

## Examining EFL students' pluricultural and plurilingual development during intercultural virtual exchanges between Colombia and Germany

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### Abstract

This study examines the perception of English as a foreign language intermediate students' plurilingual and pluricultural competence. Students from Colombia and Germany took part in online interactions and mediation through a virtual exchange, which is a means for inter- and intracultural development, language proficiency and personal growth and transformation. During their online live meetings, the students discussed cultural topics and worked on an artefact together. The results of pre- and post-project questionnaires, as well as surveys, demonstrated shifts in the establishment of cultural knowledge, adaptation to novel social co-participation situations and recognition of the need for cultural awareness. The study discusses pedagogical implications for both the classroom and the implementation of virtual exchange projects.

**Keywords:** English language teaching (ELT), intercultural learning, plurilingual and pluricultural competence (PPC), virtual exchange.

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## 1. Introduction

The companion volume (CV) to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), published in 2018, widened the focus of modern foreign language education to plurilingual and pluricultural competence (PPC), online interaction and mediation (Piccardo, North & Goodier, 2019). Research on students' pluricultural and plurilingual development based on PPC scales is relatively recent (Galante, 2018). The development of PPC and the application of the newly developed PPC scales in the context of an international virtual exchange project have not been examined before, and this study aims to fill this gap.

Virtual exchange, telecollaboration or online international exchange (OIE) refers to an 'internet-based intercultural exchange between people of different cultural and national backgrounds, set up in an institutional context to develop both language skills and intercultural communicative competence (as defined by Byram, 1997) through structured tasks' (Guth & Helm, 2010, p. 14). In such an exchange, the focus is on the role of language in helping to establish relationships rather than language as a system of units (Thorne, 2010) with learners from geographically distant areas (O'Dowd, 2011). One benefit of virtual exchanges, in general, is that students and teachers come into contact with perspectives and practices that differ from their own and can learn from these viewpoints within a supportive classroom environment (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016).

Moreover, the benefits of virtual exchanges for intercultural education include their contribution to learning about other cultures beyond the textbooks and traditional (online or static) cultural studies resources. Virtual exchanges can support the development of pragmatic competences and learners' awareness of cultural beliefs and values being relative (O'Dowd & Dooly, 2020). They also support students in developing skills that are relevant to their lives and help them to appreciate language education as a way of developing their identity rather than learning a code restricted to some environments (Byram & Wagner, 2018). Virtual exchange projects are particularly valuable in (post) coronavirus disease (COVID-19) times when intercultural communication programmes and pedagogy must counteract patterns of racism and xenophobic tendencies that impact inter-communal solidarity (Mansouri, 2020).

This paper investigates students' PPC and their perceptions of their mediation and online interaction skills in a virtual exchange project. It seeks to detect possible shifts in how students assess their progress. Therefore, this study aims to further ongoing research on virtual exchanges by exploring the interconnection between PPC and virtual exchanges.

## 2. Literature review

Virtual exchanges have become one of the pillars of computer-assisted language learning (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016). O'Dowd and O'Rourke (2019, p. 4) point out that 'virtual exchange appears to be taking root in education'. With regard to practitioners, several platforms have been established to support teachers in their endeavour to implement virtual projects (e.g., eTwinning or UNICollaboration) and other projects like the Collaborative Online International Learning at the State University of New York. Beside facilitating the development of intercultural communicative competence which has become necessary for many people working in an international environment, virtual exchange requires students to develop their electronic literacies, such as how to create multimodal presentations in a foreign language (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016). Virtual exchanges should not be confined to students of foreign languages because learners coming from a range of disciplines should be able to communicate in several languages and develop their e-literacies to secure their employability (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016; O'Dowd, 2018).

Virtual exchange projects provide students with hands-on experiences that are relevant for their future career (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016) and communication in international and intercultural contexts in general (Coste, Moore & Zarate, 2009). Pegrum, Dudeney and Hockly (2018, p. 3) stress that 'in a

super diverse era, the ability to operate across multiple languages, cultures and modes of communication is in high demand'. Moreover, virtual exchange projects can support matters that are crucial for intercultural education, such as intercultural dialogue, coexistence and the promotion of attitudes of equality and respect for people from different backgrounds (Bleszynska, 2008). In this context, PPC is of importance, and virtual exchanges can support students in developing it (Galante, 2018). The literature review covers the main concepts that are relevant to this study: PPC, online interaction and mediation in the context of virtual exchanges.

