature also emphasises the importance of teacher competences and careful pedagogical design for successful project implementation (Birsak de Jersey et al., 2025; O'Dowd, 2025; Wigham & Clavel-Arroitia, 2025). However, research focusing specifically on early childhood and primary education remains comparatively limited, particularly from the

perspective of teachers who implement these projects. This indicates a clear need for further study on how VE can be adapted for younger learners and on how teachers experience its use in practice. Such research is important for developing more effective and age-appropriate approaches and for supporting teachers who wish to integrate VE into early language education. Accordingly, the research question underlying this study is: What are teachers' experiences with VE, particularly regarding perceived benefits, challenges, and pedagogical practices?

Methodology

Participants

The study involved 11 English teachers from several European countries who had prior experience of implementing VE projects with young learners. Participants were recruited through purposive and subsequent snowball sampling, with prior experience of conducting VE projects involving children in preschool or the early years of primary education as the main inclusion criterion.

Recruitment was conducted independently by two student researchers working on their diploma projects: one at the University of Warsaw, Poland, and the other at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. In both cases, recruitment initially relied on professional connections between the first participants and their supervisors. The researchers subsequently used snowball sampling, asking initial participants to recommend other teachers with relevant VE experience. In the case of the student researcher from the University of Warsaw, the first participant was the head of a VE programme conducted with preschool children, who provided contacts for three additional project partners; all agreed to participate.

The participants represented a range of European contexts (see Table 1 in the Appendix), providing a cross-national perspective on the implementation of VE with young children. Regarding teaching contexts, some participants worked in preschools with children aged 3–6, while others taught pupils aged approximately 6–10 in primary schools. One participant had experience at both the preschool and primary levels.

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Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, conversational interviews conducted independently by the two student researchers. Four interviews were conducted in English, while the remaining interviews were conducted in Slovene and subsequently translated into English for analysis.

Although two different researchers conducted the interviews, they followed the same general interview focus, addressing teachers' experiences of planning, implementing, and evaluating VE with young learners, including their observations of children's language development and other outcomes of participation in VE. The interviews used broad, open-ended prompts that invited participants to describe and reflect on their experiences. The researchers then used follow-up questions flexibly to clarify participants' responses or explore issues that arose during the conversation.

The semi-structured format therefore provided a common thematic framework across the interviews while allowing the conversations to develop according to individual participants' experiences. Participants were encouraged to elaborate on aspects of VE they considered particularly relevant, including project organisation, classroom implementation, perceived benefits, challenges, and children's development. Consequently, the categories presented in the results were generated through inductive analysis of recurring patterns across participants' accounts.

Data analysis and ethical aspects

All participants were informed of the study's aims and gave their informed consent before taking part. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all interview data were anonymised, and participants were identified only by numerical codes (e.g., P1, P2). The study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical codes for research involving human participants.

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2021). After transcription and, where necessary, translation into English, the researchers familiarised themselves with the interview material and identified initial codes inductively. Codes referring to similar experiences, practices, perceived benefits, challenges and other

recurring issues were subsequently compared and clustered into broader thematic categories.

The researchers jointly discussed the developing coding framework. The process involved comparing data interpretations, discussing potential overlaps between codes and themes, and refining the thematic structure to ensure the final categories adequately represented the interview material. The final themes reflect an inductive interpretation of participants' accounts while being organised around the study's overarching focus on teachers' experiences and pedagogical practice related to VE with young learners.

Results

Teachers' experience with VE projects

Teachers' experience with VE projects ranged from novice to highly experienced. Several participants reported that their initial engagement with VE was accompanied by uncertainty, notably about digital tools and project organisation: "I think teachers often have reservations about such projects because they think it will be too stressful [...] and maybe they even think they don't have enough knowledge" (P9). Early experiences with VE were sometimes negative due to limited expertise in online collaboration environments or partners withdrawing from the project. Nevertheless, teachers often viewed these initial difficulties as valuable learning opportunities. Teachers with longer involvement in VE projects emphasised that VE competences develop mainly through participation and collaboration with more experienced partners. Informal peer learning and repeated engagement in projects were identified as drivers of building self-assurance and proficiency: "the organisational aspect is very important and also demanding [...] then it is up to the teacher to organise the work so that this timeline is maintained" (P6). The data suggest that although initial experience may be limited, sustained involvement leads to the development of effective practices and greater professional confidence.

