


# Virtual Exchange as a Transformational Third Space for English Language Teacher Education: Discussing Project ViVEXELT

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses Vietnam Virtual EXchange for English Language Teaching (ViVEXELT), a project funded by the British Council - Vietnam (Digital Learning Innovation Fund Pilot – Response to COVID-19). It makes a substantial contribution to the theorization of Virtual Exchange as a fertile and inclusive knowledge-sharing Third Space. ViVEXELT proposes a distinctive internationalization of the curriculum (IoC) model, where students and staff involved in formal ELT courses in higher education collaborate with ELT practitioners from other ELT educational sectors to co-construct Sustainable Development Goals-inspired ELT materials. ViVEXELT attracted over 200 participants from 46 different educational level institutions between June 2021 and March 2022. The rich qualitative data collected illustrate that ViVEXELT supported its participants with developing online interactional and intercultural competence, while also providing them with opportunity to reflect on the learning gains from the pandemic for their future ELT practice, such as the effective use of breakout rooms.

## KEYWORDS

Breakout Rooms, Community of Practice, COVID-19, ELT, IaH, IoC, Online Learning, SDGs, Telecollaboration, Third Space, Vietnam, Virtual Exchange, ViVEXELT

## INTRODUCTION

ViVEXELT (Vietnam Virtual Exchange for English Language Teaching) stemmed from a collaboration between a UK university and a University in Vietnam. A £30,000 grant was awarded by the British Council Vietnam Digital Learning Innovation Fund – Response to COVID 19, “designed to encourage partnerships between the UK and Vietnam which generate new research, insight and/or innovations to support Vietnam’s National Foreign Languages Project (NFLP) in its ambition to improve the teaching and learning of English in Vietnam by 2025, and beyond” (see <https://www.britishcouncil.org/education/he-science/opportunities/vietnam-digital-learning-innovation-fund>). The core ViVEXELT team comprised the two project leads from the institutions above and also included the English Language Manager at a Migrant and Refugee Centre in the UK, a consultant on e-learning from the

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another university in the UK, and English language teachers and teacher educators from three more universities in Vietnam (see <https://ViVEXELT.com/about-us-2/>).

Building on the work carried out in Vietnam since the government introduced the ‘National Foreign Language Project 2020’ in 2008 (Le, et al., 2020), ViVEXELT focused on setting up a sustainable and inclusive model of continuous professional development (CPD) for English language teacher education. The major challenge identified by Le (2020) in Vietnam was that English language teachers do not always engage with the new language policy because they feel they do not ‘own’ the change process. Le also stressed that it is of fundamental importance to provide English language teachers with opportunities to engage “in continuous knowledge-building processes throughout their careers in order to reframe their praxis in a dialectical unity of theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge gained from both their access to expert knowledge and their situated experience” (2020, p.17). ViVEXELT therefore aimed to address “Theme 2 - Capacity Building” through the development of an ELT cross-educational-sector and inclusive knowledge-sharing continuous professional development (CPD) virtual exchange (VE) programme for practicing teachers, students engaged in teacher education courses at university and teacher educators. Providing synchronous and asynchronous opportunities to knowledge-share on ELT, ViVEXELT encouraged its participants, both in the UK and in Vietnam, to co-create ELT materials relevant to their contexts to teach speaking online and become more invested in taking ownership of their teaching practice with the underpinning of relevant scholarship, while also developing online interactional skills, a priority area identified by the funders. It aimed therefore at creating an ELT Community of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998) through VE as an intercultural/international teacher education approach: a transformational Third Space (Bhaba & Rutherford, 2006) for knowledge exchange, a point further explored in the literature review below.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

VE is becoming recognized as a valid approach for language teacher education (e.g., Dooly & O’Dowd, 2018; Dooly & Sadler, 2019; Baroni, et al., 2019; O’Dowd & Dooly, 2020; Hauck, et al., 2020; Cerveró-Carrascosa, 2022; Fuchs et al., 2022; Wu, 2022; Bilki, et al., 2023). O’Dowd, et al., define VE as a “term used to refer to the sustained engagement of groups of learners in online intercultural interaction and collaboration projects with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programmes” (2020, pp.146-147). There is evidence (Nissen & Kurek, 2020; O’Dowd, 2022a; O’Dowd & Dooly, 2022) that VE can have a positive impact on the professional development of language teachers and students in teacher education and help them to develop 21<sup>st</sup> Century digital literacies and competences (Dooly & Vinagre, 2022), such as intercultural communicative competence (ICC, Byram, 1997); critical digital literacy (Hauck, 2019; 2023) and cyberpragmatics (Di Sarno-García, 2022). VE has been defined as a postmodern approach to language teacher education that fits well with Kumaravadivelu’s (2012) post-method principles of particularity (situational understanding of the teaching context), practicality (autonomous approach to theory and practice with teachers as agents of their own theorization from their own practise) and possibility (awareness of the socio-cultural factors affecting language teachers’ circumstances and their ability to be/become agents of change) (Orsini-Jones & Fuchs, 2022).

