

## 2. Looking back and ahead: reporting and reflecting on GAZUFES

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### Abstract

Virtual exchange (VE) between different English language teaching (ELT) contexts can afford opportunities to develop intercultural communicative competence (ICC) while also offering a window to reflect on different realities in terms of ELT. To this end, two ELT programmes integrated a VE project into their syllabi to provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to experience VE with reflection and development of ICC. The present account aims to describe and reflect on the GAZUFES (Gazi University and UFES University) VE project that involved pre-service teachers, tutors, and teacher trainers in a university in Brazil and another in Türkiye. GAZUFES was in turn part of the large-scale Erasmus+ KA3 Policy Experimentation European Virtual Innovation and Support Networks for Teachers (VALIANT) project. The exchange had some positive outcomes, but the sudden return to in-person classes at the end of the pandemic in the Brazilian university negatively affected the integration of GAZUFES into the Brazilian curriculum and the number of participants from Brazil. Despite the unequal number of students involved in the project, those who participated were very motivated and engaged in reflective and stimulating interactions.

**Keywords:** Virtual Exchange, English Language Teaching, Brazil, Türkiye, GAZUFES

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### 1. Introduction

Virtual Exchange (VE), also known as telecollaboration (Helm, 2013) or Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) (Wimpenny et al., 2022), when practised as the constructive communication/interaction between geographically distant English language teaching (ELT) professionals and students, combines the potential of intercultural dialogue and the reach of digital technologies to foster teacher education. In this regard, this paper aims to describe and reflect on the VE project between Gazi University and the Federal University of Espírito Santo – UFES – (hereinafter GAZUFES) project that involved pre-service teachers, tutors, and teacher trainers in a university in Brazil and Türkiye in the first semester of 2022 as part of the large-scale Erasmus+ KA3 European Policy Experimentation European Virtual Innovation and Support Networks for Teachers (VALIANT) project led by Robert O’Dowd (<https://valiantproject.eu/contact/>). The GAZUFES VE project lasted six weeks and involved four groups of participants including pre-service teachers and a mediator (English teacher) for each group. The tasks carried out focused on the comparison of the two ELT contexts in Brazil

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and in Türkiye and on the co-creation of ICC-based activities aimed at English students in secondary school in those contexts. The sudden return to in-person classes because of the end of pandemic at UFES negatively affected the integration of the GAZUFES project in the Brazilian curriculum and consequently, it also affected the participation of the target Brazilian pre-service teachers. This resulted in a disparity in numbers of participants between the partners: 20 from Gazi University and nine from UFES (which included both pre-service teachers and mediators). Despite the unequal number of participating students from each context, those who managed to participate were very motivated and engaged in reflective and stimulating interactions, especially during the synchronous meetings held with the smaller groups.

## **2. VE in ELT contexts – a short review**

Orsini-Jones et al. (2022) discuss how VE in the form of COIL projects can create global communities of practice to support international ELT programmes. In a related study, Orsini-Jones et al. (2021) address the potential of VE to develop critical literacy and intercultural awareness ‘in’ action, ‘on’ action and ‘for’ action in ELT through the analysis of the BMELTEVEP (Blending MOOCs in English Language teacher Education with Virtual Exchange during a Pandemic) project. This VE project was carried out between March and April 2021, with students and staff involved in English language teacher education in universities in the Global South (Brazil and Sri Lanka) and one in the Global North (UK) (Orsini-Jones et al., 2022). Participants were involved in the Third Space created through the VE project, engaging with each other synchronously online via Zoom and asynchronously with a global ELT community of practice of over 200,000 participants in a MOOC.

VE has been found to be effective when used in EFL and ELT contexts. Fuchs (2016) found an increase in negotiated design, implementation, and evaluation of language learning tasks with a VE between the USA and Türkiye. Another study with pre-service teachers from Germany and Israel also illustrated that the VE process improved pre-service teachers’ preparedness to teach linguistically and culturally diverse students (Waldman et al., 2019).

