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УДК 004.738.5:37.064.3  
DOI [10.46793/Uzdanica21.2.311K](https://doi.org/10.46793/Uzdanica21.2.311K)  
Оригинални научни рад  
Примљен: 28. фебруар 2024.  
Прихваћен: 21. јун 2024.

## ESP STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF PARTICIPATION IN INTERCULTURAL VIRTUAL EXCHANGE<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract:* Virtual exchange programs are gaining ground in modern foreign language pedagogy especially as a valuable tool for intercultural encounters in an educational context that would otherwise be predominantly monocultural. The current study is set to examine ESP students' views and impressions regarding their participation in a newly implemented virtual exchange activity aimed at developing students' intercultural competence and skills. The paper presents the results of a survey conducted with 25 students immediately after their participation in the virtual exchange program. The overall results, of both quantitative and qualitative nature, point to a highly positive attitude of participants towards this innovative pedagogy and general satisfaction with intercultural learning. They also reveal some minor problems that the students were faced with during the program. Considering the fact that this is a completely new learning and teaching experience to all study participants, the findings are to serve as guidelines for improving and better implementing this activity into current ESP courses, and on a long-term basis, incorporating it into ESP course syllabi.

*Keywords:* virtual exchange, intercultural communication, online collaboration, ESP.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Life in today's highly globalized society undergoes rapid changes in all segments of human activities, including the field of education. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become an inseparable part of educational processes, bringing about tremendous changes and innovations in teaching approaches and learning practices. Modern technological tools allow not only an easy access to various pieces of information but also make it possible for instructors and

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<sup>1</sup> Реализацију овог истраживања финансирало је Министарство науке, технолошког развоја и иновација Републике Србије (бр. уговора 451-03-66/2024-03/ 200125 и 451-03-65/2024-03/200125).

learners to communicate remotely and get in touch with their counterparts all over the world. As a relatively new practice that has gained momentum in the past twenty years (Luo, Gui 2018; Vuković Vojnović, Knežević 2023), virtual exchange (VE) is not only a valuable innovative resource for teaching and learning languages as well as other contents, but also a strategy for the internationalization of the university, course and curriculum design. In a nutshell, as an activity to be integrated in regular coursework, VE represents an internet-based learning in which professors and students of different native languages and cultural background collaborate on specific tasks. Most commonly, especially in the European context, this sort of activity is conducted in English, which serves as a lingua franca. This provides an opportunity for developing and practicing foreign language (L2) communication skills, in this case English. Furthermore, the activity is aimed at the development of intercultural communicative competence as this form of international collaboration transforms language learners into intercultural speakers with both linguistic skills and intercultural awareness (Baker 2012; Çiftçi, Savas 2018). In this way, language learners become efficient and competent interactive users of L2 ready to collaborate with people from other countries and cultures (Zečević, Trkulja Milekić 2022). This ability is highly valued and appreciated in the professional context today and that is why modern courses for teaching and learning languages for specific purposes should put even more emphasis on intercultural communication skills. With this in mind, the current paper presents the results of a survey into the perceptions of students at the University of Novi Sad about their participation in a virtual exchange activity that was incorporated into their English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course. The study extends previously published findings (Vuković Vojnović, Knežević 2023) regarding students' views on initiating this type of collaboration within ESP courses at the University of Novi Sad and as such is aimed at gaining a wider and complementary insight into the implementation of such programs in current ESP courses.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

Virtual exchange (VE) is an online interaction of students from diverse cultural or geographical backgrounds who collaborate on tasks that are integrated into their coursework and are monitored by their teachers (O'Dowd 2018: 1). In the context of L2 learning through VE, students from different educational and cultural backgrounds are involved in discussions to share information, exchange their opinions and compare their findings on the same topics (O'Dowd 2021: 2). Students are invited to participate in both synchronous (e.g. lectures, presentations, live discussion groups), and asynchronous (e.g. emails, co-creation of reports and

other outcomes) online activities (Vuković Vojnović, Knežević 2023: 146). In addition to anticipated benefits such as the development of cultural sensitivity, creative, collaborative, communicative and ICT skills (Flowers, Kelsen, Cvitkovic 2019; Masterson 2020; Vuković Vojnović, Knežević 2023: 146) or certain affective gains (Porto, Golubeva, Byram 2023), there are potential drawbacks that need to be addressed. Namely, there are some personal traits such as communicative competence, motivation and expectations, then group dynamics and miscommunication, as well as some objective factors such as problems with technology, different academic calendars and different workloads students have in other courses at their home institutions (Çiftçi, Savas 2018; Mestre-Segarra, Ruiz-Garrido 2022).

