# 10. Preparing pre-service teachers for integrating virtual exchange into early language teaching

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## Abstract

Promoting authentic language use in a classroom environment is a challenge in foreign language (FL) teaching at an early level. Virtual exchange (VE), as an instructional approach, in which geographically separated students interact with each other using technology, offers students the opportunity to use language for meaningful communication. This chapter presents the views and key challenges identified by pre-service teachers (N=501) regarding the use of VE activities in early language learning. It addresses a previously underexplored area of VE in lower primary education in four different contexts, i.e. Germany, Poland, Slovenia and Spain. The study showed that the participants rarely experienced VE activities as learners and had limited opportunities to learn how to use VE in teaching. Most of them expressed a positive attitude towards the inclusion of VE into primary education and strongly believed it fosters cultural awareness and authentic communication. However, they expressed concerns related to young learners' low language proficiency, difficulties with task design and student motivation. The chapter proposes possible responses to these challenges, namely, exposing pre-service teachers to VE experience, demonstrating good practice examples and creating a community in

which pre-service and in-service teachers collaborate in promoting young learners' communicative skills.

## Keywords

*authentic language use, initial teacher education, primary language instruction, virtual exchange*

## Introduction

In monolingual classroom contexts, young learners often encounter limited opportunities and motivation to use English as a means of authentic communication. Their communicative output may be restricted to isolated words or formulaic expressions, reflecting both minimal linguistic resources and a lack of immediate communicative need. Creating opportunities for authentic communication has long been a priority in language learning, and teachers, including the authors of this chapter, have experimented with initiatives such as inviting international guests or setting up pen-pal projects with partner schools abroad. While these efforts helped to create authentic communicative contexts, they were also limited by the time and logistics involved – letters often took weeks or even months to arrive and the concept of real-time communication with peers in other countries remained largely aspirational. Today, virtual exchange (VE) offers new possibilities for young learners to engage in meaningful communication in English, fostering both language development and intercultural awareness. Although there are many studies reporting on the use of VE in secondary and higher education, many authors observe a gap in VE studies in primary education (Dooly & O'Dowd, 2018; Pennock-Speck & Clavel-Arroitia, 2023; Wigham & Whyte, 2024).

This chapter therefore presents the endeavours of four European universities to address the issue of educating pre-service primary school teachers to incorporate VE into their future lessons in order to create opportunities for authentic language use and intercultural communication in early language teaching. It highlights the challenges of implementing VE in primary classrooms which were identified through a survey of pre-service early language teachers and proposes potential strategies to address these challenges through teacher education.

## Virtual exchange in early language teaching

The first attempts at video conferencing began early in the 21st century (O'Dowd, 2021), but it was only in the last decade that it gained widespread adoption, experiencing a significant surge during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most common definition of VE is "the process of communicating and collaboratively learning with peers from different locations through the use of technology" (Dooly & Vinagre, 2022, p. 393). The authors outline a range of terms that have emerged in connection with VE, beginning with Telecollaboration, eTandem, and Teletandem, and evolving to include Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). O'Dowd (2021) introduced an additional term to the VE lexicon, 'Online Intercultural Exchange' (OIE), highlighting its focus on intercultural dialogue. Today, VE has become the most widely accepted term for describing online communication and collaboration between students.

The implementation of VE into education has predominantly been explored at the secondary and tertiary levels. Existing studies highlight its benefits, including the development of oral fluency and increased willingness to communicate (Dooly & Vinagre, 2022), enhanced intercultural communicative competence (Avgousti, 2018; Commander et al., 2022), and improved digital literacy skills (Hauck, 2019). In contrast, research on VE in primary education remains limited, typically comprising small-scale studies and anecdotal accounts. Among the few empirical investigations, findings suggest that VE fosters greater intercultural awareness

(Alcaraz-Mármol, 2020; Peiser, 2015; Tomas et al., 2021), enhances learners' motivation to study foreign languages (Okumura, 2020), has a positive effect on pupils' speaking skills and their general language competence (Heinzmann et al., 2022), and promotes more authentic interpersonal engagement (Kim, 2020).

