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Acquiring Intercultural Communicative Competence through Virtual Exchange

Gabriela TUTUNEA
Ph.D. student, Theoretical and Applied Linguistics
Transilvania University of Braşov
gabriela.tutunea@gmail.com

Abstract. Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is an indispensable skill when interacting with people from other cultures, given the clash of perspectives that intercultural encounters may bring about. Being a skill that can be taught and learned, there is a wide concern for developing ICC through formal education. This involves designing specific training tasks that can enhance the acquisition of ICC with the help of virtual exchange (VE) activities.

The aim of the present paper is to highlight a specific way in which the educational goals associated with ICC development can be achieved. To this end, an analysis of 55 eTwinning intercultural projects has been conducted in order to determine the relationship between ICC and VE.

The statistical data described here indicate that VE fosters the development of ICC. Moreover, they are indicative of the fact that the VE task types that are most effective in the development of ICC can be identified through computation.

Keywords: intercultural communication, ICC, virtual exchange, eTwinning

1. Introduction

Intercultural encounters happen all the time, offline and online, for professional, social, and personal reasons. Political or business meetings, medical or educational settings, online games or social website contexts in which one part is of a different culture are very common.

An intercultural encounter, obviously, requires sharing a language. The communication process requires sharing a culture (Hofstede et al. 2010). Auwalu Issa (2015) argues that culture is the result of the process of communication within a community. In the scholarly literature, two opposing views of the process of communication stand out. One describes communication as a one-way process, "a transmission of information, ideas, emotions, skills, knowledge,

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by using symbols, words, pictures, figures, graphs or illustrations" (Seema 2010 in Auwalu Issa 2015: 3), while the other refers to communication as a two-way process that consists in "an exchange of ideas and feelings between individuals in a society, with a hope of feedback" (Pate–Dauda 2015, in Auwalu Issa 2015: 3–4). In an intercultural exchange, the message encoded by the sender projects a different perspective than that of the receiver, and it is likely to end up in false interpretations, cultural misunderstandings, or even conflicts (Bhabha 1994).

With this in mind, this study attempts to answer the following question: how can VE determine the development of ICC?

The discussion below will begin with some considerations on the nature of ICC as reflected in the scholarly literature and its components (section 2). It will then go on to recap the strategies currently proposed for ICC development within the formal educational paradigm (section 3).

2. The nature of ICC

Perry and Southwell (2011: 455) give a succinct interpretation of ICC, describing it as "the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures". Byram (1997), on the other hand, builds a framework that extensively characterizes what appropriately and effectively literally refer to knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical awareness.

To Byram's model, Müller-Hartmann and Schocker-von Ditfurth (2007, in Vos 2018) later added valuable insights that help understand the original model. In what follows, the focus of the discussion is on Byram's (1997) framework since it has a significant bearing on the analytical part of the present paper.

The knowledge component is targeted at grasping the defining features underlying both cultures in contact or, in Byram's own words, "knowledge about one's own and the other's culture, knowledge about social processes and social interactions" (1997: 35). In this connection, Finkbeiner (2009: 154) makes an excellent association between having knowledge of other's perspectives and a "cultural GPS" (global positioning system) that helps understanding various settings.

With regard to adopting the right attitude, Keller (1999: 14) argues that "attitude is everything:" an individual with the appropriate attitude does something towards smoothing the differences of perspectives that intercultural encounters bring about. As for attitudes, "curiosity, openness, readiness to suspend belief about one's own and disbelief about other cultures" (Byram 1997: 34) are key elements in dealing with other perspectives. He advocates for an ethnorelativistic stance, or, as he puts it, the individual's ability to "decentre", which he defines as "the ability to see how own values, beliefs, behaviours might look from the

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perspective of an outsider who has a different set of values, beliefs, behaviours" (Byram 1997: 34).

The abilities above rest upon two different sets of skills. One set consists of skills that enable individuals to mentally correlate their knowledge of both cultures. Specifically, Byram identifies them as "skills of interpreting and relating [that] consist in the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, explain and relate it to documents or events from one's own culture" (1997: 37). Müller-Hartmann and Schocker-von Ditfurth (2007, in Vos 2018: 43) explain the skills of interpreting and relating as the art of understanding the other.