### **2.1. Plurilingual and pluricultural competence**

Multilingualism, defined as 'the knowledge of a number of languages, or the coexistence of different languages in a given society' (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 4) emphasises the boundaries between languages; on the other hand, plurilingualism (including pluriculturalism) is a holistic concept and stresses the 'porosity of languages and cultures, the dynamic moulding of one's repertoire, the flow of the construction of PPC' (Piccardo, 2019, p. 190).

The CEFR defines PPC as 'the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent, has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages and experience of several cultures' (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 168). Plurilingualism includes the use of languages, varieties or dialects as part of an individual's repertoire and the notion of pluriculturalism, i.e., 'cultural knowledge gained due to life experiences and trajectories' (Galante, 2018, p. 13). Consequently, it must be understood as one single construct (CEFR CV, Council of Europe, 2018). Piccardo et al. (2019, p. 26) point out that 'a plurilingual approach stresses the potential advantages for language awareness of considering interconnections, rather than pursuing the purist "target language only" approach'.

Plurilingual competence assumes that partial competence in different languages, varieties and cultural knowledge is natural and not a deficit (Council of Europe, 2001, 2018). Plurilingualism involves 'the ability to call flexibly upon an inter-related, uneven, plurilinguistic repertoire' (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 28). Piccardo et al. (2019, p. 27) state the importance of plurilingualism by defining it as a 'springboard to personal growth, self-awareness, language awareness, interculturality, political perspective and professional competence'. The CV further characterises PPC as the ability to call flexibly upon an inter-related, uneven, plurilinguistic repertoire to ... express oneself in one language (or dialect or variety) and understand a person speaking another, bring the whole of one's linguistic equipment into play, experimenting with alternative forms of expression (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 28).

From a didactic perspective, embracing plurilingualism can empower students 'in perception, awareness and active exploration of linguistic and cultural diversity, hybridity and interconnection' (Piccardo, 2017, p. 11). Plurilingual foreign language teaching practices exploit learners' metalinguistic awareness and experiences as plurilingual speakers to support them more efficiently in their study (Cenoz & Gorter, 2013). Several studies on plurilingual instruction show that it can enhance students' metacognitive and metalinguistic skills (e.g., Corcoll, 2013).

One recent example was provided by Galante et al. (2020). The author states that the adoption of plurilingualism for language teaching, although it has been theorised substantially in the CEFR, is not restricted to the European context only nor is plurilingualism exclusive to the CEFR. To measure PPC, Galante (2018) developed PPC scales based on the plurilingualism theory discussed in the CEFR, the CV and a literature review. The PPC scales, which were validated through consultation and statistical analyses, reflect the notion that plurilingualism and pluriculturalism are intertwined. They can be utilised with advanced speakers of English because the language used is suitable for students at B2 level (Galante, 2018).

## **2.2. Online interaction**

When students are engaged in meaningful communication in a second language, they can focus on meaning, negotiate input and try new language forms (Gass & Mackey, 2006). In plurilingual and pluricultural pedagogies, the interaction stems from the students' linguistic repertoire and the learners use their linguistic repertoire strategically to employ previous knowledge and make progress in another language (Galante, 2018). The CV introduces online communication as a new category and deals with it separately due to its multimodality (Council of Europe, 2018). It states that a 'user/learner will struggle to interact successfully in an online meeting until he/she reaches the B levels' (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 96). Online interaction in the CV includes online conversation and discussion, as well as goal-oriented online transactions and collaboration (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 82).

The key concepts operationalised in the framework that are relevant for this study are the participation in online collaborative project work and the management of communication problems, which require feedback such as clarification requests or confirmation checks (Long, 1996). The CV stresses that 'a rigid separation between written and oral does not really apply to online transactions, where multimodality is increasingly a key feature and resource, and the descriptors therefore assume the exploitation of different online media and tools according to context' (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 98). This was also the case for the project conducted for this study. For example, students occasionally resorted to communicating through online writing for a short period of time when issues arose with the audio.

## **2.3. Mediation**

Mediation can be defined as a 'social and cultural process of creating conditions for communication and cooperation, facing and hopefully defusing any delicate situations and tensions that may arise' (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 106). According to the CV, there are three categories of activities of mediation: mediating a text, mediating concepts and mediating communication. Mediating texts and some of its subcategories are relevant for this study, such as relaying specific information, explaining data verbally, processing text or translating a written text for someone else and expressing a personal response to creative texts (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 104). Piccardo et al. (2019) purport that the mediation of texts can go beyond texts used in class. In mediation, 'the user/learner acts as a social agent who creates bridges and helps to construct or convey meaning, sometimes within the same language, sometimes from one language to another (cross-linguistic mediation)' (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 103), focusing on the establishment of meaning and form. North (2020) points out that the CV allows for flexibility even in simple mediation activities, which suggests a language education philosophy that is suitable for learning an additional language.