Authentic communication within the foreign language classroom remains a complex and widely debated concept. Various scholars have attempted to define it, often emphasizing the meaningfulness of language use. For example, Brown (2014) describes authentic communication as spontaneous and purposeful language use, while Little et al. (1989) associate it with task performance that mirrors real-life language use, aligning with principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Similarly, Nunan (1989) highlights tasks in which learners focus on meaning over form, a core element of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), where learners use authentic language to complete meaningful tasks in the target language (Ellis, 2003).

Achieving authentic communication was a central concern for the authors of this chapter during their early teaching careers and continues to pose a significant challenge for language educators globally. Creating a classroom environment conducive to authentic language use remains difficult (Cook, 2016; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Nonetheless, authentic communication is a fundamental component of VE, as it provides meaningful contexts for interaction, requiring learners to negotiate meaning, express opinions, and collaborate across cultural boundaries (O'Dowd, 2018). While such exchanges reflect real-life communication, they are rarely replicated in traditional classroom settings unless teachers open their classrooms to the outside world.

Cutrim Schmid and Whyte (2015) present a successful VE initiative between primary schools in Germany and France, demonstrating that the authenticity of the tasks positively influenced learners' motivation and use of the target language in genuine interactions. Although learners were encouraged to draw on their full linguistic repertoires, the authors identified opportunities for more creative and learner-centred language use. They advocate for greater attention to VE task design and implementation, along with the development of frameworks to support the language output of young learners.

In their framework, O'Dowd and Waire (2009) propose three main categories of VE tasks: (1) *information exchange activities*, in which learners introduce themselves through presentations; (2) *comparison activities*, where learners engage in dialogues to examine similarities and differences in their lives and schooling; and (3) *collaboration activities*, involving joint efforts to create a shared product. These tasks promote authentic classroom communication but require careful adaptation to suit young learners' linguistic skills. Adequate scaffolding strategies are essential to help students overcome language limitations and communicate effectively with international peers.

Beyond task design and implementation, teachers face additional challenges when integrating VE into early language education. One of the most frequently cited barriers is learners' limited language proficiency (Ala-Kortesmaa & Muñoz, 2023; Dooly & Vinagre, 2022; Wigham & Whyte, 2024). Similarly, Whyte and Cutrim Schmid (2019) acknowledge the difficulty of facilitating authentic language use while accommodating young learners' restricted linguistic resources.

Technical difficulties also emerge as a significant obstacle in VE implementation. These include unstable internet connections and technological malfunctions (Dooly, 2023; Jaramillo Cherrez & Gleason, 2022; Orsini-Jones, 2023). Jaramillo Cherrez and Gleason (2022) observed that teachers frequently need to develop ad hoc strategies to address common technological disruptions in the classroom. These technological challenges were significantly intensified during the rapid transition to remote learning brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019. As Dooly (2023) explains, widespread and prolonged school closures compelled both educators and learners to engage with technology-based instruction on a large scale, thereby exposing considerable deficits in digital infrastructure. Different time zones and schedules even intensified these difficulties by presenting significant logistical challenges that limited opportunities for synchronous communication (Cabrini Simões Calvo & Hartle, 2024; Helm, 2015; Ingrisch-Rupp & Symeonidis, 2025; Yang, 2020).

The scarcity of research in primary VE, combined with the aforementioned challenges, contributes to a general lack of teacher competence in designing, implementing, and evaluating VE projects for young learners (Dooly & Vinagre, 2022). Wigham et al. (2024) report that teachers often struggle with the practical aspects of VE and require guidance in aligning pedagogical tasks with appropriate digital tools. Several other studies emphasize the critical role of both pre-service and in-service teacher education in enabling the successful integration of VE into language teaching (Gutiérrez et al., 2021; O'Dowd et al., 2020; Whyte & Cutrim Schmid, 2019). To effectively harness VE for promoting authentic language use, greater emphasis must be placed on the preparation and professional development of language educators.

## The variety of the early language teaching contexts of the study

Early English language learning varies between the contexts in which the study was conducted. In Slovenia, English is introduced in Grade 1 (age 6), while Spanish children are first exposed to English during pre-primary education (age 3). In Poland, formal instruction begins in Grade 1 (age 7), although foreign language activities are integrated into preschool settings through play. In Germany, foreign language learning is introduced later, in Grade 3 (age 8-9), although some federal states may do so starting from Grade 1. And even though attempts are made to promote multilingualism in all these contexts, English is predominantly taught as a first foreign language (between 90-95% of students learn English in primary and secondary schools). Instructional time in the four contexts slightly differs; in Slovenia, Poland, and Germany, children receive approximately two hours per week in early grades, which increases to three hours in later years, while in Spain, instruction ranges from three to four hours per week. The pedagogical approaches in early language learning also vary; in Slovenia topic and content-based instructions are common, and in Spain, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) is prominent, while Polish and German classrooms tend to rely more on coursebooks. Due to the prevalence of more traditional approaches (with the exception of CLIL), limited number of lessons, and frequently monolingual classes, there is often a lack of opportunities for promotion of the use of FL for authentic communication.