The other set includes social learning skills, or, as Byram puts it, "skills of discovery and interaction [that] consist in the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and to operate knowledge, attitudes, and skills in real-time communication and interaction" (1997: 37–38). Apart from attitude (see above), collaborating with people from other cultures requires an aptitude to adapt quickly to new situations (Müller-Hartmann–Schocker-von Ditfurth 2007, in Vos 2018: 43).

Critical cultural awareness, an ability that has been found to support language acquisition (Nugent–Catalano 2015) is the centrepiece component of Byram's model. It refers to the ability to take "a critical perspective on one's own culture and a critical evaluation of the other's culture" (Byram 1997: 53). Browne and Keeley (2012, in Jatiningsih et al. 2019: 696) explain critical awareness through the use of critical thinking in reconsidering one's own beliefs, perspectives, and behaviours. Müller-Hartmann and Schocker-von Ditfurth (2007, in Vos 2018: 43) observe that interacting with people from other cultures imminently implies an evaluation of the other's perspectives, attitudes, and behaviours.

ICC can be achieved either informally, by going abroad and living in another culture, or formally, in the context of the classroom. From this point forward, the focus of the discussion is on acquiring ICC in the classroom environment.

3. Acquiring ICC through formal education

Along with the interpretation of Byram's (1997) model, Müller-Hartmann and Schocker-von Ditfurth (2007, in Vos 2018: 43) suggest a range of tasks geared towards acquiring ICC at each stage, in the context of the classroom. With respect to acquiring knowledge, Müller-Hartmann and Schocker-von Ditfurth (2007, in Vos 2018: 43) recommend "watching films, reading texts, searching the Internet, and making use of authentic material".

Regarding sparking curiosity and inciting interest, the authors are of the opinion that it can be achieved via "brainstorming and [using] visual aids, written texts about other cultures, literature, songs or interviews, virtual and face-to-face

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meetings". They also consider that appropriate tasks targeted at developing the necessary skills are "writing new scenes, role plays, games, chats, study visits, and ethnographic observations".

The Council of Europe put forward reflection and discussion as the most important tasks through which students can analyse different perspectives (Lindner–Méndez Garcia 2014: 233).

Two frameworks, namely the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (AIE) and the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters through Visual Media (AIEVM) that guide students to describe, interpret, and evaluate their own intercultural experiences have been designed in this respect.

Over the time, the ways to acquire ICC have multiplied and diversified, as shown by the range of activities and classroom tasks listed below. In a nutshell, they involve:

1. lectures, readings, films, multimedia presentations, and creative writing – in Gudykunst et al. 1977, Tudorache 2012, Navaitienė et al. 2013;
2. dialogues and discussions – in Brislin–Yoshida 1994, Kramsch 1998, Guilherme 2000, Finkbeiner 2009, Tudorache 2012, Navaitienė et al. 2013;
3. role play – Brislin–Yoshida 1994, Gudykunst et al. 1977, Arakelian 2009, Navaitienė et al. 2013, Reid 2015;
4. simulations – Gudykunst et al. 1977, Spodek 1983, Tudorache 2012, Navaitienė et al. 2013;
5. teaching specific behaviours, cultural assimilation, cultural capsule, cultural island – David 1972, Gudykunst et al. 1977, Reid 2015;
6. interactions, study abroad, and virtual exchange collaborations – Brislin–Pedersen 1976, Gudykunst et al. 1977, Tudorache 2012, Navaitienė et al. 2013;
7. reflections – Arakelian 2009, Tomalin 2009, Tudorache 2012, Lustig–Koester 2013, Navaitienė et al. 2013;
8. ethnographic tasks, writing autobiography or biography – Finkbeiner 2009, Navaitienė et al. 2013;
9. research – Reid 2015;
10. cross-cultural analysis, comparison – Robinson 1985, Finkbeiner 2009, Tomalin 2009, Reid 2015, Tudorache 2012, Navaitienė et al. 2013;
11. reformulations – Reid 2015;
12. observations – Reid 2015;
13. predictions – Reid 2015;
14. storytelling and image-making – Navaitienė et al. 2013;
15. project work – Navaitienė et al. 2013.

Not all of these activities can be adapted to distance working. Those tasks that can be adapted to working remotely will be considered in section 4.