## 2.2. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

As it has been mentioned in the introduction, along with the increased opportunities in higher education that boost international encounters of students and educators via a virtual exchange, foreign language education has shifted its focus and expanded its goals to embrace the development of intercultural communication competence as the fifth language learning skill (Tomić 2022). The understanding of intercultural competence (IC) is not straightforward since culture itself is “a socially constituted set of various kinds of knowledge structures” (Kecskes 2012: 175) which help us make sense of a particular situation and behaviour of others. According to Deardorff (2018: 480–481), intercultural experts reached a consensus regarding the definition of intercultural competence as “effective and appropriate behaviour and communication in intercultural situations” and developed a framework of intercultural competence regarding attitudes, knowledge and skills. Attitudes include being interested in others, being open to differences and ready to leave behind your familiar ways of dealing with challenging situations, such as negotiations and mediating cultural differences. The knowledge, in addition to valuing one’s own identity and culture, refers to a deeper understanding of global views across languages and cultures. Finally, the skills do not comprise the knowledge itself but the ability to process and critically evaluate information in an intercultural context. In addition to the three elements, internal and external outcomes are also specified and refer to the ways individuals treat others. Ideally, considering the internal outcomes, an individual with a well-developed IC would be able to acknowledge the views of others and respond to them in the way that is expected by the other person. However, the actual appropriateness and effectiveness can only be assessed by the addressee, which is defined by the external outcomes. This has led Deardorff (2018) to conclude that language knowledge is not enough for successful intercultural communication, but language learning needs to incorporate some personal traits such as mindfulness, self-reflection, curiosity, openness, etc. In an earlier study, Byram and Fleming (1998: 8), also recognizing

attitudes, knowledge and skills as being important factors of communicative competence, say that having a well-developed intercultural competence means that one “has knowledge of one, or, preferably, more cultures and social identities and has the capacity to discover and relate to new people from other contexts for which they have not been prepared directly”.

### 2.3. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN ESP

In the context of foreign language education, two notions have been promoted – authenticity and appropriateness related to the native culture and the native speaker (Kramsch 1998: 80). However, globalization and worldwide networking have greatly redefined the traditional communicative language pedagogy from the eighties and introduced new conventions and norms when it comes to communicative and language competence (Kramsch 2014). As stated by Byram (2009: 7), *The White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* developed by the Council of Europe recognises key competencies for successful social inclusion and intercultural dialogue in the form of “democratic citizenship, language and history”, and the development of these competences needs to be incorporated into the educational system. In this respect, developing intercultural communicative competence is a way to acquire or value the culture of the other by putting it into interaction with one’s own culture.

Regarding the relationship between the culture and language, one of the most often cited claims is made by Bennett (1997: 16) who said that “to avoid becoming a fluent fool, we need to understand more completely the cultural dimension of language”. Language proficiency has been recognized as one of the important pillars of intercultural communication in addition to awareness, attitudes, skills, knowledge (Fantini 2000: 28, cited in Lázár 2007: 9). However, this cultural dimension of language learning is still not formally recognized, which is evident in the lack of intercultural communication training within the language curriculum (Lázár 2007: 5). In particular, in the context of ESP, i.e. learning English for the purpose of one’s future profession, the course content often neglects the cultural dimension of communication and lacks training in intercultural competence. As observed by Hoskins and Reynolds (2020), there is a tradition of ESP courses being strongly anchored in the disciplines the students major in, focusing on disciplinary literacy, i.e. communication in the academic and professional contexts of the students’ area of study. In her study on ESP teachers’ practices of incorporating cultural concepts into their courses, Radić-Bojanić (2019) concludes that the subject area itself determines the type and the amount of cultural elements in ESP syllabi and course materials. However, the role of the language material used in the classroom and the educational resources made available to students cannot be neglected, since they can greatly influence the learner experience and their inter-