## **3. Methodology**

In this study, the mediation was cross-linguistic and focused on the collaboration to establish new meaning and communicate information. As suggested by the instructors, mediation was required when students read articles on the topic of English and Spanish as a lingua franca in either Spanish or German. In their online meetings, the students were required to share the key points of their article(s) in English.

This study seeks to gain insights into students' perceptions of their competence levels using knowledge of languages and cultures, written and online interaction and mediating texts through inter- and intranational comparison. It considered the effect of a virtual exchange project on these perceptions over time and addressed the two following research questions.

1. How does virtual exchange alter students' perception of their PPC?
2. How does virtual exchange contribute to students' interactions?

This study is framed within social constructivism which recognises and accepts that learning occurs thanks to continuous interactions through which individuals seek understanding and develop meanings from experiences (Creswell, 2013). These new experiences influence the learner who then develops new concepts in academic and other contexts. In the current study, the participants of intermediate English as a foreign language were required to work in assigned groups with international and, at times, national partners. They worked for 6 weeks to develop a marketing strategy for a specific product of their choice into a non-Western country (e.g., selling coffee in a high-context culture). The non-Western culture was selected to encourage students to incorporate cultural differences that are not necessarily influenced by Western thoughts, thus taking into consideration religious beliefs and language among others. By working in groups, students interacted through video or audio to discuss and debate. Consequently, the aim was to enable students to acquire a better understanding of each other while building and exchanging ideas.

### **3.1. Participants**

The participants of the study were students enrolled in English language courses during the 2019 fall semester from Colombia or Germany. The participants in Colombia were international business majors taking a Professional English Oral Communication course, and the participants in Germany were students of different subjects (e.g., information technology or cultural management) and their English classes focused on general English. All 23 participants, located in Colombia or Germany, had Spanish or German as their first language (L1), except one student whose L1 was Russian but who was socialised in Germany). The participants in Colombia were on average 19.4 years old. The mean age of the participants in Germany was 23 years.

### **3.2. Materials**

Through the social-constructivist paradigm, the authors drew from a corpus of different types of data. Before beginning the telecollaborative sessions, the students completed the demographic survey that also included two open-ended questions regarding current perceptions of their own PPC (Galante, 2018). A second instrument used was the PPC self-assessment survey which provided the authors with another view of how students perceived their strengths. The self-assessment survey comprised rankings regarding the descriptors found in the CV on written and online interaction and mediation (of text and communication) (Council of Europe, 2018). A third instrument was the PPC scale (see Appendix C) that demonstrates students' degree of acceptance and readiness for intercultural exchanges. The PPC scale (Galante, 2018) contains 24 statements (scored on the Likert scale, from 1 being strongly disagree to 5 being strongly agree) and enables students to measure their current perceptions of PPC-related items. Once the products in the final week of the project were over, the students took the post PPC self-assessment and scale survey and a post-questionnaire with seven questions regarding their experience, expectations and feelings. All questionnaires were completed on participants' mobiles or on PCs, except for the post-qualitative questionnaire which was written by hand or on a PC. The questionnaires were in English due to the relatively high level of English among the participants.

### **3.3. Procedures**

The students worked with each other using the videoconferencing tool Zoom. The students recorded their conversations and were instructed to make them accessible as either audio or video recordings for their instructors. The participants were offered a choice of using either audio or video to ensure that they felt at ease while carrying out their tasks. At the beginning of the project, the

students received a link to an online document with an overview of the weekly tasks that they were expected to complete with their partners (see Appendix A). The students were required to complete the activities in their own time, in preparation for their online meetings with their partner(s). Participation in the project counted in the students' evaluations and grades.

In week 1, the students met for the first time in order to become acquainted with each other. To this end, they prepared several questions for their partners. In week 2, the students were instructed to choose from a range of articles in their first language (see Appendix A) before meeting their partners and then to summarise and compare the information with the latter. The pedagogical rationale behind the reading assignment was that students had to mediate information from their respective texts and discuss the issues that emerged from the oral summary of the articles. They also completed the pre-surveys.

