

7. Action-research and role-reversal-informed creation of a Zoom breakout room guide for e-CIIC mediators

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Abstract

This paper reports on how a Zoom breakout room (BoR) guide for E-CIIC (e-Classroom Interactional and Intercultural Competence) mediators was created as an unexpected outcome of project ViVEXELT (Vietnam Virtual EXchange for English Language Teaching). ViVEXELT was funded by the British Council and the National Foreign Language Project in Vietnam (digital learning innovation fund pilot – response to COVID-19, 2021-2022). The grant was awarded to provide research and insights to respond to specific questions about remote or digital capacity building during/post COVID not yet investigated in Vietnam. The ViVEXELT team delivered two iterations of a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) Virtual Exchange (VE) course, in June-July 2021 and in October-November 2021 and reached over 200 participants, from 41 different educational institutions in Vietnam and five in the UK. The evaluation of the project was carried out with a mixed method approach. Rich qualitative data were collected from both individual interviews and reflective journals. The journals were analysed using NVivo software and a significant finding was the participants' interest for both the use of BoRs and the way they had been managed by e-mediators during the ViVEXELT synchronous sessions. As a result, an action-research-informed Zoom BoR guide for e-Classroom Interactional and Intercultural Competences (e-CIIC) mediators was created. It was an 'expert student' (who was also part of the ViVEXELT core team) who had the initial idea to co-create a guide with the other ViVEXELT participants. This paper will report on the research-informed process that led to the design of the guide.

Keywords: Virtual Exchange, English Language Teaching, CPD, Action Research, Zoom breakout rooms, E-mediators.

1. Introduction

Project ViVEXELT (Viet Nam Virtual Exchange for English Language Teaching) was made possible by the award of the British Council Learning Innovation Fund – Response to COVID-

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19 addressing Theme 2, Capacity Building) to the two lead institutions coordinating it: Coventry University (CU) in the UK and Hanoi University of Science and Technology (HUST) in Vietnam (<https://www.britishcouncil.org/education/he-science/opportunities/vietnam-digital-learning-innovation-fund>). The funding was awarded to projects that:

1. Supported Vietnam's National Foreign Languages Project (NFLP) ambition to improve the teaching and learning of English;
2. Explored more inclusive and accessible approaches, particularly through digital and education technology;
3. Encouraged collaborative partnerships between the UK and Vietnam generating new research, insight and/or innovations.

CU and HUST are committed to ways of internationalising the learning experience that comply with Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) principles to foster the development of intercultural awareness and global citizenship attributes. Virtual Exchange can support an EDI-compliant approach to the internationalisation of the curriculum in a variety of educational settings as it:

enables sustained, technology-enabled, research informed, people-to-people education programmes or activities in which constructive communication and interaction takes place between individuals or groups who are geographically separated and/or from different cultural backgrounds, with the support of educators or facilitators' (EVOLVE, 2023).

Virtual Exchange can also be instrumental in supporting the creation of cross-continental communities of practice. Therefore, ViVEXELT aimed to address ELT capacity building and digital competence enhancement through the creation of a cross-sectional ELT network as community of practice supported by an online course that included both synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities. An interesting element of the project was the inclusion of the English language provision manager for the Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre (<https://www.covrefugee.org/>) in the core ViVEXELT team, who at the time of the project, was also a student completing her MA in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics at Coventry University, with the co-principal investigator from CU as her supervisor. Participating

in ViVEXELT and reflecting on the feedback received on the use of the Zoom breakout rooms (BoRs) and the research data collected with the rest of the team, gave this ‘expert student’ the idea to base her MA dissertation on the creation of a guide for e-mediators in BoRs. The input from an ‘expert student’ in action research practice has been implemented for a number of years at Coventry University (e.g. Orsini-Jones, 2014; Lloyd, et al., 2018) and provides academic staff with the opportunity to see their practice through ‘the looking glass’ of their students.

The ViVEXELT course had two iterations and aimed at addressing a priority area identified by the Ministry of Education and the British Council in Vietnam, namely, teaching speaking online at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The content of the five Zoom synchronous sessions on the ViVEXELT course was as follows:

1. Introduction to ViVEXELT, e-CICs (e-Classroom Interactional Competencies, after Moorhouse et al., 2021) and intercultural awareness.
2. Teaching Speaking Online.
3. Communicative Grammar Teaching Online.
4. Tips and Tricks to Support Online Interaction.
5. Reflective Practice in ELT (with a focus on student-centred/learner-centred approaches).

This paper will focus on the analysis of the participants’ reflective journals submitted at the end of the course, that highlighted their interest for the BoR experience. It will also illustrate how a BoR guide for e-Classroom Interactional and Intercultural Competence mediators emerged from these reflections, partly drawing on the findings on the mediation competencies needed by English teachers teaching online at the time of COVID-19 by Moorhouse et al. (2021).