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4. How VE can help

VE refers to encounters that are organized in institutional settings, take place over the Internet, and involve students from different countries. VE can assist ICC development by providing an environment for the acquisition of knowledge and the practice of skills, as well as by enhancing motivation, changing negative attitudes, and fostering critical awareness. Navaitienė et al. (2013: 36) consider that experience, i.e. interaction with people from other cultures, is a very productive way of acquiring intercultural competence: "experiential learning or learning by doing is more effective than lecturing as it may include the methods of experience, comparison, analysis, reflection and cooperative activities".

Lindner and Méndez Garcia (2014: 231) raise awareness of the fact that the intercultural dialogue should be designed so that "it purposefully takes the participants out of their comfort zones". Therefore, if the tasks are masterly outlined so that they provoke an inner crisis, then the participants get to acknowledge and respect the cultural differences (Schneider–von der Emde 2006: 183).

With the help of technology that supports interaction, students of different cultures can develop collaborative projects. Collaborative learning implies dialogue, and dialogue supports understanding, skill development, and the building of new knowledge (Motteram–Forrester, 2005: 283). Hockly (2014) assesses the research of VE from 1990 to 2014. She reaches the conclusion that "the success of an online intercultural exchange project is not dependent on the technology put in use, but on the pedagogical framework and task design" (2014: 5). The interaction can be synchronous, in the form of in-class discussions, or asynchronous, involving the use of forums or emails.

O'Dowd and Ware (2009: 176) analysed more than 40 articles reported in international journals and edited collections, and they compiled a list of 12 task types and their intended outcomes put in use during VEs. Their typology is based on the educational objectives that VE is expected to cater for:

Table 1. *O'Dowd and Ware's (2009: 176) VE task types*

Virtual Exchange Activities	Intended Outcomes
Analysing cultural products	Awareness of target culture Awareness of one's own culture
Authoring "Cultural Autobiographies"	Establishing personal relationship with partners Increased awareness of cultural differences
Carrying out virtual interviews	Development of intercultural communicative competence
Carrying out "closed outcome" discussions	Negotiation of meaning Development of communicative competence
Collaborating on product creation	Development of intercultural communicative competence
Comparing class questionnaires	Awareness of different cultural meanings

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Virtual Exchange Activities	Intended Outcomes
Comparing parallel texts	Increased awareness of target culture and one's own culture
Engaging in informal discussion	Development of communicative competence
Exchanging story collections	Cultural knowledge
Making cultural translations/adaptations	Development of intercultural communicative competence
Transforming text genres	Cultural awareness Communicative competence
Translating	Communicative competence

5. Analytical framework of the present research

The analytical framework of the present research is based on a systematic review of the scholarly literature in the field, as summarized in sections 2 and 4 above. It consists of a benchmark made up of the five criteria found in Byram's (1997) ICC model and the 12 task types for VE listed by O'Dowd and Ware's (2009). They will be briefly outlined below.

5.1. *Knowledge* refers to having acquired cultural knowledge of one's own and/or of the partners' culture such as: the school, the town, the country, way of living, traditions, customs, etc. Scientific knowledge is not included for ICC evaluation.

5.2. *Skills of discovery and interaction* point to collaboration and cooperation skills, based on the ability of seeing the other's perspective.

5.3. *Skills of interpreting and relating* label globally the ability to grasp cultural differences and/or similarities.

5.4. *Attitude* refers to becoming tolerant, adopting a positive attitude towards oneself and the other.

5.5. *Critical cultural awareness* labels one's ability to be critical with regard to oneself, to one's own perspective of seeing things.

5.6. *Analysing cultural products* points to activities of analysing information such as texts, images, or videos.

5.7. *Authoring "Cultural Autobiographies"* stands for activities of presenting one's own school, town, country, traditions, or customs, writing a story, or creating an artefact.

5.8. *Carrying out virtual interviews* consists in collecting answers to the same questions from respondents from both cultures.

5.9. *Carrying out "closed outcome" discussions* consists in dialogues on common themes, which often takes the form of a debate involving the whole class.

5.10. *Collaborating on product creation* designates activities of co-creation of a song, a story, a quiz, a website, etc. with partners of different cultures.

5.11. *Comparing class questionnaires* implies the existence of a quiz and displaying the results of the poll.