In week 3, the students reviewed the terms of Hofstede's cultural dimensions (see Appendix A) and had to familiarise themselves with key concepts of cultures such as low and high context, polychronic and monochronic. Then, each student simultaneously reviewed his or her own cultural background and discussed similarities and differences between the cultures. From week 4 to week 6, the students worked on their final project. The assignment was a joint asynchronous video-recorded presentation. They were provided with a case scenario (see Appendix A) for which they were to place an existing product from one of their two countries into an Asian or African country. This would provide a flipped-classroom element that emphasises active learning as postulated by Dooly and Sadler (2020). Every student was assigned one of the final video-recordings and was required to give peer feedback from a rubric provided beforehand.

### **3.4. Data analysis**

The study benefited from quantitative and qualitative data collection. Descriptive statistics were calculated using IBM SPSS Statistics V25.0 through descriptive statistics for the mean and standard deviation of the responses to items scored on the questionnaires. Cohen's D was employed to identify particular shifts of beliefs and to measure the change or the effect before the beginning and end of the project in the PPC since the group numbers for the pre and post were unequal (Todd, 2020; Trending Sideways, 2020). Responses to open-ended questions and the post-questionnaire entries were categorised according to recurrent themes.

## **4. Results and discussion**

### **4.1. Beliefs about PPC**

Students answered two open-ended questions in the demographic survey pertaining to whether they felt being pluricultural and plurilingual (Galante, 2018). The students read the definition of a plurilingual and pluricultural person and were then invited to write down their answers. The results showed that only one of the participants in Colombia did not consider himself or herself plurilingual or pluricultural. That participant mentioned that he or she felt this way because he or she needed to 'learn more local vocabulary'. He or she also stated the following as a reason for feeling this way: 'because I have never lived in a different country'.

Another participant who felt plurilingual but not pluricultural mentioned the following: 'Even though I know about many cultures, I do not think this knowledge is enough to consider myself a pluricultural person'. The picture in Germany is much more mixed. Three participants did not feel that they were plurilingual. Although one participant can communicate in French, he or she claimed to rarely use the language. Another participant in Germany denied being plurilingual and stated: 'because mainly I use English next to my first language (sic) and I forgot lots of vocabulary'. The third participant stated the following: 'I am not proficient in any language'. Of the 13 participants who

completed the questionnaire, six stated that they did not consider themselves to be pluricultural for the following reasons:

‘No, because I don’t know that much about cultures’.

‘No, I don’t really think so. I know a lot of other cultures, but I don’t really adopted (sic) them I guess’.

‘No, I know some differences but I’m not that into this theme for adopting them or know everything about them.’

‘No, because I don’t think I know other cultures as well as I should’.

#### 4.2. Pluricultural and plurilingual competence

The effective size values were interpreted following Cohen’s D with thresholds of 0.2, 0.5 and 0.8 representing small, medium and large effect sizes, respectively. The results of the pre- and post-questionnaires show that an overall shift occurred in both groups regarding perceived PPC. Both groups grew more confident of their communication style in an intercultural setting. Table 1 shows the shifts for responses to statements that were more notable and meaningful regarding how the groups approached the exchanges and their perceptions at the end. These statements relate to the PPC survey numbers 2, 5, 6, 14, 20, 22 and 23.

**Table 1. Relevant PPC scale statements**

| Statement | Colombia pre |      |     | Colombia post |      |     | Cohen’s Ds | Interpretation | Germany pre |      |     | Germany post |      |     | Cohen’s Ds | Interpretation |
|-----------|--------------|------|-----|---------------|------|-----|------------|----------------|-------------|------|-----|--------------|------|-----|------------|----------------|
|           | M            | SD   | n = | M             | SD   | n = |            |                | M           | SD   | n = | M            | SD   | n = |            |                |
| 2         | 1.54         | 0.69 | 11  | 1.75          | 0.71 | 8   | 0.22       | Small          | 2.36        | 1.03 | 13  | 1.69         | 0,85 | 11  | -0.70      | large          |
| 5         | 1.45         | 0.52 | 11  | 2.25          | 0.71 | 8   | 0.98       | Large          | 2.09        | 0.7  | 13  | 2.31         | 0,95 | 11  | 0.26       | small          |
| 6         | 3.9          | 0.83 | 11  | 3.88          | 0.64 | 8   | -0.02      | Small          | 3.82        | 0.87 | 13  | 3.31         | 0,95 | 11  | -0.56      | medium         |
| 14        | 3.81         | 0.87 | 11  | 4             | 1.07 | 8   | 0.15       | Small          | 3.45        | 0.69 | 13  | 3.31         | 0,48 | 11  | -0.23      | small          |
| 20        | 2.64         | 0.92 | 11  | 2             | 0.53 | 8   | -0.62      | Medium         | 3           | 0.89 | 13  | 2.92         | 0,76 | 11  | -0.09      | small          |
| 22        | 4.55         | 0.69 | 11  | 4.13          | 1.25 | 8   | -0.32      | Small          | 4.09        | 0.7  | 13  | 4.23         | 0,83 | 11  | 0.18       | small          |
| 23        | 3            | 1.18 | 11  | 2.13          | 0.83 | 8   | -0.64      | Medium         | 2.82        | 1.17 | 13  | 3.23         | 1,17 | 11  | 0.35       | small          |