Hauck (2019 and 2023) discusses how VE combines the impact of intercultural dialogue with the broad reach of digital technology (EVOLVE Project Team, 2019). VE is a research-informed practice and a strong catalyst in advancing the internationalization of Higher Education (HE) curricula, known as internationalization at home (IaH) (Beelen & Jones, 2015; O’Dowd & Beelen, 2021). VE originates in the field of language learning and teaching (O’Dowd, 2022b) and other terms are still used to define it in language education, e.g. telecollaboration, Di Sarno-García et al. (2023) and teletandem, e.g. Salomão (2019), but unlike these other terms, VE has now been adopted by disciplines other than language studies, it has become an umbrella term, often used in conjunction with COIL - Collaborative Online International Learning (Rubin & Guth, 2022) -, as an approach

to the Internationalization of the Higher Education Curriculum (IoC) through Internationalization at Home (O'Dowd, 2022b)<sup>1</sup>.

According to O'Dowd, VE differentiates itself from other types of online learning because of these key characteristics it involves: "1) technology-based interaction; 2) engagement with members of other cultures/countries; 3) integration into curriculum; 4) facilitation and support by educators or experts; 5) a strong (but not exclusive) focus on the development of soft skills and intercultural competence; 6) a student-centred, collaborative approach to learning"(O'Dowd, 2022b, p. 13). A broader interpretation of VE is adopted here, and instead of using "student-centred" as in point 6 above by O'Dowd, this study proposes 'participant-centred', as some of the participants in project ViVEXELT were students on university courses in English language teacher education, but there were also English teacher educators, academic English lecturers at university, English language teachers in schools (primary, secondary and private) and teachers of English in a UK charity for migrants and refugees. So ViVEXELT consisted of quite a unique cross-educational mix that included teachers who were not involving their students in this CDP initiative, but also tutors who were embedding ViVEXELT in the curricular implementation of their university teacher education courses.

VE was adopted as the CPD approach for the ViVEXELT project because there is evidence (e.g. Orsini-Jones et al., 2021; Wimpenny et al., 2022) that it can provide an inclusive learning environment, a fertile Third Space (Bhabha & Rutherford, 2006) that supports Global South-North dialogue. The VE Third Space is a transformative learning space in teacher education that can help its participants to acquire new competences, and also rethink their beliefs and worldview (Wimpenny, et al., 2022). The VE Third Space can however take learners "out of their comfort zone" (Orsini-Jones & Finardi, in press), and cause anxiety related to both the use and reliability of technology and the use of English for participants whose first language is not English. However, after the initial discomfort caused by the encounter with a different way of engaging with language education, the engagement within the VE Third Space can support resilience, flexibility and the ability to engage with "others". It can provide learning experiences "otherwise" (Guimarães & Finardi, 2023), affording Global South-North encounters underpinned by a decolonial approach (Macedo, 2019). In the field of language education there is evidence (Wimpenny & Orsini-Jones, 2020; Hildeblando Júnior, 2023) that VE exchanges that utilize English as the medium of communication and involve L2 speakers of English, can provide the opportunity to engage with a critique of the "native speaker" model (Holliday, 2006) as the ideal English language teacher and stimulate a discussion on how the ELT curriculum could be decolonized (Rubdy, 2015) and the English traditional ELT "canons" challenged. There is moreover evidence that the VE Third Space can support participants with feeling included and valued (Orsini-Jones et al., 2022).

In the VE Third Space participants can see, analyze and critique local challenges through a global lens and actively engage with societal challenges from multiple perspectives (O'Dowd, 2020, p. 484). Critical global citizenship values, that is to say values relating to social justice that interrogate and change the status quo (Pashby & Andreotti, 2016) can be fostered in the VE Third Space. The VE Third Space can therefore decenter and decolonize existing ELT curricula, beliefs and accepted canons through international dialogue.

The next section will discuss project ViVEXELT and how it was implemented.