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5.12. *Comparing parallel texts and/or cultural products* indicates the presence of activities that require identifying similarities and/or differences between equivalent productions in one's own and the other's culture.

5.13. *Engaging in informal discussion* indicates not only the presence of synchronous communication, such as chat or Skype meetings, but also participation in forums.

5.14. *Exchanging story collections and/or cultural products* indicates the presence of sharing work activities.

5.15. *Making cultural translations and/or adaptations* is used when a project includes the presence of translations of authentic materials such as songs, stories, poems, documents, etc.

5.16. *Transforming text genres* is an activity that consists in transforming a poem/song/video into a story or vice versa.

5.17. *Translating* refers to translation for communication.

6. Data collection and approach

Three types of projects are developed within the context of pre-university formal education. Projects on discipline-specific topics are widespread mainly among hard sciences. Most often they conclude with a contest. Joint projects involving schools and organizations are devised with the aim of preparing pupils for the workplace, putting them in connection with experts in the field. Intercultural projects aim at initiating pupils in collaborative learning with peers of different cultures.

Erasmus is the European programme for education, and it co-finances the eTwinning platform. The platform is devised for personnel working in schools in European countries, enabling them to communicate, collaborate, and develop intercultural projects. The projects are available online at the address: https://live.etwinning.net/projects. Being a collaboration between schools from different countries, each project is evaluated by the representatives of the European Commission in that country and can be awarded the National Quality Label (NQL).

A project that earns at least two NQLs is awarded the European Quality Label (EQL).

The criteria of measurement for an eTwinning Quality Label can be found at: https://www.etwinning.net/en/pub/benefits/recognition/etwinning-national-quality-lab.htm. Because the quality label criteria depend on the presence of activities such as pupils interacting with their partners and working collaboratively using methods such as problem solving, information gathering, research, comparative work, and role-play (e.g. artists, journalists, scientists, actors, technicians), I assumed that I would find ICC elements in the projects. The corpus that I analysed consists of 55 EQL-awarded eTwinning projects, all

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of which had Romanian participants, used English as a working language, and were developed between 18.09.2006 and 25.01.2020. For each project, there is a description available in the "About" tab of the project website.

In the description of every project, I searched for the ICC elements that make up Byram's model and the VE elements from O'Dowd and Ware's framework. These criteria did not appear verbatim in the description of the project, but I identified them based on how Byram, and O'Dowd and Ware defined them and on how the project was presented on its webpage. The data resulting from the content analysis were employed to quantitatively evaluate the way in which eTwinning projects lead to the development of ICC skills by employing VE tasks.

The approach to the data in hand was statistical: for every type of ICC outcome from the Byram's framework identified in the project, I assigned 1 point. If the element was not found in the entire description, I associated 0 points. Then I calculated the sum of these values, representing the number of ICC components targeted by the project. In the same way, I proceeded for VE tasks, searching for the elements devised by O'Dowd and Ware and counting the tasks.

In order to interpret the data, I resorted to the theory of probability. I used correlation in order to determine the relationship between two phenomena illustrated by two sets of values. In 1896, Pearson introduced the formula for the correlation coefficient that determines whether two sets of data increase and/or decrease simultaneously, as follows:

$$\frac{(x_1 - \bar{x})(y_1 - \bar{y}) + (x_2 - \bar{x})(y_2 - \bar{y}) + \cdots + (x_n - \bar{x})(y_n - \bar{y})}{\sqrt{(x_1 - \bar{x})^2 + (x_2 - \bar{x})^2 + \cdots + (x_n - \bar{x})^2}\sqrt{(y_1 - \bar{y})^2 + (y_2 - \bar{y})^2 + \cdots + (y_n - \bar{y})^2}}$$

The correlation coefficient calculates the degree of similarity (Asuero et al. 2006: 41) between two ranges of values $x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_n$ and $y_1, y_2, \ldots, y_n$, where $\bar{x}$ is the symbol for the mean of the $x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_n$ values, and $\bar{y}$ is the symbol for the mean of the $y_1, y_2, \ldots, y_n$ values. Correlation is largely employed in research, especially in fields such as engineering, medicine, business, pharmacology, etc.