## Pre-service teachers' perspectives on VE in early language learning

This study was part of the INVITED Erasmus+ project (*Integrating primary and pre-school virtual exchange projects into language teacher education*[1]), a collaborative initiative developed by four partner institutions: the Pädagogische Hochschule Freiburg, the University of Warsaw, the University of Ljubljana, and the University of Murcia. The project was created with the shared aim of supporting teacher education programmes in equipping future language

[1] https://invited-project.eu/

teachers with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to use VE as a tool for fostering meaningful communication, authentic language use and intercultural awareness in young learners.

Initially, it was essential to gain insight into the perspectives on the use of VE in primary language learning of future teachers themselves. It was crucial to establish what support they need to use VE confidently and meaningfully with young learners in the future. To explore these issues in order to encourage the use of VE in their prospective classrooms, a needs analysis questionnaire was developed. Its questions were grouped into five thematic sections: participants' understanding of VE, their previous experiences and perceived competences with VE, the challenges they believe VE integration brings into early foreign language education and their expressed needs in designing and implementing VE projects in early language classrooms.

While the questionnaire was innovative in examining pre-service primary school teachers' perspectives on the integration of VE into early foreign language education across four European countries, its design was informed by insights from previous research. Notably, Helm (2015) investigated the practices and challenges associated with telecollaboration in higher education; Gutiérrez et al. (2021) provided practical guidance for educators through a comprehensive handbook on designing VE activities; Dooly and O'Dowd (2018) presented a range of VE project examples along with their associated challenges; O'Dowd and Vinagre (2024) assessed the effectiveness of VE networks within teacher education; and the EVOLVE project (2020) offered valuable findings on the impact of VE on student learning in higher education contexts.

The survey was completed by 501 pre-service early foreign language teachers from Spain, Poland, Slovenia, and Germany. The majority were enrolled in the study programme *Primary Education with English* (41.1%) and were in their fourth year of studies (43.3%). Despite their advanced stage in training, pre-service teachers reported limited exposure to VE throughout their education, either as learners or as participants. Only a small proportion had learned about VE (8.4%) or taken part in such projects during their university studies (7.4%), while only a few had experienced VE earlier in their education, in either primary (5.1%) or secondary (10.2%) school.

Nevertheless, their attitudes toward VE were largely positive. Participants recognised its value, particularly in raising cultural awareness (30.3%) and facilitating authentic, meaningful communication (23.5%) in the language classroom. At the same time, they identified some key challenges, such as primary student language proficiency (21%) and the need for reliable technology and infrastructure (17.1%). Many expressed a desire to learn more about the investigated topic, especially about planning a VE project, designing meaningful tasks, finding appropriate tools and integrating VE effectively into the curriculum. Encouragingly, nearly two-thirds of respondents (66%) stated that they intend to implement VE in their future teaching careers, although a smaller group (20%) remained uncertain, and some felt they lacked the necessary knowledge to implement it (14%).

In general, the survey reflected the vast gaps in the experiences, training opportunities and knowledge about VE among the surveyed pre-service teachers. Despite this, they recognised the opportunities VE offers to young language learners, particularly its promotion of intercultural competence and authentic communication, and demonstrated the willingness to implement VE into their classrooms, provided they are supported in doing so.

## Key challenges of integrating VE into early language teaching

When pre-service teachers were surveyed about the challenges they believed they would face in conducting VE projects in early language classrooms, their responses were very similar, regardless of the countries in which they studied. Besides technology challenges, their main concern was young language learners' low proficiency level, which could hinder the successful execution of the project and the use of authentic communicative activities. Similar concerns regarding low language proficiency levels by young learners impacting VE implementation have been expressed by Dooly and Vinagre (2022) and Ala-Kortesmaa and Muñoz (2023) who have also discussed the challenges of different levels of competence in the VE exchanges.