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Establishing and maintaining international collaboration

Another theme that appeared in the interviews was the importance of building and sustaining strong international partnerships. Teachers found collaborators through eTwinning, the European School Education Platform (ESEP), Erasmus networks, professional events, social media, and personal contacts. However, finding a partner was only the first step as the quality of the subsequent collaboration was the most important aspect. Successful partnerships were characterised by regular communication, shared responsibility, commitment and mutual trust: "we usually plan everything together, and we also stay in touch regularly during the project to solve any issues and make adjustments" (P2). Teachers were also aware of the delicacy of voluntary international collaboration. Some mentioned the risk of partners disengaging: "potential problems include coordinating work with partners and the possible departure of partners from the project" (P5). To address this, several teachers preferred working with multiple partners and remaining flexible throughout the project: "we maintained honest and tactful communication [...] and found compromises that suited both sides" (P2).

Design and structure of VE projects

Participants mentioned working closely with their partners from the start and selecting project topics tailored to their pupils' ages, language proficiency, interests, and curriculum requirements. Most projects followed a similar structure: an introductory phase where students got to know one another; a series of thematic activities carried out over a longer period; and an ending with a final presentation or reflection. Within this system, teachers combined asynchronous tasks (including recorded videos, Padlets, e-books, or shared online work) with synchronous video calls lasting 20–30 minutes. Synchronous meetings were valued for live communication but were also the most technically demanding: "the biggest challenge [...] is video conferencing" (P8). Participating teachers emphasised the need for flexibility, as plans needed to change continuously in response to students' responses. One participant articulated what many implied: "teachers need to recognise that it is part of the curriculum and not something separate" (P10). Projects varied in duration (from several months to a full school year) and intensity, with the number of synchro-

nous meetings ranging from 1 to 5 during the project, depending on timetable constraints and partner availability.

Implementation of VE projects

Working with younger learners called for attentive adaptation of VE activities. In practice, this involved designing tasks that were shorter, more interesting, and supported by various modes of communication: songs, games, storytelling, drawings, show-and-tell, and simple role-play were commonly used. Preparation was also important: teachers often introduced tasks in a playful and structured manner, using familiar vocabulary and routines to build confidence. To facilitate participation, especially for those with limited language skills, teachers relied heavily on different forms of multimodal scaffolding: "we include lots of pictures, icons, emojis [...] we give students short, simple sentences" (P2); "we use visual aids [...] many pictures [...] body language and gestures"(P3). Teachers also paid attention to how interaction was organised during activities, as shown in the comment: "we prepare the order of speaking [...] determine who will ask what" (P11). Across the data, there was a clear emphasis on encouraging communication over accuracy. The main goal was to create a safe and encouraging environment where learners felt willing to participate, even if their language was still developing.

Perceived benefits for students

The most prominent benefit teachers identified was the development of communicative skills in a foreign language, and several teachers stressed that even minimal language knowledge enables meaningful participation. One participant's view that "language is not important [...] you can communicate knowing just a little bit of language" (P1) should be understood as showing a communicative, confidence-focused pedagogy. The same teachers reported that students became more willing to speak over time: "many pupils are afraid of talking [...] eTwinning is a good opportunity [...] it is important to communicate" (P8). While the most frequently cited improvements were increased confidence in speaking and improved speaking skills, several teachers also noted progress in listening skills, thanks to repeated exposure to authentic language materials: "younger children absorb everything like sponges, so the effects

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were visible in the areas of communication and social skills" (P7), as well as in vocabulary – particularly the thematic vocabulary used during project activities: "most of them already knew the basics of English, but they improved it significantly" (P11).