nalization of certain intercultural and social concepts, shape their critical thinking skills, and impact their appreciation of diversity (Hossain 2024). It is up to the ESP educators to introduce intercultural concepts to their students since they will need help “to deal with global communicative practices online in all their complexities” (White 2007: 235). The non-philological students who usually take ESP courses can be better prepared to successfully participate in the global professional context since both business and academia have become excessively internationalized. Effective ESP courses need to incorporate collaborative learning as an opportunity to expose the students to diversity and promote cross-cultural learning as well as to provide for different learning styles and competencies (Hossain 2024). Therefore, the implementation of VE in ESP should be well-planned as “an effective pedagogy” to facilitate the development of “intercultural and global competences” and it is also a way for students to participate in authentic discourse (Nicolaou, Sevilla-Pavón 2022: 120).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The current study is set to explore ESP students' views and impressions about their participation in a VE activity aimed at developing their intercultural competence and thus provide a better insight into the effectiveness of this first-time implemented activity in their language course at university. The study is centred around the following research questions:

1. How do students assess the VE program in general?
2. How do they perceive the participation in the program, what strengths and drawbacks do they observe?

#### 3.1. PARTICIPANTS

There were 25 undergraduates who voluntarily applied for participation in this activity as part of their ESP course at the Faculty of Sciences, University of Novi Sad, in the academic year 2023/2024. The distribution of participants regarding the gender and area of study is given in Table 1.

*Table 1.* Participants across gender and area of study

Area of study	Females	Males	Total
Information Technologies	0	12	12
Mathematics	2	6	8
Tourism and Hotel Management	5	0	5
Total	7	18	25

As the official requirement for participation in this program is B2 level of English language proficiency, the participants proved their language competence either by submitting a recognised international certificate or by being internally tested by two ESP teachers prior to assigning to the program.

### 3.2. VE PROCEDURE

At the beginning of their ESP course, our students were informed about the possibility of participating in an international collaborative project in English with a group of peers from three European universities<sup>2</sup>. The collaboration implied participation in five online sessions (one-hour session per week) focusing on cultural issues and interculturality with the aim of getting to know other students' cultures and learning how to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds. All students were given unique guidelines for their sessions and they were supposed to consult them and prepare for the meetings in advance. As for the sessions themselves, the first session was meant for introducing themselves and their cultures, the next two implied discussions on a topic that was negotiated among students and selected from the list of topics suggested by the professors, while the last two sessions were devoted to deciding on the group final production and its preparation. Thus, apart from discussing the chosen topic within the framework of their cultures, the students were also supposed to negotiate, agree upon and collaborate on a joint group project (a video, an article, an escape game, etc.) that would represent their cultures, show what they learned about one another and in that way promote intercultural knowledge and awareness. Before the collaboration started, the participants of this study were given a brief introductory lecture into intercultural communication and why it is relevant for their knowledge and use of English. After each session, the students were supposed to produce the minutes of their meetings and display the link to these documents so that they were accessible to all professors and students in the program. They also shared their final outcomes with everyone participating in the VE activity.

### 3.3. RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

An online survey method was employed for data collection. Upon the program completion, the participants were sent a link to an online survey and were asked to respond to the questions. The questionnaire was developed by two ESP

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<sup>2</sup> The activity is part of WP5 of the EUGLOH project, including students from the University Paris Saclay, University of Szeged, Ludwig Maximilians University of Munich and University of Novi Sad.

professors whose students participated in the collaboration and who coordinated the program. It included 20 questions divided into two sections. The first section included socio-demographic information and the second one was devoted to assessing the quality of the program in general and the respondents' own participation in it, i.e. a personal level assessment. There were 13 closed-ended questions, 12 of them of either yes/no or multiple-choice type, and one asking about the quantitative assessment of the program on a five-point Likert scale (1 denoting the lowest and 5 the highest value). In addition to these, there were 7 open-ended questions as an extension to yes/no and multiple-choice questions to allow a more detailed explanation of the respondents' closed-ended choice.

#### 4. RESULTS

As for the participants' general opinion of the program, the recorded responses reflect a high level of satisfaction, with 95% of students choosing the option "I am completely satisfied with the program" or "I am very much satisfied with the program". This satisfaction is reflected in the students' average mark of the program (4.57 on the scale 1–5) and a great willingness to participate again in a similar program. These results are summarized in Table 2 below.

*Table 2.* Participants' general assessment of the program

Entirely satisfied with the program	57%
Very much satisfied	38%
Partially satisfied	5%
Would participate again	95%
The average mark (on the scale 1–5)	4.57

The above findings can be complemented with the participants' answers to the open-ended question on the most positive sides of the program and those aspects that should be changed. The qualitative results provided as responses to this question are summed up in the following table and enlisted in descending order in relation to their frequency.