Another challenge which surfaced in the survey and is related to the language proficiency level of primary learners, is the development and management of VE tasks together with the selection of engaging content areas for young learners. The participants of the study were uncertain how to create meaningful and purposeful VE tasks for young learners, while adapting these tasks to the language level of young learners. Cutrim Schmid and Whyte (2015) ascertained that designing tasks at the right cognitive and linguistic level, with appropriate scaffolding, but at the same time giving students autonomy for self-expression, is challenging even for experienced teachers.

The third challenge identified by the surveyed pre-service teachers which is closely linked to the previous two challenges, is the maintenance of young learners' motivation and engagement throughout the exchange. Similar concerns have been shared by other studies, for example, Emir and Yangın Ekşi (2024) emphasized that pupil engagement plays a critical role in determining the success of VE initiatives, as a lack of motivation can diminish pupils' willingness to participate meaningfully. Likewise, Yang (2020) indicated how different levels

of student participation significantly influence the overall effectiveness of VE projects. Erk and Benčina (this volume) also emphasise the important role of teachers in maintaining young learner motivation in learning English as a foreign language. One of the strategies of enhancing motivation is through the use of authentic communicative tasks, because they make learning another language meaningful and relevant for the learners (Dörnyei, 2019; Ellis, 1997; Nunan, 1989). Therefore, we believe that pre-service teachers need to be equipped with the knowledge on how to implement authentic communicative tasks in VE projects to increase students' engagement and motivation level.

## Recommended responses to the challenges of integrating VE into early language teaching

Although virtual exchange (VE) offers valuable opportunities for fostering authentic communication and intercultural understanding among young learners, its introduction to pre-service primary language teacher education highlighted the importance of embedding VE experiences at multiple levels within teacher education programmes to ensure that pre-service teachers are effectively prepared to implement such initiatives in their future classrooms. The implementation of the questionnaire and the analysis of the findings was the beginning phase of the educational design process described in this chapter.

The main difficulty, as revealed by the survey data, was that many student teachers had limited exposure to VE, both during their own school education and within their pre-service teacher training programmes. This limited experience could be one of the reasons why the survey participants seemed to have doubts regarding both the pedagogical and practical dimensions of VE. In order to provide a VE experience to the pre-service teachers, we utilised a Blended Intensive Programme (BIP), which includes an extensive VE component, within our teacher

education courses (Brzosko-Barratt et al., 2025). Between 2022 and 2025, we organized three editions of a BIP for 107 pre-service English primary education students from three universities aimed at integrating English into the primary curriculum. The programme encompassed a three-month VE component with a one-week study visit to a host country. In order to showcase types of meaningful tasks in VE (O'Dowd & Waire, 2009), we engaged the participants in a wide range of *information exchange activities* (e.g., structured icebreakers to foster intercultural understanding and rapport-building activities), *comparison and analysis* (e.g., exploration of each other's educational contexts, CLIL lesson examples) and *collaboration tasks* (e.g., planning CLIL lessons in international groups). Participating in VE as learners allowed student teachers to build confidence in managing virtual collaboration, understand how intercultural interactions unfold online and familiarise themselves with digital tools. While the evaluation outcomes of the BIP were largely positive, the findings highlighted the need for further efforts to optimise the use of VE in teacher education programmes to include more opportunities for online collaborative exchange among future teachers so that these experiences could become a springboard for reflection when pre-service teachers begin developing VE projects for their own students.

Integrating VE into teacher education required creating a community to bridge two distinct worlds: active VE practitioners and university-based teacher educators. This process involved overcoming several persistent divides, particularly the long-standing gap between universities and schools, which continues to hinder progress in teacher preparation. In all participating countries, VE was largely absent from both teacher education curricula and formal teacher education standards, existing more in the domain of practical innovation than within structured

university coursework. Therefore, we decided to create an online community[2] of practitioners, researchers, teacher educators and student teachers as a group on the eTwinning platform, which is part of the ESEP (European School Education Platform). The community serves several purposes, such as providing examples of good VE practice focused on young learners, finding resources for learning how to carry out VE projects, and most importantly, creating a safe space for mutual learning and support. Previous research has shown that the implementation of VE tasks is highly dependent on multiple contextual factors, including individual teaching styles, learner proficiency levels, and classroom management choices (Wigham & Whyte, 2024). In this context, incorporating multiple voices and perspectives in our community becomes essential, as it highlights the diversity of approaches educators may take when adapting VE to their specific teaching environments.