## PROJECT VIVEXELT

As previously outlined, ViVEXELT aimed to set up an ELT Community of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998) through a VE as an intercultural/international teacher education approach: a fertile and decolonized ground, a Third Space for knowledge exchange, but also an extra line of digital and emotional support for ELT educators who were feeling isolated at the time of COVID 19.

Its main aims were (in alignment with the British Council call), to:

1. improve the speaking and interactional online competences of English language teachers at the time of COVID;
2. encourage English language teachers, who are female in the majority, to become more confident in addressing the requirements on the new Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020), that, unlike the first version of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), now includes the development of online interactional skills and a stronger stress on intercultural and digital competence development;
3. support the demise of the “native speakerism” rhetoric (Rubdy, 2015; Holliday, 2006) also removed from the CEFR, see Appendix 7 in the companion, 2020, (p. 257) at <https://rm.coe.int/common-european-framework-of-reference-for-languages-learning-teaching/16809ea0d4>; and boost the confidence of teachers whose first language is not English to take control of their teaching and learning actions through a non-threatening dialogic knowledge-sharing international VE Third Space;
4. develop further online student-centred ELT pedagogy;
5. co-construct lesson plans to teach speaking online based on real-life challenges and inspired by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

In order to address the anxiety linked to the sudden adoption of emergency remote language teaching and learning at the time of COVID 19 (ERLTL, see Li et al., 2022), the ViVEXELT team agreed to include explicit taught elements of e-classroom interactional competencies<sup>2</sup> (e-CICs) (Moorhouse et al., 2021) in the ViVEXELT programme, namely: 1. technological competencies; 2. online environment management competencies; 3. online teacher interactional competencies. As suggested by Moorhouse et al. (2021), the reflections on these competencies included discussing how to teach and communicate content across a screen; how to engage learners using two-dimensional images; how to facilitate interaction in a digital classroom; how to attend to students’ emotional needs across distance; how to maintain a sense of presence and how to troubleshoot technical issues.

The above-mentioned competencies were practiced and discussed during the synchronous Zoom course sessions (see <https://vivexelt.com/>) and asynchronously via the tailor-made Open Moodle ViVEXELT platform. The content of the Zoom synchronous sessions on the ViVEXELT course, that was discussed and agreed amongst the team members, 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, and
5. Reflective Practice in ELT (with a focus on student-centred/learner-centred approaches)

Two cycles (Phase 1 and Phase 2) of the project were delivered, one between June-July 2021 and one in October-November 2021. Following a tried and tested model successfully implemented in prior VEs led by the Principal Investigator from the UK (Orsini-Jones, et al., 2018), and in adherence with principles applied in similar teacher education VEs underpinned by social interaction and “flipped” content delivery (Dooly & Sadler, 2020), on the ViVEXELT course participants were invited to reflect on their learning experience at various stages:

- ‘IN’ action - they engaged with metareflection (Flavell, 1979) while they were interacting in each of the VE live sessions, actively reflecting on topics, competences, and tasks with other participants in the breakout rooms (BoRs)

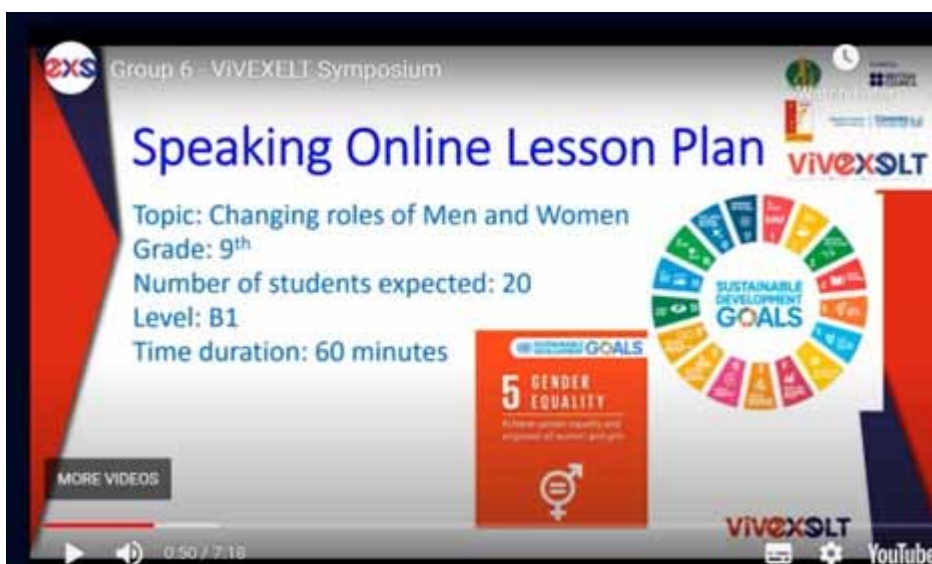
- ‘ON’ action - immediately after completing a task or a session, recording their thoughts, feelings, reactions, what had worked, what had not worked, e.g., recording notes on the relevant Padlet Wall<sup>3</sup> or Microsoft Form<sup>4</sup>
- ‘FOR’ action - for their future ELT practice, participants were asked what would they apply/take away from each session.