Becoming an intercultural speaker and improving ICC have also been studied along with the VE projects in ELT contexts. VE projects promote several opportunities to meet these needs by improving language skills, multiple literacies and interculturality (Guth & Helm, 2010). According to a recent systematic review, intercultural competence is the most frequent trend topic of research related to VE (Barbosa & Ferreira-Lopes, 2021).

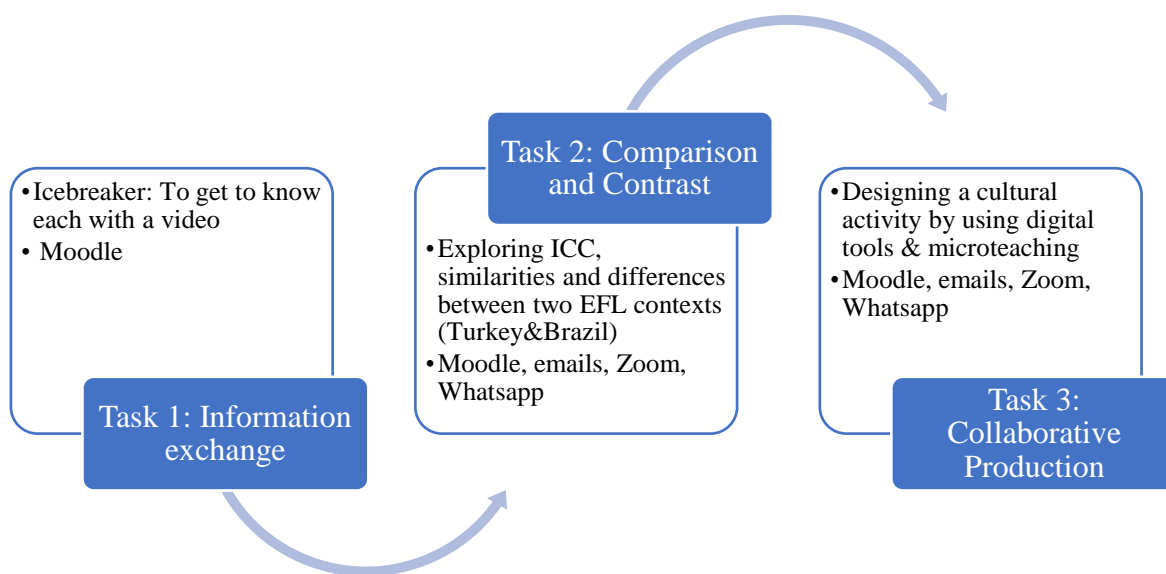
## **3. The GAZUFES VE project**

As previously mentioned, the GAZUFES VE project was carried out between two universities, one in Brazil and another in Türkiye, in 2022. As previously mentioned, GAZUFES was part of the VALIANT project (Virtual Innovation and Support Networks for Teachers), an Erasmus+ KA3 project which aims to test the efficiency of this form of VE for providing students in initial teacher education with access to the realities of the teaching profession. The VALIANT project is a large-scale study that explores different ways in which Virtual Exchange can be used in the contexts of Initial Teacher Education and Continuous Professional

Development. This objective of the project provided an opportunity to work collaboratively with teacher trainers from Türkiye and Brazil. Through the partner search platform, the teacher trainers, who are the authors of this paper, found each other and started the VE project with the guidance of the VALIANT project team.

The GAZUFES project was designed within the framework of the VALIANT project and utilised the VALIANT Moodle platform to display content, organise asynchronous activities and set the tasks for the participants. The VE lasted six weeks and included three tasks (see Figure 1). The task cycle was designed according to the suggested framework by O’Dowd and Waire (2009). The first task was an icebreaker which included preparing introduction videos and uploading them to Moodle. The second task focused on exploring ICC and comparing two EFL contexts (Türkiye & Brazil) and sharing reflections. The final task, a collaborative production, required the student teachers to design a cultural activity collaboratively and microteaching the plan.