To support pre-service teachers, a collection of teacher education resources consisting of various presentations, short videos and webinars[3] has been compiled. These materials aim at providing information on the planning process, the use of digital tools in VE projects and ways of overcoming some technological challenges. Our goal was to present a diversity of teacher experiences to give voice to varied beliefs and pedagogical approaches within VE.

To facilitate understanding of how VE can be effectively implemented into early language education, high-quality and contextually relevant examples of VE projects conducted within the project countries were collected. Considering different aspects that made these projects successful led to the development of a set of criteria for designing and implementing VE

[2] https://school-education.ec.europa.eu/en/etwinning/group/virtual-exchange-primary-and-pre-school-language-education

[3] All materials are available on https://invited-project.eu/.

projects at primary level. These criteria address areas such as finding appropriate and engaging content, thoughtful and creative task planning, the use of technology, and, most importantly, facilitating authentic communication.

While previous research has highlighted the importance of task design in facilitating VE with young learners (Cutrim Schmid & Whyte, 2015; Pennock-Speck & Clavel-Arroitia, 2023; Whyte & Cutrim Schmid, 2019), participants in our study also expressed concerns about how to design activities that are communication-oriented while being appropriate for the linguistic and cognitive needs of young children. Demonstrating the construction of task cycles and the sequencing of communicative activities is thus essential in preparing student teachers to design effective tasks in their future classrooms. The analysis of the tasks compiled within the INVITED project indicated frequent use of role plays, information gap activities, drawing, miming and various forms of arts and crafts activities.

Since communication is an essential component of VE tasks, particular emphasis was placed on implementing pre-planned scaffolding to support young learners in communicating despite their limited language proficiency. Previous research has shown that VE with young learners requires substantial scaffolding (Li & Zou, 2021; Ligorio & Van Veen, 2006), yet novice teachers are often less likely to implement such strategies effectively. Therefore, in the context of teacher education, it is essential to prepare pre-service teachers to recognise the cognitive and linguistic demands of VE activities and to understand the importance of integrating appropriate scaffolding techniques.

To support this goal, significant efforts were made to provide concrete models of practice that would help pre-service teachers understand how VE tasks can be effectively adapted for young

learners. One such example was a project that was realised at pre-primary schools in Poland, Greece and Slovakia[4]. Inspired by *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle, the project aimed to develop students' scientific thinking, language skills, and intercultural collaboration through a series of hands-on and virtual learning tasks, which illustrated several key characteristics of effective task design in the context of VE. The central inquiry of the project was: "What materials make the best cocoon?" Students worked both synchronously and asynchronously. Each task was designed with a clear communicative purpose whether predicting, justifying, or reacting to ideas to ensure that language was used meaningfully. The task sequence was carefully structured to scaffold learning: beginning with hypothesis formation, followed by collaborative decision-making, and culminating in hands-on experimentation and reflection. Teachers supported young learners linguistically through pre-taught vocabulary and sentence frames, ensuring that language demands remained accessible. Cognitive demands were also well-matched to the learners' age, with tasks focusing on concrete experiences and simple reasoning.

An example of a task sequence in the project:

**Task 1**: **Hypothesis Formation and Material Selection**

Children began by formulating hypotheses about which materials would be most suitable for making a cocoon. They selected materials they believed would be effective (e.g., cotton, cloth) and some they thought would not work well (e.g., plastic, paper), explaining their choices using drawings and simple sentences.

Their suggestions were posted on a shared Padlet, making them visible to VE partner classes.

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lBgqTzheYto&ab_channel=INVITEDproject

**Preparation/support:**

- Teachers reviewed the key vocabulary such as *thick, thin, soft* and *hard* through multisensory activities.

**Task 2: Collaborative Decision-Making and Voting**

During a synchronous online session with VE partners, each student voted for the material they thought would make the best cocoon. They practiced justifying their opinions, using sentence frames such as: *I think cotton is good because it is soft. I think a leaf is not good because it is too thin.*

Students narrowed their choices down to four materials: plastic, leaves, cloth, and paper.