The ‘in’/‘on’/‘for’ action model of reflective practice for CPD was inspired by the theorization by Schön (1983) and Mann and Walsh (2017). Each Zoom session was led by different tutors, from either the UK or Vietnam and its content was discussed and jointly agreed by the core UK-Vietnam team.

Participants engaged with live Zoom sessions for 90 minutes per week for five weeks (7.5 hours) and were asked to engage with pre-reading and collaborative tasks outside the live Zoom sessions for a further 32.5 hours. Each Zoom session included both shared learning time and group work in Breakout Rooms (BoRs) coordinated by an e-mediator per room. Each group carried out tasks and annotated a shared Padlet Wall. A speaker from each group would report back to the main Zoom room after the BoR tasks were completed. A Microsoft evaluation form was distributed to all participants after each live session. CPD certificates jointly awarded by the two lead universities, the British Council and the Ministry of Education in Vietnam were issued to participants who had completed 70% of the required activities.

Tutorial videos were created by the team ‘on demand’ for the most popular tools used (e.g. Genially tutorial, <https://vivexelt.com/resources/>) and the project website was used as the project open repository to store some of the lesson plans to teach speaking online based on the UN SDGs that were co-created by the ViVEXELT participants. The ViVEXELT website also contains video recording from the project symposia, where participating teachers gave talks illustrating how they had used the lesson plans and, in so doing, contributed to the knowledge-sharing and co-creation on ViVEXELT (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Screen shot from the video presentation of the lesson plan on teaching speaking online based on SDG 5 by Group 6, Cohort 2



The intercultural dimension of the exchange was reflected in the choice of SDGs by participants from different countries, for example SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), was chosen by many participants from Vietnam, reflecting the real-world challenge they want to address in their context. Lesson plans for teaching speaking online were created to the following SDGs: 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), 4 (Quality Education), 5 (Gender Equality), 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) and 13 (Climate Action).

The design of the programme aimed at maximising the holistic approach afforded by the VE and encouraging teachers to practice new digital tools and familiarize themselves with online teaching and learning, while also reflecting on how to teach English integrating the SDGs in their current and/or future curricula. The work on the creation of the lesson plans based on the SDGs was impactful and some teachers decided to also share what they had learnt on ViVEXELT through their own dissemination channels on social media.<sup>5</sup> The lesson plans created were repurposed and used for different ELT contexts by the ViVEXELT participants (e.g., a lesson created for pupils at secondary school level was repurposed for the primary sector).

Another distinctive feature of the project was that the first Phase of ViVEXELT was fully integrated into the MA in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics curriculum of the UK lead institution for the project. The VE was embedded in the teaching, learning and assessment of module “Theories and Methods of Language Learning and Teaching”. The learning outcomes of this module include an outcome that is specifically linked to the engagement with VE practice: “Critically evaluate how teacher education can benefit from an engagement with global online communities of practice” and students engage in an oral examination in which they are asked questions like: 1. What competences need to be added to the conceptualization of communicative competence in the 21st Century?; 2. How do O’Dowd and Dooly (2020) suggest communicative competence could be developed?; 3. How would you structure a Virtual Exchange/COIL/Telecollaborative project for your English class and what content would you cover to engage your students’ intercultural communicative competence?

The satisfaction survey completed by the students on the above-mentioned MA illustrated that they had found their experience on ViVEXELT had helped them with understanding core concepts in ELT and had provided them with a solid foundation for their future career as English teachers. The success of ViVEXELT is also well summarized by two of its participants (one a student in teacher education in Vietnam and one a teacher of English at a charity in the UK at the time of writing) in the blog “Vivify your e-classroom with ViVEXELT” (Thành Hữu Hà & Shuster, 2021).

In the next section the research methodology approach to ViVEXELT will be discussed.