The correlation coefficient can vary between -1 and 1. Thus, when the correlation is zero, the two phenomena are statistically independent, which means that there is absolutely no relationship between them. When the correlation is 1, the variations of the two phenomena are identical. The correlation can also be negative, meaning that an increase in values of one phenomenon happens simultaneously with a decrease in the other. The Microsoft Excel software is equipped with the *CORREL* function, which measures the correlation coefficient between two sets of values.

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7. Examples

In this section, a few examples illustrate the way in which content analysis has been put to use in order to determine the values for the ICC and VE criteria.

Example 1

In the project "You are the picture – Tu eres el cuadro" (https://live.etwinning.net/projects/project/129411), schools from Spain, Portugal, Italy, Romania, Turkey, Greece, Armenia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, and France were involved, being devised for pupils aged between 15 and 19. I have identified acquiring cultural knowledge (5.1 above) and skills of interpreting and relating (5.2 above) from the ICC section in the following lines: "the project consists of photographs imitating famous paintings of the major European museums. Students pose and imitate the characters in the picture and then perform the picture." The sum of ICC components from the Byram's (1997) model is 2 because there is 1 point for each criterion.

With regard to the VE tasks, I have identified authoring cultural autobiographies (5.7 above) and collaborating on product creation (5.10 above): "study and interpret the works of art in our museums from different cultures". There is also the point for translating (5.17 above) and the point for making the project website (5.10 above). The sum of VE task types identified in this project is 4.

Example 2

The project "Getting to Know Each Other" (https://live.etwinning.net/projects/project/21065) involved schools from Poland, United Kingdom, Turkey, France, Latvia, Lithuania, Italy, Germany, Spain, Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovakia, being devised for pupils aged between 11 and 17. In the ICC section, I have identified two criteria consistent with those in my framework. I have counted 1 point for acquiring knowledge about one's own and the other's culture (5.1 above), because students are required to gather information about their own school, town, and country. Consequently, they learn about their partners' school, town, and country. Another point is set to attitude (5.4 above) because of the aims expressed therein: "reach positive conclusions about their own lives, as well as those in other cultures". Therefore, the value for ICC is 2 for this project.

The value for the VE criterion is 5; one point is awarded for analysing cultural products (5.6 above), because pupils are asked to "examine their school community, the local arena, their country and Europe". Another point is set to comparing cultural products (5.12 above) because they arrive at comparing their own ideas with their partners. One point is given because in the process of presenting their own school, town, or country they author cultural autobiographies (5.7 above). Another point is given to collaborating on product creation (5.10 above) activity,

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because all information is uploaded on the website of the project. The other point is for translation (5.17 above) for communication.

Example 3

The project "Give 5: A Healthy Living Toolbox – the whole school program" (https://live.etwinning.net/projects/project/141675) involved schools from Poland, North Macedonia, Italy, Turkey, Spain, Romania, Portugal, and Lithuania, addressing pupils aged between 6 and 13. The score for the ICC criterion is 1: knowledge acquisitions (5.1 above) of the other's way of living are targeted in this project.

The score for the VE criterion is 4: one point is assigned for authoring cultural autobiographies (5.7 above), because students are required to create documents with regard to daily life in their own country, 1 point is set to collaborating on the product creation (5.10 above) task found in the line: "[t]he main result of the project will be the [t]oolbox", 1 point is assigned for the exchanging cultural products (5.14 above) task identifiable in the line: "transfer the best practices to partner schools and implement innovative practices", and 1 point is marked for engagement in the informal discussions (5.13 above) task found in the line "[d] uring the project meetings we will communicate face to face".

Example 4

The project "A Book Club" (https://live.etwinning.net/projects/project/155790) involved pupils aged between 15 and 17 from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Armenia, France, Italy, Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovakia. The score for the ICC criterion is 5 points as follows: 1 point for knowledge acquisition (5.1 above) as stated in the line "understanding of customs and traditions [...] that belong to other cultures", 1 point for skills of interpreting and relating (5.3 above), that is, "what is common, what is different from my national literature", 1 point for skills of discovery and interaction (5.2 above), as mentioned in the project description: "collaborative and creative skills", "negotiation", and "team working skills", 1 point for the critical cultural awareness criterion (5.5 above) reflected in the line: "raise awareness towards literature and global values", and 1 point for attitude (5.2 above), suggested by the reference to the idea of "tolerance".