*Table 3.* Participants' perceptions of the positive and negative sides of the program

The positive sides of the program	What should be changed
1. Meeting people from different cultures and learning about their way of living and thinking	1. Modification of the list of topics / Letting participants choose the topics for discussion
2. Improving English communication skills	2. Increasing the number of sessions
3. Breaking down stereotypes	

Focusing further on their participation in the program, i.e. the decision to participate, the vast majority of students (80%) reported the absolute lack of scepticism or doubt regarding the application for the program. Those who were insecure about participation (20%) referred to their inexperience in communicating in English with foreigners. These findings, along with the main reasons why the respondents decided to participate in the program are presented in the following table.

*Table 4.* Participants' decisiveness and motivation for joining the program

Scepticism about participation		Motives for participation
No 80%	Yes 20%	Meeting new people New learning experience Practicing English Curiosity Grade
	No previous communication with foreigners	

As for the collaboration experience within their groups, the overwhelming majority (92%) claimed that all group members equally contributed to the group dynamics and joint activities and that they felt comfortable and relaxed during the collaboration period. One student (4%), however, reported on having a serious problem in understanding other members due to their mispronunciation of English words and low level of the language proficiency. This caused imbalance in sharing the group activities and made the student feel uncomfortable during the sessions. Finally, one student (4%) reported a lower contribution in the sessions due to his shyness on the one hand, and extrovert personality of other members, on the other hand.

When it comes to intercultural dimension of this collaboration, as already mentioned, the participating students only had a brief introductory lecture on intercultural communication before the program started. This, however, was not the case with their group peers, as they had already attended some classes that introduced concepts about intercultural communication. This discrepancy, however, was not recognized as a problem among the respondents, as they reported no serious problems regarding the knowledge of intercultural concepts. In fact, almost half of them (42%) responded that their peers explained some concepts during the sessions. Interestingly, this lack of previous knowledge turned into one of the greatest benefits of the program participation. Namely, in their self-assessment of several components that the program could be expected to improve (Table 5 below), the respondents saw the greatest improvement in their self-confidence when in contact with other cultures, while in other segments of participation, for exam-



ple English language skills, the reported improvement was noticeably lower, as seen in the following table.

*Table 5. Self-assessment of specific segments of participation in the program*

	Considerably improved	Slightly improved	Remained the same
Self-confidence when in contact with other cultures	38%	43%	19%
Collaboration and team-work skills	24%	47%	29%
English language skills	14%	47%	39%

## 5. DISCUSSION

Generally speaking, the results of the survey show that the students are highly satisfied with the implemented VE program. In that regard, the results complement previously published findings in the same local context with ESP students expressing positive attitudes towards joining a VE program within their language course at university (Vuković Vojnović, Knežević 2023). They are also in line with other internationally based reports of ESP students' satisfaction with participating in a VE activity and gaining intercultural learning experience (Hagley, Cotter 2019; Hoskins, Reynolds 2020; Nicolaou, Pavon 2019). The greatest gain of the program participation, according to the students' responses, is perceived in meeting new people and learning about their cultures, which largely corresponds to the above definition of intercultural competence by Byram and Fleming (1998). It can therefore be concluded that the participation in this program resulted in developing and improving ESP students' intercultural competence and skills. The finding as such can be interpreted as an invitation and encouragement for both students and teachers to join and incorporate intercultural VE programs in their ESP courses. The survey findings also reveal a strong determination of the respondents to apply for the program in spite of having no previous experience in participating in similar programs (80% of them had no doubt about joining the activity) and the factors driving their motivation to participate. Considering motivation, it is interesting to notice that in most of the cases, the participants were driven by intrinsic motivation, since reasons such as meeting new people, experiencing something new and being curious were more frequently mentioned than some practical reasons for joining the program, for example, getting a good grade. Intrinsic motivation is regarded a key factor in language learning success (Griffiths 2010). However, recent research (Shan 2020) indicates that learners' intrinsic motivation declines developmentally and may lead to decreased academic achievement. Therefore, language learners require intrinsic motivation in the long run. In that respect, participation in a VE activity can be regarded useful for arousing ESP students' interests and stimulating their learning, particularly in case of attending ESP courses at univer-

sity, as students usually have lengthy background in learning English throughout primary and secondary education.