## METHODOLOGY

The overarching approach that underpins the research questions for ViVEXELT is Virtual Exchange as a Third Space for ELT. The investigation therefore related to if and how VE really provides a transformational and inclusive Third Space, a CPD CoP:

The research questions (RQs) were:

1. Can ViVEXELT support the development of the speaking and interactional online skills of English language teachers at the time of COVID 19?
2. Can ViVEXELT support English language teachers to develop intercultural and digital competences for the 21st Century and address the requirements of the edited CEFR Companion Volume 2020?
3. Can ViVEXELT foster the creation of a sustainable community of ELT practice and boost the confidence of non-L1 English teachers in a dialogic and inclusive way in the VE Third Space?
4. Can ViVEXELT foster the further development of a student-centred pedagogical approach to ELT in Viet Nam and the UK?

## 5. Can ViVEXELT support English language teachers to reflect on and repurpose existing innovative digital solutions and design SDG-inspired materials to integrate into their practice?

The research approach adopted was action research, an expression first coined by the social psychologist Kurt Lewin in 1946 (Lewin, 1946). There are a variety of action research models (e.g., see Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Burns, 2010). ViVEXELT adopted Kemmis and McTaggart's "participatory action research" (1988 and 2005) that is inspired in turn by educational research principles proposed by Argyris and Schön (1974) and Schön (1983). This model is seen as a "classic" in action research literature (Burns, 2010: 8) and is, according to Burns (2010) also the best known one and the best to apply for ELT, as it succinctly summarizes all the phases of the action research cycles:

- A problematic issue is identified
- Change is planned collaboratively to address the issue
- The change process is implemented: 'acted out'
- All agents involved in the change process reflect upon its outcomes, both while it is happening and at the end of the first phase of implementation, and
- A new cycle starts.

The research design was mainly qualitative and data collected were analyzed with the qualitative analysis software package NVivo 13 (<https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/home>), but quantitative elements were also included, to obtain a picture of the demographics of the participants, the length of their teaching experience (there were novice teachers but also experienced teachers), and triangulate some of the statistical findings from the Likert scale survey questions with the qualitative ones (mixed method QUAL-quant: Dörnyei, 2007).

Explicit informed consent was sought from all participants via a survey that was approved by the lead UK university ethics governance, that complies with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, <https://gdpr-info.eu/>). Participants' consent forms were coded and all data were treated anonymously. Further surveys were administered after enrolment: a post-enrolment survey and a final post-course survey.

Participation in ViVEXELT involved:

- Registration on the project via an online JISC survey (<https://www.jisc.ac.uk/about>)
- Registration on the ViVEXELT Open Moodle course platform
- Completion of a post-enrolment survey (also online via JISC online surveys)
- Completion of the post-project survey (also JISC)
- Participation in a 40 hour online VE Teacher Educator programme

The findings from Phase 1 informed changes actioned in Phase 2 of the project. Table 1 exemplifies some of these actions addressing the feedback received in Phase 1 (Orsini-Jones et al., 2023, p. 64-65):

## Participants

The ViVEXELT Community of Practice (CoP) consisted of a unique and diverse group of ELT participants, reflecting the the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)-compliant nature of the project.

The participants from Vietnam were from 41 different educational institutions distributed across the whole of Vietnam, including remote areas, while those from the UK were from 5, from the Midlands and the North of England. There was cross-educational sector representation, that included English teachers from state primary and secondary institutions in Vietnam; teacher educators and English language teachers from tertiary institutions in Vietnam and in the UK, teachers of English to refugees and migrants in the UK and private school teachers in Vietnam for pupils from age 4 to

**Table 1. Actions taken in Phase 2 in view of the feedback obtained in Phase 1**

Feedback From Phase 1	Action(s) Taken for Phase 2
1. More time in Breakout Rooms (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 <a href="http://vivexelt.com">vivexelt.com</a> )
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 realized 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 SDG group lesson plan task outside zoom contact hours	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 organized two symposia and one webinar in collaboration with the British Council which provided further opportunities for ViVEXELT knowledge sharing
8. Provision of more systematic training and briefings 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 e-mediator BoR Guide, see further details below

18, as well as students in teacher education in both the UK and Vietnam. The participating students from the UK lead HE institution were from ODA (Official Development Assistance) countries in the majority (ie: Pakistan, Albania, India, Nepal, Iraq and Nigeria) and this added an extra layer of multicultural international ELT knowledge-sharing and inclusivity to the project.