For the VE tasks, the score is 7 points obtained from: 1 point for analysing cultural products (5.6 above) inferred from the phrase: "analysing information", 1 point for authoring cultural autobiographies (5.7 above) plus 1 point for exchanging cultural products (5.14 above) on account of "presenting and commenting upon our holiday read", 1 point for collaborating on product creation (5.10 above) due to the presence of "collaborative writing", 1 point for comparing cultural products (5.12 above) owing to the presence of "what is common, what is different from my national literature" and "get more information about works whose counterparts

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you find representative", and 1 point for making cultural translations (5.15 above) as a result of the presence of "translations made by students of fragments they loved from the literary work they read". Finally, 1 point is assigned to translation for communication (5.17 above).

8. Data analysis

A relationship between ICC and VE is warranted by the correlation coefficient between the ranges of values for ICC and VE, whose value is 0.307714. Therefore, the VE activities developed in the context of eTwinning projects foster the development of ICC abilities.

However, it should be noted here that the eTwinning projects aim not only at developing ICC but also at pedagogical innovation, extensive use of technology, and curricular integration such as science, environmental issues, or entrepreneurship. For instance, when working on an experiment-based project in the field of physics, students practice only the skills of discovery and interaction (criterion 5.2) from the whole ICC framework because, in this particular case, all knowledge is related to science, not to culture.

In what follows, the correlation coefficients between the VE task types and ICC and the frequencies of occurrence for the VE task are displayed in *Table 2* below. The VE activities are ranked according to their correlation with ICC.

Table 2. *Correlation values between VE task types and ICC*

VE task type	Correlation with ICC	No. of projects in which the task is used
Making cultural translations and/or adaptations	0.912871	4
Carrying out virtual interviews	0.771744	4
Comparing class questionnaires	0.768273	5
Carrying out "closed outcome" discussions	0.644658	14
Engaging in informal discussions	0.282038	20
Exchanging story collections and/or cultural products	0.163461	47
Analysing cultural products	0	20
Authoring "Cultural Autobiographies"	0	46
Collaborating on product creation	0	50
Comparing parallel texts and/or cultural products	0	17
Transforming text genres	0	0
Translating	0	46

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The highest correlation value, 0.912871, occurs in the case of tasks involving *making cultural translations and/or adaptations*. The data show that this is the most effective VE task type, and it was used only when the values for ICC were higher. Only 4 out of the 55 projects refer to *making cultural translations and/or adaptations*.

This activity is aimed at developing a good command of the foreign language and extensive knowledge of one's own culture as well as the other's culture. It also involves other VE tasks. In the first instance, pupils have to search for an authentic text, an activity that makes them develop skills of discovery, acquire knowledge of their own culture as well as appreciate and to some extent acquire a positive attitude towards their own culture (criteria 5.1, 5.2, and 5.4, respectively, above). Then they have to translate the text; translation entails explaining cultural particularities, which implies a prior analysis of the cultural particularities.

Their partners have to perform the same tasks. In this way, pupils acquire knowledge of their partners' culture (criterion 5.1) and, to some extent, might appreciate the other's culture (criterion 5.4).

At the same time, pupils relate the elements from the other's culture to elements from their own culture, developing their skills of interpreting (criterion 5.3). Moreover, with a positive attitude, students can achieve critical awareness (criterion 5.5) by analysing and comparing features of their own and the other's culture. Thus, being involved in a project that includes *making cultural translations and/or adaptations*, students can develop all five components of the ICC framework. Therefore, the projects that include this task can record the highest ICC values.

Carrying out virtual interviews is the activity with the second highest correlation coefficient value, 0.771744. It has been employed in 4 out of 55 projects, namely the project where the ICC values are also prominent. *Carrying out virtual interviews* is an activity that implies a prior collaboration in order to create the interview, developing pupils' skills of interaction (criterion 5.2). Two ICC criteria emerge as a result of the interview: identification of similarities and differences between cultures (criterion 5.3) and awareness of the other's perspective (criterion 5.1). Moreover, by becoming acquainted with the other's perspective, pupils might develop understanding and a positive attitude towards their partners (criterion 5.4). Thus, by participating in a project that includes *carrying out virtual interviews*, students can improve four components of the ICC framework.