#### Reactions and interpretations of PPC scale using Cohen’s Ds

The reactions to statement 2, ‘It’s difficult for me to accept cultural differences when talking to people from different cultural backgrounds’, assessed acceptance. While the Germans were initially more hesitant in their responses, by the end of the 6 weeks, they demonstrated more confidence in their abilities to accept cultural differences. For the members of the Colombian group, their response to statement 5, ‘I don’t try to understand a conversation when people are speaking in a language I don’t know, even if they speak very slowly’, seems to demonstrate a shift of awareness that they probably do not pay attention to as much as they had first believed. The Germans, in their reaction to statement 6, ‘When communicating with people from another cultural background, it is important

that I am aware of communication styles and make necessary adjustments when talking to them', showed a change in the importance of having an understanding of the culture before dialogues.

Meanwhile, statement 14, 'It is easy for me to talk to people from other cultural backgrounds and discuss similarities and differences in points of view', showed a contrasting shift. While the Colombians demonstrated more acceptance, the Germans lowered their score. Item 20, 'When communicating with people from other cultural backgrounds, it's difficult for me to explain misunderstandings and misinterpretations', seems to be less of a struggle for the Colombians than for the Germans. Statement 22, 'In order to have a good understanding of the global community, it is important that I learn about similarities and differences between cultures', became less important for the Colombians with time. Statement 23 reads: 'If I am working on a task with someone who can speak the same languages as I do, we should both speak in one language only and not switch to another language'. This statement demonstrates the student's approach to communication shifted in the Colombian group from a neutral approach to language to one that involves the willingness to use more than one language during a task.

#### 4.3. Interaction and mediation

The analysis of the self-assessment questionnaire filled in before the project indicates that the students in both groups felt most competent about mediating text, assessing their competence mostly at the B2/C1 level in terms of written and online interaction and mediating texts (see Table 2). The self-assessment conducted after the project showed that the students in both groups felt more competent at the end of the project. For instance, nine students felt their competence to be at the B1 level before the project with regard to their written and online interaction, but most of them had placed themselves on higher levels on the post-test, indicating improvement in their written and online interaction. Likewise, with mediating texts, students indicated a shift towards the higher levels.

**Table 2. Self-assessment (pre and post) of interaction and mediation**

| Written and online interaction |     |                            |      |                            |
|--------------------------------|-----|----------------------------|------|----------------------------|
|                                | Pre |                            | Post |                            |
| CEFR level                     |     | <i>Frequency (Percent)</i> |      | <i>Frequency (Percent)</i> |
| B1                             | 9   | 42.9                       | 1    | 5.6                        |
| B2                             | 9   | 42.9                       | 10   | 55.5                       |
| C1                             | 3   | 14.2                       | 7    | 38.9                       |
| Total                          | 21  | 100.0                      | 18   | 100.0                      |
| Mediating text                 |     |                            |      |                            |
| CEFR level                     |     |                            |      |                            |
| B1                             | 8   | 38.2                       | 2    | 11.1                       |
| B2                             | 9   | 42.8                       | 11   | 61.2                       |
| C1                             | 4   | 19.0                       | 5    | 27.7                       |
| Total                          | 21  | 100.0                      | 18   | 100.0                      |

Discrepancies of the total number of students are the result of time challenges and other commitments. CEFR = Common European framework of reference for languages.

#### 4.4. Virtual exchange experience

The exchange experience demonstrated both similarities and differences. The Germans reacted more to issues like time and cultural differences, and the Colombians mentioned more language and content learning opportunities (see Table 3). For example, one student stated: '[T]his project impacted my learning experience because it let me express my own ideas and opinions about a topic, so I had to improve my speaking skill'. Another student concluded that his or her partner's ignorance of



suggestions regarding the schedule was part of the culture and should be accepted as such through learning:

'[I]t showed me that some things are not always self-explanatory. For example, the attentive manner. The time we met up was always in her favour. It was not that bad ... but I wished she would have adjust (*sic*) more to my time recommendations. This occasion led me to the conclusion that I need a stronger understanding of their culture background so I don't get the wrong expectation of someone'.