2. Method

Two cycles of the ViVEXELT course were delivered, one in June-July 2021 and one in October-November 2021, and the research data collected included the qualitative NVivo analysis of the optional reflective journals submitted by participants, post-project focus group interview analysis and Padlet wall (<https://padlet.com/site/product>) reflections during the focus groups.

Over 200 participants took an active part in the ViVEXELT course. They engaged synchronously in the live sessions for five hours and were asked to engage asynchronously with a group task that required the co-design of lesson plans based on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>) applied to their local contexts and needs. Each group presented their plan during the last Zoom synchronous session (see explanatory videos here : <https://vivexelt.com/symposium-2/> and repurposable plans here : <https://vivexelt.com/resources/>).

The participants, who were from 41 educational institutions in Vietnam (state primary, secondary and tertiary and private language schools) and five in the UK (four universities and a charity) were students in English teacher education, language teacher trainers and in-service English language teachers. This was therefore a rich and cross-educational sector Community of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998) that enhanced educational knowledge-sharing both locally and internationally.

Action research was the underpinning research approach (Burns, 2010) and the team addressed the issues that emerged from the first cycle in the second one (see Table 1 below). Participants were also invited to reflect ‘in action’ while engaging online, ‘on action’ reflecting on the lessons learnt and ‘for action’ for their future practice, in alignment with another ‘tried and tested’ approach to VE at CU (Orsini-Jones et al., 2021).

Table 1.

Actions taken in Phase 2 in view of the feedback received in Phase 1 community of practice

Feedback from Phase 1	Action(s) taken for Phase 2
1. More time in BoRs	BoR tasks were allocated a minimum of 15 minutes per task
2. More demonstrations of digital tools	More demonstrations included and video tutorials created for the most popular ones (see vivexelt.com)
3. Clearer instructions provided well in advance of each session	All participants were sent materials and session plans at least three days before each session
4. Too much academic material	The team had not realised that the project would attract so many primary and secondary school teachers. The materials were revised to address this
5. Greater focus on speaking skills	More speaking skills tasks were included
6. Need to have the support of a mediator to carry out the lesson plan task	Mediators were allocated to each of the groups (11 groups in total) to support participants with creating their lesson plans
7. Provision of more sessions	Session 5 became a full session; in Phase 1

it had been an informal focus group. An extra, optional focus group was set up (session 6). The team also organised two symposia and one webinar in collaboration with the BC which provided further opportunities for ViVEXELT knowledge sharing

8. Provision of more systematic training and briefing for e-mediators in BoRs
- E-mediators became part of the team and were invited to the weekly ViVEXELT meetings. Two CPD training sessions for e-mediators were created and delivered. E-mediators were sent more explicit instructions than in Phase 1 and a more systematic approach was adopted in relation to the allocation of participants to BoRs with the same e-mediator every week. E-mediators also participated in the creation of the BoR Guide, see further details below
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2.1 Role-reversal action-research-informed inquiry

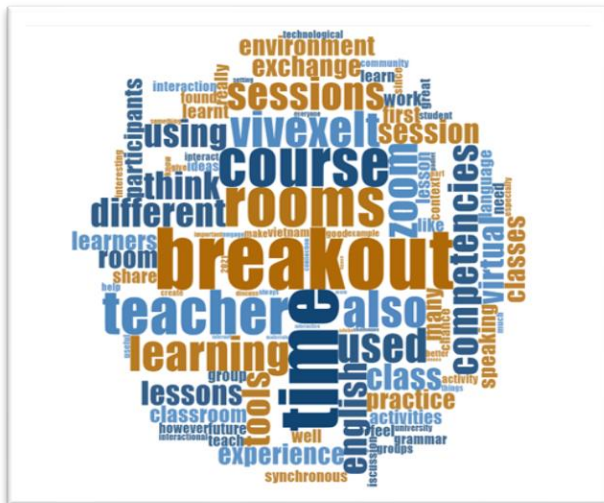
A large quantity of data were collected, however this paper will mainly focus on the feedback provided by participants in the reflective journals written for ViVEXELT that appeared to indicate that working in BoRs) during the synchronous sessions had been a transformational experience for them but had also presented challenges.

In view of the data emerging, the above-mentioned ‘expert student’, who is also one of the authors of this paper, proposed to base her MA dissertation on the creation of a BoR guide for e-CIIC mediators, making the inquiry ‘expert student-driven’ (as with other related projects, e.g. Lloyd et al, 2018) and informed by a student’s perspective on a curricular action previously analysed by her tutor. In the role-reversal model of action-research-informed inquiry, a student identifies a problematic issue that relates to their tutor’s curriculum and explores it in student-driven cycles (see Orsini-Jones, 2014). Butt based her reflections on the two cycles of ViVEXELT, with a focus on BoRs and the role of e-mediators in BoRs. This resulted in the co-creation of a BoR guide, see further details below.