Three hundred and thirty-one participants in total enrolled initially on ViVEXELT, but many of them did not attend and/or complete. In discussion with staff from the British Council in Vietnam, it was ascertained that the figures were in line with the expectations of a free online course and that the discrepancy between enrolment and completion also aligned with CPD online course results run by the British Council. However, despite this discrepancy, the project still had more participants in total who completed than was originally forecast (120), as a total of 181 obtained a certificate of either completion or attendance. To this can be added the number of the e-mediators facilitating task completion in breakout rooms (23). Vouchers were awarded to those participants who completed 70% of the activities required (115) and the reflective journal was handed in by 58 participants out of 221 (26%).

The total of 'active' participants was as follows:

Phase 1 June-July 2021:

- English Language Teachers: 27
- English Language Teacher educators: 14



- Students in English teacher education: 12
- Total: 53

Of these, 62% were Vietnamese and the rest located in the UK, but not all British. 80% were female.  
Phase 2 October-November 2021:

- English Language Teachers: 178
- English Language Teacher educators: 12
- Students in English teacher education: 31
- Total: 221

Of these, 90% were Vietnamese and 10% located in the UK, but not all British. 90% were female.

## RESULTS

### Positive Results

This section will focus on the findings from the JISC post-project online surveys, and the analysis of the reflective journals carried out with the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 13, with particular reference to the aims and objectives of the project and its research questions.

The return rate for the post-project survey for cohort 1 was 70% while there was a lower return rate for cohort 2: 33%. When analyzing the results from the Likert Scale questions, only 'strongly agree' and 'mostly agree' were counted as positive, while 'neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' were categorized as negative.

In general terms, and with reference to the specific ELT areas addressed by ViVEXELT, it was reassuring for the ViVEXELT team to see that despite the large numbers in cohort two, most feedback was generally more positive for this second delivery of the course, which would appear to indicate the effectiveness of the actions taken in relation to the lessons learnt in Phase 1, when implementing Phase 2 (see Table 1). However, a limitation in the data analysis could be the low return number in Phase 2.

With particular reference to the first two research questions (RQ1, "Can ViVEXELT support the development of the speaking and interactional online skills of English language teachers in Vietnam and the UK at the time of COVID 19?"; RQ2, "Can ViVEXELT support English language teachers to develop intercultural and digital competences for the 21st Century and address the requirements of the edited CEFR Companion Volume 2020?"), 89% of participants in Phase 1 and 93% in Phase 2 "mostly agreed" or "strongly agreed" with question: 16: "The material on the ViVEXELT project and the engagement with the project supported my understanding of teaching speaking online". Similarly, 86% in Phase 1 and 93% in Phase two "mostly agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement at question 18: "ViVEXELT provided me with the opportunity to develop my interactional online skills".

As the British Council call had stemmed from the need to address the COVID 19 Pandemic and provide support for online delivery of English teaching, questions relating to the participants' attitudes towards technology and the pandemic were also included in the surveys. It was very pleasing for the ViVEXELT team to see the outstanding positive results for question 19: "ViVEXELT provided me with the opportunity to develop and practice digital competences relevant to ELT", as 97% of participants in Phase 1 and 95% in Phase two "mostly agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement. This extract from a journal entry in Phase 1 also illustrates how this participant benefitted from the experience of taking part in ViVEXELT (*verbatim*):

*I do think that our discussion in the ViVEXELT course benefited me a lot in addressing with the arising problems in the online classes. I learnt from my partners about the way to facilitate students*

*in-group discussion, posing questions and assign them tasks to work efficiently. Those are the things must be passed on the other colleagues in my school.*

The responses also illustrated that the pandemic had caused a shift in the teachers' attitudes towards remote/online and blended learning and teaching in terms of normalization (Bax, 2003), that is to say: "The stage when the technology becomes invisible, embedded in everyday practice. The stage when a technology is [...] hardly even recognised as a technology, taken for granted in everyday life" (Bax, 2003, p. 23). Normalization is demonstrated by the responses to the statement "The Covid 19 Pandemic has changed my beliefs about online learning" in the ViVEXELT post-project survey in Phases 1 and 2 (Figures 2 & 3). Many participants also explained in the open text answers that they felt more at ease with technology than they used to be, had enjoyed the challenge of having to teach online and had come to appreciate the "any time/anywhere" opportunities offered by remote teaching and learning.