This thought is problematic because the student seems to ascribe the partner's behaviour to her cultural background. This would be a good starting point for discussion in the classroom.

**Table 3. Virtual exchange experience questionnaire**

|  | Colombia   | Germany   |
|--|--|---|
| Q4:<br>Please describe how doing this project collaboratively with international partner(s) impacted your learning experience.   | Adaptation<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– How to adapt?</li> <li>– How to work with other non-native speakers?</li> <li>– Dealt with other opinions</li> </ul> Content learning<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Helped content learning (meetings)</li> <li>– Faced speaking fears</li> <li>– Helped English</li> </ul> | Adaptation<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Accent</li> <li>– Cultural differences</li> <li>– How to work with others?</li> <li>– Preparation</li> <li>– Time</li> </ul> |
| Q5:<br>Given your online interactions with students from another country, describe any key changes in how you would approach your encounter with someone with another cultural background. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Be respectful</li> <li>– Be open-minded</li> <li>– Manage time</li> <li>– Be more confident</li> <li>– Show empathy</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Be more structured</li> <li>– Talk more about differences and backgrounds</li> <li>– Manage time</li> <li>– Ask more questions</li> </ul>  |

Some students were highly reflective regarding their experience. For example, one student in Germany answered question 5 as follows: 'I would for the future check on their cultural dimensions and orientation. Due to the discussion about their cultural orientation, I was better prepared for certain things (e.g., task focused vs relationship focused) that are in my culture self-explanatory'.

Similarly, a Colombian student stated: 'Not knowing our partners beforehand allowed us to learn how to work with people that have different teamwork styles and personalities. Also, some cultural differences influenced the way the activities were performed. Overall, the project taught us how to adapt the way we work with other people'. One student commented on virtual exchanges as a valuable task: 'I learned more about a different culture than I would have learned if we had just discussed it in class'.

The written data show that the 'illusion of communality' does not seem to apply (Ware & Kramsch, 2005, p. 200). For instance, one student in Germany wrote in his or her reflective journal: '[W]e had the opportunity to get to know how different our cultures are! Not only through some information from the internet but through someone's experience in real life'. Another student in Germany

remarked: 'With globalisation, it's less about the culture and more about the person. There are traits I have in common with my partners'. The last sentence suggests that the student started with the assumption that differences could be the norm. The students also seem to realise that the participant infrequently displays national characteristics, and therefore, cultural generalisation is not possible (Avgousti, 2018).

The results regarding whether the students feel that they are plurilingual or pluricultural or both suggest higher levels of PPC as a result of participating in the study in some respect. Discussing plurilingual and pluricultural concepts as a whole during several stages of a virtual exchange project has merit, in addition to setting pedagogical tasks that encourage students to reflect on their practices, values and beliefs (Galante, 2018). In this study, a few tasks encouraged reflection about students' plurilingual and pluricultural knowledge and experience, including the PPC scale (e.g., week 3, see appendix A). The focus was on students' perception of their PPC. It would be worthwhile to examine whether and how PPC scale results can be related to plurilingual instruction in different contexts in a virtual exchange setting. The first investigation of this kind was carried out in Toronto, Canada, in a face-to-face setting (Galante, 2018).

According to data, the change in students' perceived ability to interact and mediate is likely related to gaining experience and practice through interaction and mediation from this project. The students' conversations showed that they were able to interact successfully about challenging topics in the foreign language and that they managed to provide a presentation that includes cultural considerations with their partner. Students realised that they could mediate texts successfully when they reported about an article that they read and discussed with their partner. As a result, another benefit of virtual projects is the gain in confidence regarding interaction and mediation, if the latter is part of the project.

This study includes certain limitations. The small number of participants due to the limited number of students in Germany is considered a limitation. Moreover, the length of the project was limited due to the fact that the term dates between the two countries differed considerably.

## 5. Conclusion

The results of this study show that students' perceptions of their PPC, their interaction skills and their ability to mediate texts can be supported and enhanced through virtual exchanges, even with relatively little explicit focus on them in the classroom. Hence, instructors are advised to set up appropriate tasks that require students to reflect on their PPC and to mediate with their partner(s). The schedule (see Appendix A) may serve as a model for instructors to optimise teaching/learning practices in virtual exchanges. The gains in confidence in both Colombian and German students are likely to be the result of their experiences with their peers in synchronous communication.

