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Virtual exchange for Foreign Language learning in Pre-primary and Primary Education

El intercambio virtual para el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras en Educación Infantil y Primaria

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Introduction

This special issue sets out to generate empirical evidence on the affordances of virtual exchange (VE) for English as a foreign language (EFL) literacy in pre-primary and primary education. VE can be defined as "the process of communicating and collaboratively learning with peers from different locations through the use of technology" (Dooly & Vinagre, 2022, p. 393), with such communication commonly taking place in a shared foreign language, in the case of this special issue, English. The pedagogical potential of VE is therefore broad, since it aims to foster not only learners' linguistic competence but also their intercultural and digital competences (Baroni et al., 2019; Dooly & Vinagre, 2022; Godwin-Jones, 2019). Given these wide-ranging benefits, it should come as no surprise that VE has experienced considerable growth in recent years, both as a field of scholarly inquiry and as an educational practice. In the European context, the growing popularity of eTwinning is particularly illustrative of this trend. Launched by the European Commission in 2005, eTwinning is the European Union's flagship initiative for online school collaboration. It has since developed on a remarkable scale, with more than 171,000 projects registered as of September 2026 (European School

Education Platform, 2026). By enabling sustained interaction between pupils and teachers across national boundaries, eTwinning has developed into more than a platform for educational cooperation: it contributes to the construction of a shared European educational space by fostering intercultural understanding, active citizenship, common European values, and a sense of belonging to Europe (Council of the European Union, 2023).

Scholarly interest in VE has developed in parallel, giving rise to a substantial and increasingly nuanced body of research with several interrelated strands. A first major strand has examined the contribution of VE to linguistic development and meaningful target-language use, including the negotiation of meaning and deployment of communicative strategies during online interaction (e.g., Clavel-Arroitia, 2019; Dooly & Vinagre, 2022). A second, closely related line of research has focused on intercultural learning, intercultural communicative competence, and, more recently, global citizenship, areas that have been central to O'Dowd's (2020, 2021) work on telecollaboration and VE. A third strand has addressed the pedagogical and professional dimensions of VE, including the competences required of teachers, task design, teacher mediation, and the conditions needed for successful implementation (e.g., Dooly & Vinagre, 2022; O'Dowd, 2015a, 2015b). More recent work has also increasingly examined issues of equity, inclusion, and differentiated participation, questioning whether access to VE necessarily translates into equitable engagement for all learners (O'Dowd, 2025). Finally, an emerging body of research has begun to focus specifically on younger learners and synchronous interaction, examining teacher roles, learner autonomy, task implementation, and opportunities for language learning in primary-school telecollaboration (e.g., Wigham & Whyte, 2024; Whyte & Wigham, 2025).

Despite this growing body of work, research has focused predominantly on secondary and higher education contexts, while VE in pre-primary and primary education—and particularly research examining its linguistic, intercultural, digital, and pedagogical affordances for young learners—remains comparatively limited. This special issue seeks precisely to contribute to this emerging research strand. Beyond providing new empirical evidence in an underexplored area, its contribution lies in the range of perspectives represented: the five studies encompass both preschool and primary education, pre- and in-service teacher education,

teacher and learner perspectives, classroom implementation, and issues of inclusion and differentiated support. Together, they provide a multifaceted account of VE with young learners, ranging from teacher preparation and perceptions to its enactment in classroom practice.

Before introducing the five articles that comprise the special issue, it is important to note that four of them—with the exception of the contribution by Clavel-Arroitia and Pennock-Speck—as well as the special issue itself, emerged from the INVITED project. Integrating Primary and Pre-school Virtual Exchange Projects into Language Teacher Education (INVITED) is an Erasmus+ project (2023-2026) aimed at promoting VE in preschool and primary EFL education and, particularly, at developing the competence of pre- and in-service teachers in the design and implementation of VE with young learners. The project responds to the relative scarcity of VE in early language education by strengthening teachers' capacity to create meaningful, intercultural, and digitally mediated interaction between young learners across geographical contexts, while fostering linguistic, intercultural, and digital competences.

Led by the University of Education Freiburg in Germany, the consortium also includes the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia, the University of Warsaw in Poland, and the University of Murcia in Spain. A distinctive feature of the INVITED project is that it not only aims to teach future teachers "about" VE but also enables them to design, implement, and reflect on actual VE projects with children in local primary schools as part of their university education. The project also targets in-service teachers' experiences, attitudes, confidence, and training needs concerning VE with young learners.

INVITED's principal outputs include a needs-analysis survey, an eTwinning community for finding partners and exchanging materials and good practices, and a teacher-education module, subsequently developed into a free online professional-development course. The latter provides approximately 25 hours of training covering the principles of VE, competence development, task design, digital tools, and the planning and implementation of VE projects with young learners. INVITED also incorporates a research strand that has generated a growing body of empirical work on VE with young learners (e.g., Birsak de Jersey et al., 2025; Dagarin Fojkar et al., 2026), of which the present special issue represents a further outcome.