Several teachers also noted a heightened curiosity about other countries and cultures, with children spontaneously asking questions about their exchange partners' everyday lives and traditions: "hey, when are we going to meet with those kids from Greece and Slovakia?" (P1), "it was extremely important to meet someone from another country, [...] to see their national costumes" (P7). Teachers also described VE as a concrete, engaging way to introduce learners to other cultures and reduce stereotypes: "they interacted with foreign students and saw what schools and classrooms are like in other countries, what kind of snacks they have, etc." (P10), "children from other countries often sent us packages [...] this allowed the children to experience new cultures" (P5), with noted effects on attitude: "after the project, pupils would find it much easier to accept [...] a pupil from another country" (P9), "this definitely strengthens intercultural awareness as well as empathy towards others" (P10). Teachers also mentioned that children became more motivated and socially engaged, and gained some familiarity with digital tools in the process: "children learn [...] how to use the internet, computers and phones appropriately" (P5).

Teachers' professional development

Teachers described their experiences with VE projects as motivating and professionally enriching, both in the classroom and beyond. They highlighted an increase in their self-confidence, organisational and digital skills, as well as pedagogical innovation, noting that working on VE projects required them to learn new tools and approaches: "with every project I learn something new" (P6); "organising projects demands negotiation and modification" (P11). The risk of professional stagnation without external projects was also raised: "If a teacher is not involved in any projects, they tend to become a little 'stale'. Projects always force you to learn something new" (P10). Collaboration with international partners was notably valued for the sharing of ideas and for the sharing and co-creation of materials across teaching contexts: "I gained breadth – both personally and professionally" (P7).

Challenges and constraints

Despite the generally positive picture, teachers reported many challenges. Technical issues were among the most common concerns. Participants frequently mentioned problems with the ESEP platform, internet connections, equipment, or uncertainty during live sessions: "you never know if we will be able to hear each other, if the microphone, speaker and camera will work" (P8). Organisational and workload pressures were also prominent. VE projects routinely spanned beyond regular working hours: "overworking is a challenge [...] a lot of work outside school, usually in the evening" (P1). Scheduling between multiple school timetables and time zones posed recurring difficulties, as did the requirement to balance project activities with curriculum demands: "you have to make sure that the lessons are in line with both the curriculum and the project" (P9). Teachers noted that during online meetings, children's shorter attention spans led to weaker engagement than in face-to-face sessions: "concentration is horrible" (P4). Due to the children's ages (some as young as three), the online meetings were described as "quite a challenge" (P5) and, in some cases, "not effective for all children" (P5). Finally, partner reliability was another risk, especially if engagement decreased over time.

Overall perceptions of VE

Although teachers reported many challenges, participants' overall perceptions of VE remained positive. Several described it as transforming the texture of everyday classroom life, giving their pupils access to interlocutors and experiences that would otherwise be unavailable: "eTwinning projects are a great experience for both children and professionals" (P5). VE was frequently viewed as expanding horizons: "it was initially a window to the world" (P7). Challenges were acknowledged but generally seen as manageable: "I think it is worth the time and effort" (P6), and most participants said they intended to continue VE work and would recommend it to other educators.

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Discussion

The findings extend the growing body of research on VE by showing how teachers working with preschool and early primary school pupils adapt VE principles to the developmental, organisational, and pedagogical demands of these settings. However, implementing VE with young learners calls for considerable teacher commitment, as well as appropriate planning and support. Although a significant proportion of the literature on VE has so far focused on secondary or higher education (e.g., Asensio Pastor & Al-Momani, 2025; Helm, 2015; O'Dowd, 2018), the findings of this study show that teachers working with the youngest pupils are already adapting VE principles to children's needs, with practices adjusted to their stage of development and provide them with intensive support. In this way, the study contributes to the growing body of research on VE at the primary level by providing a teacher-centred account of how VE is adapted and sustained in early years settings (Pennock-Speck & Clavel-Arroitia, 2022; Wigham & Clavel-Arroitia, 2025).