The analysis of the ViVEXELT participants’ reflective journals carried out with NVivo and the results of a subsequent focus group on Zoom underpinned the design of the various drafts of the guide (over 10) that were discussed with a self-selected number of participants (22) during an online focus group session.

3. Results

3.1 Reflective Journals Analysis for Phase 1 (June-July 2021)



The number of mentions of the BoRs indicated that this was a theme of great interest. For several participants, using BoRs appeared to be a new experience and feedback was very positive, e.g. ‘so getting the chance to communicate in smaller groups in the breakout rooms was something amazing to me and very useful as I could be noticed and listened to when asked.’ The benefits of working in smaller groups were reiterated by many, suggesting participants felt more at ease and consequently more confident to engage with others. There was recognition that using BoRs could add value to participants’ own lessons: ‘Thanks to the virtual exchange, I have learnt encouraging students to collaborate and spend time in breakout rooms is effective in decreasing the teacher talking time and increase the student talking and working time.’

However, despite the many positive comments, using BoRs posed challenges too. Firstly, participants highlighted the importance of having access to task instructions once they had moved from the main room into the BoR. Other frustrations stemmed from differences in access to technology between participants, such as no access to microphones resulting in more written interactions via the Zoom chat facility, and the difficulties of working with time constraints in this new working environment. With technological issues and instructional limitations impacting on oral and written interaction, participants were often pushed for time to complete the tasks set for BoRs. Also acknowledged in the reflective journals were the different levels of engagement amongst BoR participants and the tendency for some to be very reluctant to appear on camera or engage at all. The role of the ViVEXELT e-mediators was recognised as important in helping with these challenges: ‘In the future, I plan to also assign a group leader and/or a moderator to each breakout room, which is something that I learnt from the ViVEXELT sessions.’

There was evidence from the reflective journals of:

1. BoRs providing a positive environment for interaction and collaboration
2. Teachers not having used BoRs as much as anticipated (prior to ViVEXELT)

3. Specific challenges to working in the BoR environment
4. Recognition for the role of a moderator/mediator
5. Some initial definitions of the moderator/mediator role.

The specific BoR lessons learnt from Phase 1 and implemented in Phase 2 were:

- Recognising the importance of informal conversations in the BoRs and making time for these to happen
- More scaffolding of the BoR sessions to facilitate engagement and include all participants
- Ensuring sufficient time is allocated for tasks in BoRs
- Supporting participants to ‘stay on task’ and complete the set tasks
- Ensuring mediators have access to task instructions/links before heading to BoRs
- Providing e-mediators with more training.

3.2 Reflective Journals Analysis for Phase 2 (October-November 2021)

Thirty-six reflective journals were submitted by participants following completion of Phase 2 of the project. Again, these were amalgamated into a single, anonymous Word document (total 15,921 words) and analysed using NVivo. The same procedure as in Phase 1 was followed and, once the key words ‘online’, ‘students’, ‘teaching’ and ‘teachers’ were removed the results were very similar to Phase 1 (Figure 2) in Phase 2 (Figure 3), with ‘breakout’ and ‘rooms’ represented again as key emerging words.

Figure 3.

NVivo word cloud from Phase 2 (excludes: ‘online’, ‘students’, ‘teaching’ & ‘teachers’)

The creation of the BoR guide drew from the:

- Analysis of individual participant reflections in the journals.
- Written reflections/feedback from ViVEXELT mediators.
- Mediator feedback before and after the live sessions.
- Self-selected participants' focus group on BoRs (16th February 2022).

The team had to make some choices while writing the guide, for example who the guide would be for (audience) and how it should be written (practical and informal? Academic?). It was agreed to opt for a clear, concise and accessible style, with an emphasis on practicality. The guide is now available at the project's website (vivexelt.com) and is included in the list of useful resources for VEs recommended by the VE expert Robert O'Dowd: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fbQ1xpPM_HHBiOlulk_mISN0MkgrRyZpVM4ITx-BrM0/edit#

A limitation of the study is that it proved to be challenging to sustain the CoP after the funding ended, however there is evidence that the ViVEXELT Facebook page and the project website are still being accessed/used at the time of writing this paper (October 2023).

4. Conclusions

Participating teachers stated that they had acquired new competences and applied and disseminated what they had learnt into their practice. Most participants provided positive feedback on the lessons learnt about BoR use in their practice.

The analysis of the data and feedback discussed here would appear to illustrate that ViVEXELT was successful in supporting ELT teachers at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ViVEXELT model of ELT CPD, 'in', 'on' and 'for' action, is a flexible, sustainable and transnational model for online teacher professional development that maximises opportunities for exchanging knowledge, experience and skills in a relaxed and friendly intercultural and international setting.

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