**Figure 1.** *Tasks of the GAZUFES Project*



Source: Adapted from O’Dowd & Waire (2009)

In Brazil, at UFES, the GAZUFES VE was offered as an optional activity to the English Language Teaching Practicum course since the university returned to in-person classes and did not allow the integration of online components into the curriculum, so the Brazilian participants engaged in the project on a voluntary basis. The Turkish University, GAZI, integrated the VE into the course called ‘Teaching English to Young Learners II’ in which pre-service teachers are trained in teaching main language skills to young learners through both theoretical and practical aspects (microteaching). Although the VE was integrated into the syllabus of the

course at GAZI, the participants were included on a voluntary basis. Their participation in the VE was evaluated and graded in Türkiye. Two teacher trainers (henceforth TT), associate professors lecturing the English teaching practicum courses at UFES and GAZI, carried out the VE project. TTs were also assisted by five English teachers (who were carrying out their Master's and PhDs studies under the supervision of TTs) who acted as mediators. The remaining participants were undergraduate pre-service language teachers in the two Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Sixteen participants from ELT department of Gazi and 4 from UFES participated in the GAZUFES project.

## 5. Looking back and ahead

The reflections of two TTs and five mediators were analysed to evaluate the project and their ICC components during the period of the VE. The reflections from TTs included similar concerns such as the organisational issues and the VE managing process. They added only few comments on culture (their own culture or noticing any specific aspect from the culture of their partner) and ICC. They also state that despite the unexpected changes in the VE project, both TTs were flexible and ready to suggest solutions.

Furthermore, due to the lack of direct involvement of the TTs in the VE tasks (since the mediators organised and led them), the TTs felt that they could not control the process, which led to some organisational problems and a lack of sense of involvement in the VE process. Thus, the TTs stated that they felt the need to remind the tasks and deadlines to the mediators who were responsible for monitoring the VE tasks. The purpose of involving the mediators into process for monitoring the tasks was to provide an opportunity for the tutors to experience a VE project and to decrease the workload of TTs.

Moreover, the mediators' reflections as facilitators and participants of the VE also included common themes. Mostly, they found the VE effective and had a positive attitude toward it. However, there was low participation in asynchronous activities. Zoom sessions included more intercultural interactions. It was also noted that there was a need for guidance and monitoring for mediators to track the progress in VE tasks and the lack of learner autonomy. Initially there was limited knowledge of the culture of their partner country, but this increased during the VE. Here are some extracts from the mediators' reflections:

*I had really a good impression of the Turkish students. They seemed so motivated and engaged. They like to interact and give their opinions (different from Brazilian students, in general). Although there were some divergent opinions, they showed respect and openness for new ideas. Besides me, there's one Brazilian student who is also participative and motivated. I'm really enjoying working with my group. (M1, BR).*

*In my previous experience as a tutor, the participation in the virtual exchange was part of the discipline, it was even evaluated - not a mere isolated initiative. This time, it is being regarded as an extra activity, which I believe explains the low participation. (M2, BR)*

*Since the number of Brazilian participants is already less than the Turkish ones, missing even one Brazilian participant makes a great difference. I feel like even numbers of Brazilian and Turkish students in each group would produce better results. (M3, TR)*

As previously mentioned, the sudden return to in-person classes because of the end of the pandemic in the Brazilian university affected the integration of the GAZUFES project in the Brazilian curriculum and, consequently, also affected the participation of Brazilian pre-service teachers. Despite the unequal number of students from each context, those who managed to participate were very motivated and engaged in reflective and stimulating interactions, especially during the synchronous meetings held with the smaller groups in Task 2 and Task 3 through Zoom sessions.

## **6. Conclusions**

Based on the experience gained with the GAZUFES VE Project, the authors can conclude that the VE projects between different EFL contexts provide opportunities for different cultural experiences for pre-service teachers of ELT departments/programmes. Since physical mobility between Türkiye and Brazil might not be possible due to the geographical distance, VE Projects can open up intercultural opportunities not available to students in the two countries as Internationalisation at Home (IaH) (Beelen & Jones, 2015) activities. Another implication is that including the mediators as participants in the VE process may offer the possibility of ICC development of the mediators who are managing the VE tasks. Therefore, the VE can provide a positive ICC experience both for the participants of the VE projects and the practitioners managing the process.

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