Virtual exchanges that include work on PCC and mediation are especially valuable in (post) COVID-19 times when in-person intercultural encounters are restricted. Pandemics, such as COVID-19, and environmental issues lead educators and the world of work to be dependent on technology. A general shift towards international online work meetings rather than face-to-face meetings is likely to happen. Therefore, enabling students to communicate in an international setting online with (prior) reflection on concepts like plurilingualism is more crucial than ever. Generally, virtual exchange projects can provide students with and prepare them for international encounters, and it is therefore advisable to make virtual exchange projects part of the curriculum. Piccardo (2019) points out that the CV makes plurilingualism and mediation more visible and could contribute to the democratisation of foreign language curricula, as well as 'the language of schooling, and perhaps in turn for other subjects' (p. 198).

Further research is required in different settings to investigate what level of focus on PPC and mediation has an impact on students' perception. Different kinds of mediation, such as mediating

communication in a group and mediating concepts as discussed in the CV (Council of Europe, 2018), should also be examined in the context of virtual exchanges. Further studies with various cohorts and settings and a higher number of participants are desirable. Further research could usefully explore the kind of tasks that are most effective for mediating texts in virtual exchanges and within a plurilingual context and determine whether mediating texts in languages other than students' L1 positively affects their language skills (e.g., their vocabulary) and self-efficacy concerning the languages used.

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## Appendix A. Weekly activities

| Week   | Topic   | Activity   |
|--------|---|--|
| Week 1 | Topic: Getting to know each other<br><br>Mode:<br>Synchronous           | Students work together via DFNConf or Zoom.<br><br>Pre-surveys conducted and demographics determined.  |
| Week 2 | Topic: Lingua franca summary and discussion<br><br>Mode:<br>Synchronous | Before meeting up, students read an article in their first language. Suggestions included the following.<br><br>In German:<br><a href="https://www.spiegel.de/lebenundlernen/schule/fremdsprachen-globales-englisch-ist-eine-grundfaehigkeit-wie-autofahren-a-544335.html">https://www.spiegel.de/lebenundlernen/schule/fremdsprachen-globales-englisch-ist-eine-grundfaehigkeit-wie-autofahren-a-544335.html</a><br><br><a href="https://blog.tuv.com/ausser-kontrolle-englisch-als-lingua-franca-in-unternehmen/">https://blog.tuv.com/ausser-kontrolle-englisch-als-lingua-franca-in-unternehmen/</a> |

Optional:

<https://de.motionpoint.com/blog/is-english-still-the-lingua-franca-of-the-internet/>

Click on 'Datei-Download':

<https://www.bibb.de/veroeffentlichungen/de/bwp/show/6851>

In Spanish:

<http://elestimulo.com/blog/el-espanol-se-consolida-como-segunda-lengua-franca-internacional/>

[https://cvc.cervantes.es/obref/congresos/sevilla/comunicacion/ponenc\\_tamaron.htm](https://cvc.cervantes.es/obref/congresos/sevilla/comunicacion/ponenc_tamaron.htm)

<https://www.uv.mx/prensa/general/idioma-espanol-en-condiciones-para-ser-usado-como-lengua-franca/>

During the meeting, students summarise the article(s) read and discuss the topic(s).

Students work together via DFNConf or Zoom. (Must record the session and upload.)

Week 3      Topic: Cultural dimensions  
  
Mode:  
Asynchronous and synchronous

Students first do the self-assessment questionnaire (Mapping Your Cultural Orientation):  
<https://www.uwb.edu/getattachment/globalinitiatives/resources/intercultural-competence-tool-kit/Mapping-Your-Cultural-Orientation.pdf>

Students then meet their partners and discuss their differences (e.g., low- or high-context culture, monochronic or polychronic culture, individualistic or collectivistic, egalitarian or hierarchical, etc.). In class, students report about their partner(s).

Students click on the link below, look up their own culture, and compare it with their definitions from week 2. Students then discuss with their partner the similarities and differences between their two cultures. In the discussion, students consider how the cultures could work together in virtual teams in a business situation (Could the teams succeed? Why or why not? What would some of the difficulties be? What would a successful team protocol be?)

<https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/>

Students work together via DFNConf or Zoom. (Must record the session and upload.)

Week 4      Topic: Project ABC Foods, Inc.  
  
Mode:  
Asynchronous and synchronous

ABC Foods, Inc., headquartered in the U.K., is looking to export and launch some of its food products into a location on the Asian or African continent. The chief executive officer (CEO) wants each team to decide on the products and the city to target, as well as determine how it plans to market the products to the culture. Each team has 2 weeks to make these decisions and present its project ideas to the CEO. Teams work with their international partners to plan the presentations.