Comparing class questionnaires, whose correlation coefficient is 0.768273, has been used in 5 out of the 55 projects. This task implies creating the questionnaire, which is an activity of product creation type. By working on a product creation task, pupils practice their skills of interaction (criterion 5.2). The main outcome of *comparing class questionnaires* is identifying differences of ideas that are likely rooted in cultural differences (criterion 5.3). At the same time, pupils acknowledge the other's perspective (criterion 5.1), which might lead to developing a positive

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attitude towards their partners (criterion 5.4). Therefore, in case the topic addressed by the project is related to culture, engaging in a project that includes *comparing class questionnaires*, students can develop four components of the ICC framework.

Carrying out "closed outcome" discussions is a task that in most cases takes the form of a debate. The correlation coefficient for *carrying out "closed outcome" discussions* is 0.644658, which means that it also represents a very promising activity in the development of ICC. Through discussions, students practice interaction (criterion 5.2), negotiation of meaning, developing skills of interpreting (criterion 5.3), and relate knowledge about the other's culture to knowledge about their own culture, becoming aware of the other's perspective (criterion 5.1). By becoming familiar with the other's perspective, students can appreciate and develop a positive attitude towards their partners (criterion 5.4). As a result, being involved in a project that includes *carrying out "closed outcome" discussions*, students can improve four components of the ICC framework in case the topic of the project is culture-related. *Carrying out "closed outcome" discussions* is involved in 14 out of the 55 projects. However, the frequency of occurrence (which is 14) is considerably higher in comparison to the frequencies of occurrence of the previous tasks (which include 4 or 5 occurrences) due to the fact that not all discussions are related to culture. If the *discussions* are related to topics other than culture, then criteria 5.1 and 5.4 are not met, and the project addresses only three components of the ICC framework.

Engaging in informal discussions is an activity that has the correlation coefficient 0.282038, which means that it positively affects the development of ICC. The coefficient is not very high, meaning that the task has been included both in situations when ICC increased and decreased, 20 out of the 55 times. The task requires participants to practise interaction with peers from other cultures (criterion 5.2), which results in discovering the other's perspective (criterion 5.1) and noticing cultural similarities and differences (criterion 5.3). By becoming familiar with the other's perspective, students can develop a positive attitude towards their partners (criterion 5.4). As a result, in case the topics of the *informal discussions* are culture-related, students can improve four components of the ICC framework. The number of ICC components that can be enhanced by including *engaging in informal discussions* in a project is the same as in the case of including the *carrying out "closed outcome" discussions* task. The reason why the value of the correlation coefficient for *informal discussions* is lower than in the case of the *"close outcome" discussions* is the use of *informal discussions* in more non-cultural projects than in the case of *"closed outcome" discussions*.

Exchanging story collections and/or cultural products is an activity about which it has also been found to positively affect the development of ICC, having the correlation coefficient 0.163461. It was largely exploited, being used in 47 out of the 55 projects. It does not require much expertise being accessible to any level and amenable to any subject. The most important thing is the fact that *exchanging*

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story collections and/or cultural products was employed in the situations when the values of ICC were higher and was disregarded when they were lower. This phenomenon happens because a project that uses *story collections and/or cultural products* has always a culture-related topic. *Exchanging story collections and/or cultural products* leads to identifying cultural similarities and differences, and thereby developing the skills of interpreting and relating (criterion 5.3). Moreover, the comparison of cultural products presupposes the existence of the products, which requires authoring a product or searching for an existing product, tasks that develop skills of discovery (criterion 5.2) and of acquiring cultural knowledge (criterion 5.1). Having acquired knowledge of the other's culture, students might appreciate their partners' culture, developing a positive attitude towards them and their culture (criterion 5.4). Thus, by participating in a project that includes *exchanging story collections and/or cultural products*, students can develop four components of the ICC framework.

For the activities involving *analysing cultural products*, *authoring "Cultural Autobiographies"*, *collaborating on product creation*, *comparing parallel texts*, *transforming text genres*, and *translating*, the correlation coefficient has been found zero. This means that there is no relationship between ICC and any of these tasks.