**Preparation/Support:**

- Prior to the online session, children were working in pairs, practising the phrase *Show me something soft/thin/thick.*
- Each group had a set of different materials, and they had to decide which is the best to make a bed for their teddy. They used the phrase: *I think (cotton) is (the best), because it is (soft)*.

**Task 3: Experimentation and Discussion**

Each partner group prepared a cocoon prototype using one of the selected materials. During another online collaborative session, the groups presented their cocoons and predicted whether their peers' cocoons would succeed or fail when tested. While testing the cocoons, students described the materials they used and responded spontaneously to their peers' designs with comments and predictions, e.g. *That will break. It looks strong. Cocoon small, caterpillar big.* This phase encouraged scientific reasoning, active listening, and real-time dialogue between peers across cultures.

**Preparation/Support**

- Teachers facilitated the creation of the cocoon prototypes.
- Students practiced simple sentences needed for predictions, e.g. *It is good. It will break.* Etc.

Compiling and analysing the exemplary projects and defining the set of criteria became influential in designing the teacher education modules to address the challenges identified in our study. The teacher education modules included topics such as selection of appropriate and engaging content, application of digital tools, as well as the planning process. The goal was to enable pre-service teachers to select engaging, age-appropriate content that integrates multiple subjects and promotes inclusivity, cultural awareness, and early literacy. It was also important to demonstrate that projects should produce tangible outcomes showcasing children's skills and involve families and communities to extend the learning impact beyond the classroom. Furthermore, there is a unit in the module that illustrates how to reflect on the effective, responsible and safe use of digital tools in VE tasks.

## Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to address the challenges to implementing VE with young learners identified by preservice teachers and to present possible responses to these challenges through teacher education.

The study of 501 pre-service early FL teachers across four European countries revealed that the participants had limited experience with VE, either as learners or as future teachers. However, they acknowledged its value in language learning, particularly in fostering intercultural awareness and promoting authentic communication among young language learners. Other

studies (e.g. Kim, 2020; O'Dowd, 2018; Wigham & Whyte, 2024) recognised VE as a useful tool for allowing authentic communication in the language classroom, which is often lacking in monolingual FL contexts. The study participants also expressed concerns about practical implementation of VE into early language classrooms, particularly young learners' low language proficiency as well as difficulties with task design and student motivation. These findings seem to be consistent with existing literature, highlighting similar challenges faced by other teachers (Emir & Yangın Ekşi, 2024; Yang, 2020). To address these barriers, some recommendations are provided, including embedding VE experience into teacher education through other programmes, e.g., BIP; the development of a VE repository with good practice examples, resources, webinars; pre-service teacher education modules; and the formation of a collaborative learning community. These initiatives provide concrete VE experience, exemplify effective VE models and offer opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop practical skills in a supported environment.

Nevertheless, many challenges in VE integration still exist, as it often relies solely on the innovation and commitment of individual teachers and teacher educators. Other chapters in this volume (Jang & Yang, Kos & Bergner, among others), emphasise the key role of teacher education in preparing future teachers in the use of appropriate and efficient methodology in teaching young learners and the importance of letting pre-service teachers try out these methodologies in the classrooms during their studies. This requires joint effort in the form of a continuous learning model that supports pre-service and in-service teachers and teacher educators as active and collaborative learners (Näykki et al., 2021). This shared learning space would allow pre-service teachers to plan and implement VE activities alongside more experienced educators, while in-service teachers could gain fresh ideas for their classrooms, and teacher educators could explore ways of introducing VE into teacher education

curricula. Since the majority of the research in VE is done at higher levels of education, such initiatives would also enable more research-based solutions to the challenges that VE brings.

The strategies for building the skills of pre-service teachers to prepare them for successful VE integration into early language teaching proposed in this chapter can be transferable to other contexts. Firstly, they address the omnipresent challenges that persist in other teacher education programmes, i.e., limited VE experience, as well as lack of opportunities and resources focused on VE in young learner education. The recommended strategies can also contribute to more engaging and meaningful interactions in the primary classroom by fostering authentic communication and intercultural competence among young language learners. We firmly believe that the key lies in teacher preparation, which addresses VE integration on multiple levels, including personal experience, showcasing good practice examples and offering pre-service teachers support through learning communities. Such communities are needed to ensure a safe place for mutual learning and pedagogical vision and would allow VE to become a transformative tool for early language education globally.

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