With reference to RQ 3: "Can ViVEXELT foster the creation of a sustainable community of ELT practice and boost the confidence of non-L1 English teachers in a dialogic and inclusive way in the VE Third Space?", many positive statement were made in the open questions sections of the post-project surveys that appeared to substantiate the claim that ViVEXELT had provided a safe knowledge-exchange Third Space and created a an ELT CoP. For example, in reply to "list three good things about ViVEXELT" participants wrote (*verbatim*):

Figure 2. "The COVID-19 pandemic has changed my beliefs about online learning" Cohort 1 results

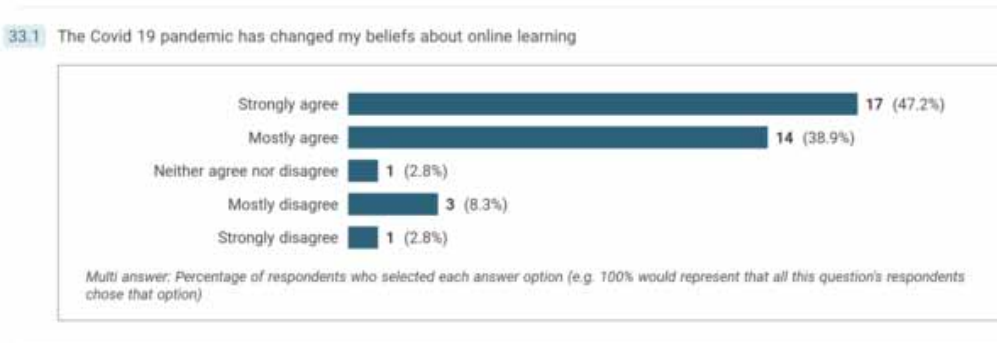
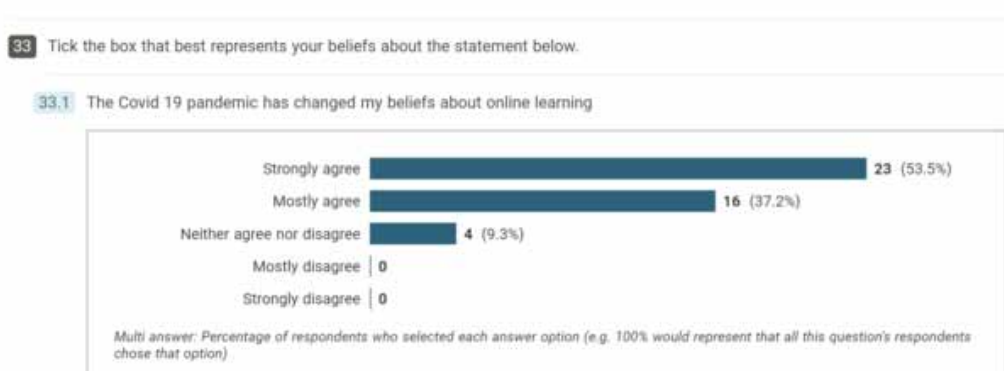


Figure 3. "The COVID-19 pandemic has changed my beliefs about online learning" Cohort 2 results



- A. Giving a lot of useful ways to teach speaking skill. Creating a lot of opportunities for us to exchange experiences in teaching. Introducing some new apps to teach English online
- B. I love the way you organize for each lesson; we can read or try the materials before the lesson. the warm-up activities are also good and the fantastic sharing in the breakout room
- C. They created a teaching exchange community. The lecturers were really enthusiastic. The lecturers introduced some useful interesting teaching tools.
- D. good materials, good sources, and excellent environment for teachers to professionally develop
- E. Vivexelt team did well in introducing new tools, organize discussion in breakout rooms, interesting lessons
- F. Vivexelt team have created a teaching/ learning community. They have also suggested us some new ideas for our teaching techniques.
- G. I think the team was really well organized, I also liked how all participants had a chance to speak out in the sessions
- H. They give great support - They motivate and inspire us.-They are very friendly

ViVEXELT therefore appeared to have provided a sense of safety and community support at a critical time, when participants (and these were female in the majority) were in need of both emotional and pedagogical help during a pandemic. In the words of the respondents, ViVEXELT created an accessible and friendly learning environment. Some participants expressed surprise about the fact that it was so useful to knowledge share on ELT across educational sectors, as they had not experienced this in their prior CPD training but found it useful and stimulating. In fact, the groups working of the lesson plans illustrated during the ViVEXELT symposia how to repurpose their plans depending on the sector in which they would be used.

This sense of belonging to a welcoming international community is also reflected in the results for question 20: “ViVEXELT provided me with the opportunity to become part of an international community of ELT practice”, where 97% of respondents in Cohort 1 and 98% in Cohort 2 “mostly agreed” and/or “strongly agreed”, confirming the positive intercultural knowledge sharing value of VE discussed in the literature. This VE opportunity helped participants with feeling less lonely and isolated in their remote teaching journey during the pandemic.