The first finding concerns how teachers adapt to VE. Many participants described initial uncertainty regarding digital tools, workload, and project management – consistent with research indicating that teachers' adoption of technology is determined by beliefs, self-confidence, and institutional culture as much as technical knowledge (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010; Tondeur et al., 2016). The findings also align with the TPACK framework (Koehler & Mishra, 2009): teachers had to combine digital tools, language pedagogy, and content appropriate to young pupils' cognitive level – a complex integration developed mainly through experience and peer collaboration, rather than formal training. Grau and Turula (2019) similarly observed that teachers' VE competences develop mainly through experiential learning.

Another important issue was the function of international partnerships. Teachers repeatedly emphasised that the success of a VE project depends on reliable partners, regular communication, trust, and flexibility. The results are strongly supported by the work of Dooly (2017) and Dooly and O'Dowd (2018), who argue that telecollaboration is primarily relationship-based and that a project's success often depends as much on the quality of teacher partnerships as on task design. The strategy of simultaneous collaboration with multiple partners constitutes a pragmatic response to the instability of voluntary international cooperation. This

is also linked to O'Dowd's (2025) argument that sustainable VE requires stronger organisational structures and institutionalisation rather than relying on teachers' enthusiasm, as evidenced by participants' accounts of routine, unpaid evening work.

Study findings on lesson design indicate that VE projects involving young pupils are most effective when they are flexible, multi-stage and combine socialisation, thematic collaboration, and reflection. This reflects the commonly used task sequencing models identified in research on VE (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021; O'Dowd, 2021). The teachers participating in the study maintained a balance between asynchronous and synchronous modes, using video recordings, joint platforms, group work materials, and live meetings. This multimodal approach is well suited to the needs of the youngest pupils, as it takes into account their short attention spans whilst allowing them time to process information and creating opportunities for spontaneous interaction (Birsak de Jersey et al., 2025; Cutrim Schmid & Whyte, 2015). Hampel and Stickler (2012) similarly emphasised that video conferencing can enrich language learning through multimodal communication, although it also involves technical and organisational demands. The present findings show this twofold perspective: synchronous meetings were highly valued, but organising them was often stressful and difficult due to pupils' short attention spans and the need for carefully scaffolded interaction.

A key aspect of this study is its application in working with preschool and primary school children. Teachers described using songs, games, visual aids, gestures, role-play, predictable routines, and a highly structured system of turn-taking. These practices are fully in line with established principles of early years education, which emphasise short tasks, multisensory learning, play, movement, repetition, and emotional security (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019; Pinter, 2017; Shin & Crandall, 2014). VE with young pupils needs to be adapted to their developmental levels, with teachers acting as mediators, facilitating participation using appropriate tools, language support, and structured interaction (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007; Poehner & Lantolf, 2024).

The perceived linguistic benefits reported by teachers are consistent with interactionist perspectives on second language acquisition (Gass & Mackey, 2014; Long, 1996), arguing that language development is shaped by meaningful interaction, negotiation of meaning, and opportunities for expression. For young learners, VE provides a rare context

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in which English becomes a communicative tool for interacting with peers from other countries. Participants emphasised that children could communicate successfully with only limited language resources and that confidence often increased through repeated exchanges. This is especially relevant in early language-learning settings, where the introduction to authentic, meaningful interaction can otherwise be limited (Enever, 2011). Teachers also discussed personal and professional benefits, including increased motivation, digital competence, organisational skills, and pedagogical innovation. These outcomes are consistent with previous VE research showing that teachers often gain as much as learners from participation (Dooly & O'Dowd, 2018; Dooly & Vinagre, 2021).