Collaborating on product creation is the activity that has been mainly capitalized in eTwinning projects, being found in 50 out of the 55 cases. *Collaborating on product creation* is the most important means by which intercultural communication is put into practice. However, no correlation with ICC has been found because, being employed too extensively, it makes no difference between the situations in which ICC increases or decreases. While collaborating on the creation of a product, students develop their skills of interaction (criterion 5.2). Thus, being involved in a project that includes *exchanging story collections and/or cultural products*, students can develop one component of the ICC framework.

Transforming text genres has never been used in any of these 55 projects; therefore, no relationship can be expected. Since it is an activity that requires a lot of expertise, it seems to be dispreferred by pre-university teachers. It requires analysing the text (which develops criteria 5.1 and 5.3, as shown below), a high level of knowledge about both cultures (criterion 5.1), and it also implies translating as well as making cultural adaptations afterwards (developing all five criteria of the ICC framework, as shown above).

Translating has also been counted quite often, being widely necessary in intercultural communication: 46 out of the 55 times. However, not all projects make use of translation. Some projects, especially those directed towards primary school pupils, consist in exchanging photos, artefacts and compiling the album containing all these cultural products; they use too little conversation to be considered a formative activity. The task leads to foreign language acquisition.

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Analysing cultural products implies the existence of the cultural products, being performed during an activity of product creation type. Therefore, it is plausible that the number of *analysing cultural product* occurrences, which is 20 out of the 55 times, is lower than *collaborating on product creation*, which is 50 out of 55.

Analysing cultural products aims at acquiring knowledge of one's own or the other's culture (criterion 5.1). At the same time, students could notice similarities and differences between cultures (criterion 5.3), and they might appreciate that cultural knowledge, developing a positive attitude (criterion 5.4). Thus, by participating in a project that includes the *analysing cultural products* task, students can improve three components of the ICC framework.

The task *authoring "Cultural Autobiographies"* involves searching the necessary information, developing skills of discovery (criterion 5.2), acquiring knowledge of one's own culture (criterion 5.1), and at the same time increasing appreciation towards one's own culture (criterion 5.4). Therefore, being involved in a project that includes the *authoring "Cultural Autobiographies"* task, students can develop three components of the ICC framework.

Comparing parallel texts and/or cultural products requires prior activities of authoring a text (aiming at criteria 5.1, 5.2, and 5.4, as shown above) or searching for a text/cultural product (training skills of discovery – criterion 5.2). As expected, the tasks involving comparisons occur with less frequency than those based on authoring: the ratio is 17 to 46 times.

Comparing parallel texts and/or cultural products helps not only the development of the pupils' skills of interpreting and relating (criterion 5.3) by identifying similarities and differences but also their acquisition of knowledge about their own and the other's culture (criterion 5.1) and the development of a sense of appreciation of one's own culture or the other's culture or both (criterion 5.4). Moreover, with a positive attitude, students can achieve critical awareness (criterion 5.5) by comparing features of their own and the other's culture. Thus, by participating in a culture-related project that includes *comparing parallel texts and/or cultural products*, students can develop all five components of the ICC framework.

Obviously, more research is necessary in order to determine to what extent the VE tasks are complemented by the ancillary tasks enlisted in the corresponding interpretations.

9. Conclusions

Intercultural encounters are very common in today's society, and putting together all the elements that characterize ICC was a real breakthrough. Various techniques for acquiring ICC have been put into practice, and the task types have

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been refined. Institutions of higher education have shown a wide interest and set the scene for the development of intercultural collaborations between students.

With the advent of technology and the introduction of VE in schools, far more students could benefit from intercultural training. The present study focuses on intercultural training at the pre-university level. Making use of the eTwinning platform, the schools from European countries can develop collaborative projects.

Based on the description that accompanies every project, I used content analysis in order to find a relationship between the VE tasks employed and the targeted ICC abilities. Broadly, the activities for VE consist in those tasks designed for the acquisition of ICC that were adapted to the online medium.

The relationship between ICC and VE has been established through mathematical data processing. The results show that VE can assist ICC acquisitions. Moreover, the activities that make the VE compilation can be sorted according to the position they stand in relation to ICC. The most promising types of VE tasks in ICC development are then selected from the list.

Not all eTwinning projects are culture-related.

However, the projects that address topics other than culture further develop students' skills of interaction, cooperation, collaboration, and interpretation, necessary for intercultural communication, and they should not be overlooked.

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