The special issue contains five papers. In the first, "Pre-service teachers'

perspectives on virtual exchange in early language education", Dagarin-Fojkar and Brzosko-Barratt focus on pre-service teachers' perceptions, preparedness, and training needs regarding the use of VE in early language education. Drawing on questionnaire data from 501 pre-service teachers across several European contexts, particularly Spain, Poland, Slovenia, and Germany, the findings reveal very limited exposure to VE during initial teacher education despite generally positive perceptions of its potential for cultural awareness, learner autonomy, and authentic communication. Participants felt most confident about working with learners and preparing classrooms for online interaction, but less confident about finding partners and designing activities targeting sociocritical and digital competences; they also highlighted young learners' limited language proficiency, technological issues, and learner motivation as major anticipated challenges. Overall, the findings point to a strong need to integrate VE more systematically into initial teacher education through practical preparation that equips future teachers to design, scaffold, and implement developmentally appropriate exchanges with young language learners.

In "Virtual exchange with young learners: Experiences of preschool and primary English language teachers", Marchlik, Apili, Traven, and Rozmanič tap into experienced pre- and primary-school English teachers' perceptions of VE with young learners. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 11 teachers from several European countries who had implemented VE with children aged approximately 3-10-years-old, it explores perceived benefits, challenges, and pedagogical practices associated with VE in early language education. Teachers reported that VE created authentic opportunities for meaningful language use, increased learners' confidence in speaking, and fostered curiosity about other countries and cultures, while also contributing to teachers' own professional development. At the same time, implementation was constrained by technical problems, workload, scheduling and partner coordination, as well as the difficulty of sustaining very young learners' attention online. The findings highlight the importance of developmentally appropriate task design, multimodal scaffolding, short and carefully prepared synchronous encounters, and sustained collaboration between partner teachers.

In the third article, "Differentiated scaffolding strategies for inclusive VEs in primary education", Clavel-Arroitia and Pennock-Speck examine how differentiated scaffolding can support inclusive synchronous VE

among primary-school learners with diverse linguistic abilities, levels of psychosocial maturity, and educational needs. Drawing on two VE projects involving pupils aged 8-11 from France, Spain, and the United Kingdom, the study shows how teachers adapted linguistic demands, used peer and multimodal support, prepared learners before synchronous encounters, and provided linguistic, behavioural, organisational, and technical mediation during interaction. Across the two exchanges, the findings highlight the importance of flexible rather than uniform scaffolding and the central role of teacher mediation in enabling equitable participation. The study thus shows that inclusive synchronous VE with heterogeneous groups depends not only on appropriate task design and technology, but also on differentiated support tailored to individual learner needs before and during interaction.

The fourth article, "Preschool children's experiences with virtual exchange in the language classroom" shifts focus to the learners themselves. Birsak de Jersey and Kolb examine preschool children's experiences of VE throughout an eight-month project connecting early childhood settings in Austria and Portugal and involving children aged between 3 and 5-years old. Drawing on classroom video recordings, teacher interviews, a teacher-researcher diary and children's multimodal texts, the study identifies four interrelated dimensions of the children's experience: strong emotional engagement, their perception of the exchange as a "real" encounter, the development of connections with the partner group, and the discovery of common ground across the two settings. The findings suggest that, when VE is built around repeated interaction, shared activities and developmentally appropriate forms of communication, even very young learners can participate meaningfully in international exchanges and begin to develop social and intercultural connections with peers abroad.

In the final contribution, "Virtual exchange in pre-primary EFL education: Pedagogical challenges", Nicolás Conesa examines the challenges involved in extending VE to pre-primary EFL teacher education. The study investigates the perceptions of 43 Spanish pre-service teachers, working in nine groups, as they designed VE activities for five-year-old learners according to criteria identified in successful eTwinning projects. Analysis of their reflective journals showed that, while participants felt relatively confident in areas such as age-appropriate content selection and language scaffolding, they reported particular difficulties in incorporating inter-

cultural learning, children's agency, higher-order thinking, and broader community impact. The findings highlight the need for more developmentally appropriate VE criteria and more comprehensive, experiential preparation for pre-service teachers working with very young language learners.

Collectively, the five contributions in this special issue move the discussion of VE in early language education beyond its potential benefits to the conditions under which those benefits can be realized. By bringing together the perspectives of young learners, pre-service teachers, and experienced practitioners, they show that meaningful and inclusive VE depends on developmentally appropriate task design, differentiated and multimodal scaffolding, sustained teacher mediation, effective partner coordination, and experiential teacher preparation. The contributions also demonstrate that linguistic development is only one aspect of VE: carefully designed exchanges can foster children's intercultural awareness, digital competence, agency, emotional engagement, and sense of connection with peers across geographical boundaries. At the same time, the challenges identified—from technological and organizational constraints to difficulties promoting inclusion, intercultural learning, and higher-order thinking—point to a clear agenda for further research and teacher education. Taken together, the articles establish early foreign language education as a distinctive and important context for VE and provide a strong foundation for its more systematic, inclusive, and pedagogically informed development.

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