The present study confirms the persistence of implementation barriers. Frequently mentioned concerns were technical problems, scheduling difficulties, curriculum alignment, workload, and unreliable partners. These difficulties have been described multiple times in the literature on VE (Hagley & Green, 2022; Helm, 2015; O'Dowd, 2021; O'Dowd, 2025). However, they may be greater in preschool and early primary settings, where timetables are rigid, children require closer supervision, and communication tasks demand extensive preparation. References to unpaid evening work suggest that, to a large extent, VE currently relies on teachers' personal commitment. However, without designated time, institutional recognition, and technical support, enduring viability may remain limited.

Finally, the study adds to discussions on internationalisation in early years education. Teachers' framing of VE as a "window to the world" presents it as a form of internationalisation that is easier to access and more welcoming than physical mobility, especially for young children with limited opportunities for cross-cultural contact. This supports O'Dowd's (2018, 2021) argument that VE can democratise access to international and intercultural encounters. For young students, such opportunities may be significant, as they arise at a stage when identity and attitudes towards language and cultural others are still developing.

In summary, these findings suggest that VE with preschool and early primary pupils should not be viewed merely as a simplified version of telecollaboration designed for older learners. Rather, the study points to a distinct pedagogical model, characterised by child-centred design, intensive teacher mediation, multimodal interaction, and substantial

scaffolding. In this respect, the study contributes to existing VE research by specifying some of the pedagogical and organisational conditions under which VE can become a viable and meaningful part of early language education.

Conclusion

Across the European contexts represented in this study, VE proved capable of supporting language development, intercultural awareness, and learner motivation, when activities are carefully customised to pupils' developmental needs. Successful implementation depends on teachers' capacity to provide multimodal support, maintain international collaboration, and integrate virtual education into everyday school practice. The study also indicates that VE has potential as an internationalisation strategy in early language education, particularly in situations where opportunities for physical mobility are limited.

However, the research findings raise doubts concerning the sustainability of this approach. The current model relies heavily on teachers' individual enthusiasm and their unpaid work. As Wigham and Clavel-Arroitia (2025) noted, primary school teachers who engage in VE commonly lack targeted training in both the tools and the required instructional techniques. Teacher education and professional development programmes should therefore address digital pedagogy (Romero-Tena et al., 2025), intercultural communication and VE-specific design as core preparation for early language educators (Dagarin Fojkar et al., 2026). The findings of the present study also provide many useful tips for teachers considering the use of VE with young pupils: it may be beneficial to start with asynchronous tasks to build pupils' confidence before moving on to live interactions; to collaborate with more than one partner to reduce the risk of disengagement; to explicitly incorporate VE into curriculum planning, and to consistently apply multimodal support throughout the process.

The presented study has several limitations. It is based on subjective observations of a small group of teachers, and does not include classroom observations or pupils' opinions. Subsequent studies might adopt a longitudinal approach to trace how participation in VE affects young pupils' language development and intercultural attitudes over time, or conduct comparative studies examining how institutional and cultural

settings shape implementation across countries. Such work would be strengthened by attending to the structural conditions that support early language teachers in implementing VE projects with children.

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Appendix

Table 1

Participants in the study

Participant No.	Country of origin	Place of work / Age of students	Researcher's university
P1	Poland	Preschool /3-6	University of Warsaw
P2	Greece	Preschool /3-6	University of Warsaw
P3	Greece	Preschool /3-6	University of Warsaw
P4	Slovakia	Preschool /3-6	University of Warsaw
P5	Slovenia	Preschool / 4	University of Ljubljana
P6	Slovenia	Primary school / 6-10	University of Ljubljana
P7	Slovenia	Primary school and preschool / 3-8	University of Ljubljana
P8	Slovenia	Primary school / 6-10	University of Ljubljana
P9	Slovenia	Primary school / 10	University of Ljubljana
P10	Slovenia	Primary school / 10	University of Ljubljana
P11	Slovenia	Primary school / 8	University of Ljubljana

Source: Authors' own work