Students work together via DFNConf or Zoom. (Must record the session and

upload.)

|        |                                       |   |
|--------|---------------------------------------|---|
| Week 5 | Topic: Project ABC Foods, Inc.        | Students work individually to plan their part of the presentations.   |
|        | Mode:<br>Asynchronous                 |   |
| Week 6 | Topic: Project ABC Foods, Inc.        | Peer- and self-evaluations are made. Each class watches the presentations and offers feedback, which then is sent to group members (scan if necessary). |
|        | Mode:<br>Asynchronous and synchronous | Individual reflections also are turned in.<br><br>Post-survey is conducted.   |

## Appendix B. Self-assessment grid interaction and mediation

This self-assessment grid is taken from the Council of Europe (2018, pp. 168–170).

| Interaction                    | B1  | B2  | C1   |
|--------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Written and online interaction | I can interact about experiences, events, impressions and feelings provided that I can prepare beforehand. I can ask for or give simple clarifications and can respond to comments and questions in some detail. I can interact with a group working on a project, provided there are visual aids such as images, statistics and graphs to clarify more complex concepts. | I can interact with several people, linking my contributions to theirs and handling misunderstandings or disagreements, provided the others avoid complex language, allow me time and are generally cooperative. I can highlight the significance of facts, events and experiences justify ideas and support collaboration. | I can understand the intentions and implications of other contributions on complex, abstract issues and can express myself with clarity and precision, adapting my language and register flexibly and effectively. I can deal effectively with communication problems and cultural issues that arise by clarifying and exemplifying. |
| Mediation                      |   |   |  |
| Mediating a text               | I can convey information given in clear, well-structured informational texts on subjects that are familiar or of personal or  | I can convey detailed information and arguments reliably, e.g., the significant point(s) contained in complex but   | I can convey clearly and fluently in well-structured language the significant ideas in long, complex texts, whether or not they  |

current interest.

well-structured, texts within my fields of professional, academic and personal interest.

relate to my own fields of interest, provided that I can occasionally check particular technical concepts.

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### Appendix C. Plurilingual and pluricultural competence (PPC) scale

1. When talking to someone who knows the same languages as I do, I feel comfortable switching between one language to another language.
2. It is difficult for me to accept cultural differences when talking to people from different cultural backgrounds.
3. When speaking English, it is easy for me to use an expression or a word in another language for a concept or a word that does not exist in English.
4. It is easy for me to make adjustments in my communication style if the person I am talking to comes from a different cultural background.
5. I do not try to understand a conversation when people are speaking in a language I do not know, even if they speak very slowly.
6. When communicating with people from another cultural background, it is important that I am aware of communication styles and make necessary adjustments when talking to them.
7. I speak my first language and English, but I also know words and expressions in other languages.
8. It's difficult for me to explain stereotypical ideas from my cultural background when interacting with people from other cultural backgrounds.
9. When talking to someone who knows the same languages as I do, using two languages at the same time in a conversation is not right. Languages should be used separately.
10. I do not want to learn about more other cultures (except for English-related ones) in the future.
11. When talking to someone who knows the same languages as I do, it is difficult for me to respond if he/she switches from one language to another language.
12. I understand there are differences between cultures and that what can be considered 'strange' to one person may be considered 'normal' to another.
13. The more languages I know, the better I can understand the global community.
14. It is easy for me to talk to people from other cultural backgrounds and discuss similarities and differences in points of view.
15. When talking to someone who knows the same languages as I do, in order to keep a conversation going some people interact in two (or more) languages, but I find it difficult for me to do so.
16. The fact that I already know about at least two cultures (or more) does not make it easier for me to learn about a new culture
17. I understand that in the future, the languages I now speak can be more or less fluent depending on the experiences I have and how I use these languages.
18. I need to have similar values and beliefs as a person from another cultural background so we can understand each other.
19. The fact that I already know at least two languages (or more) does not make it easier for me to learn a new language.
20. When communicating with people from other cultural backgrounds, it is difficult for me to explain misunderstandings and misinterpretations
21. I am able to recognise some languages other people speak if they are similar to my first language (e.g., same language family).
22. In order to have a good understanding of the global community, it is important that I learn about similarities and differences between cultures.
23. If I am working on a task with someone who can speak the same languages as I do, we should both speak in one language only and not switch to another language.
24. I know there are differences in communication between cultures so it is important for me to adjust my behaviours accordingly so I am not misinterpreted.