Addressing the strengths and drawbacks of the implemented program, the overall results point to no serious problems during the collaboration period. The reported issues primarily refer to the imbalance in the level of English language proficiency among team members, but these are sporadically reported, as the overwhelming majority of respondents (92%) said the collaboration went smoothly without experiencing any serious problems. Even the lack of prior intercultural communication classes, which had been recognized as a potential problem by the ESP teachers, did not turn out into an issue for the program participants. They felt that the introductory lecture and additional explanations of their group peers were sufficient for understanding the relevant culture concepts and discussing about them. Moreover, the intercultural dimension of the collaboration was perceived as the greatest gain among the participants. This finding is certainly valuable and deserves attention of future research. For the time being, it could be explained by the fact that the modern generation of students known as digital natives might be more prepared for cultural encounters and contacts due to their presumably constant access to the internet and social media contents gathered worldwide. In addition, some of the respondents' suggestions for the program improvement can also be viewed in light of the program's drawbacks. These primarily refer to the respondents' impression of being limited by the given list of topics for discussion and preparation of the final project. In spite of being provided a list of 19 various topics along with hints for developing them into discussion, some of the participants expressed a need for greater freedom in selecting topics for group discussions. This is certainly something that needs to be addressed and discussed by the program partners in further collaboration within the program.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The students' feedback on their participation in an intercultural virtual exchange program presented in this paper provides valuable insight into the effects of integrating this innovative pedagogy in an ESP course and offers a number of pedagogical implications for its planning and implementation. To start with, the overall results support the initiative of introducing an intercultural VE into ESP courses with the aim of strengthening students' intercultural skills and competencies needed in international encounters within academic and professional contexts, such as student exchange and mobility programs, international conferences, workshops, business meetings, etc. Apart from developing intercultural competence, the findings show that this new learning practice raises students' interests and motivation, making their language learning more dynamic and enjoyable. Further, they show that the implementation of this activity in an ESP course does not necessarily

imply collaboration among students majoring in the same field of study. What seems to be effective in this case is actually gathering students of versatile cultural backgrounds. It is important, though, that the pairing implies a relatively identical level of English language proficiency among participants. A detailed introduction into the activity and preparation of students prior to the collaboration period is essential. Finally, careful but not too strict guidelines for students' meetings are also important.

The presented survey findings are based on a relatively small sample of respondents, which is certainly a major limitation of this study. For obtaining more reliable and objective findings on the efficiency of incorporating intercultural VE activities within ESP courses a larger sample of VE participants is needed. With this in mind, the paper concludes with a call to ESP teachers and practitioners for a larger inclusion of VE programs in their courses and syllabi.

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Департаман за географију, туризам и хотелијерство

## ПЕРЦЕПЦИЈЕ СТУДЕНАТА ЕНГЛЕСКОГ ЈЕЗИКА СТРУКЕ У ВЕЗИ СА УЧЕШЋЕМ У ИНТЕРКУЛТУРНОЈ ВИРТУЕЛНОЈ РАЗМЕНИ

*Резиме:* Виртуелни програми размене све су присутнији у савременој педагогији страних језика као важно средство за интеркултурну сарадњу у образовном контексту који би иначе био претежно монокултуран. У овом раду испитују се ставови и утисци студената у вези са њиховим учешћем у новоспроведеној виртуелној активности размене у оквиру енглеског језика струке која има за циљ развој интеркултурних компетенција и вештина студената. У раду су приказани резултати анкете спроведене са 25 студената непосредно након њиховог учешћа у програму виртуелне размене. Целокупни резултати, квантитативне и квалитативне природе, указују на изразито позитиван став учесника према овој иновативној наставној активности и опште задовољство интеркултурним учењем. Резултати указују и на мање проблеме са којима су се учесници сусрели током виртуелне сарадње. С обзиром на то да је ово потпуно ново искуство учења и подучавања за све учеснике програма,

резултати су значајни као смернице за унапређење и бољу имплементацију ове активности у актуелне курсеве енглеског језика струке, а дугорочно гледано, за интеграцију оваквих активности у наставне планове и програме страног језика струке на универзитету.

*Кључне речи:* виртуелна размена, интеркултурне компетенције, онлајн-сарадња, енглески језик струке.