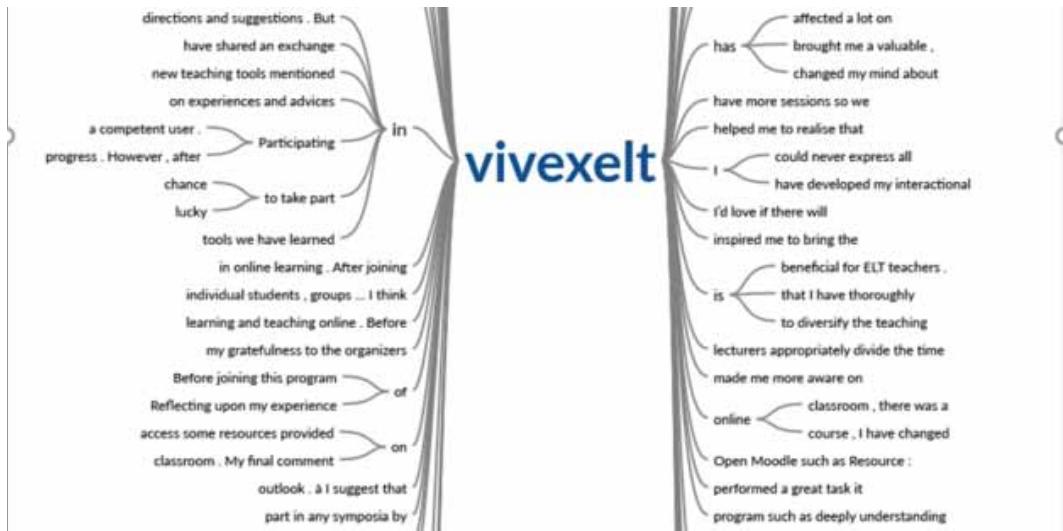
Participants were also very complimentary of the use of BoRs. Many Vietnamese tutors mentioned they were new to BoR use. BoRs emerged as a major theme of interest in the reflective journals too (Orsini-Jones, et al., 2023). The feedback and reflections resulted in the decision to facilitate the co-creation of a participant-informed BoR guide for e-CIIC (e-Classroom Interactional Intercultural Competences) mediators in Zoom BoRs, that has been allocated an international standard book number (ISBN) and has been disseminated worldwide (Wells et al., 2022) - it is included for example in the *Reading and Resources for Virtual Exchange* collated by Robert O’Dowd (2023). This outcome had not been envisaged at the project outset but aligns with existing literature on action-research (Burns, 2010), that discusses how action-research offers opportunities for transformational and participatory ELT research-informed practice.

The word-tree created with the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 13 from the journal entries would appear to illustrate the transformational impact the project had on its participants in their own words (Figure 4, ViVEXELT NVivo Word Tree from the Reflective Journal Analysis), e.g. “affected me a lot”; “changed my mind about”; “helped me to realise”; “inspired me to”.

Positive comments in the journals also appeared to address RQ 4: “Can ViVEXELT foster the further development of a student-centred pedagogical approach to ELT in Vietnam and the UK?”, for example the extract below from a reflective journal in phase 2 (*verbatim*):

*This course really helps me to understand the nature of learning challenge, especially in teaching speaking online. Now I am planning that speaking should be taught in meaningful context. I thought how passive I was in teaching speaking online to students after this module. In the future, I plan to*

Figure 4. ViVEXELT NVivo 13 word tree from the reflective journal analysis



*also assign a group leader and/or a moderator to each breakout room, which is something that I learnt from the ViVEXELT sessions.*

As for RQ 5, “Can ViVEXELT support English language teachers to reflect on and repurpose existing innovative digital solutions and design SDG-inspired materials to integrate into their practice?”, as mentioned before here, the answer to this is available at the ViVEXELT website, where participants have posted their lesson plans based on the SDGs and have illustrated how they used them in a variety of ELT contexts in talks given at the ViVEXELT symposia. Participating teachers stated that they had acquired new competences and applied and disseminated what they had learnt into their practice. They also commented in the focus groups held after each phase phase of ViVEXELT that before engaging with this project designing lessons embedding the UN SDGS was perceived to be ambiguous and irrelevant to their context. The support received on the way to integrate/apply SDGs in their practice supported them with seeing how the SDGs could be integrated into their ELT curricula. The teacher participants were encouraged to share their lesson plans, teaching activities and project-based learning as well as help train their colleagues about the understanding and teaching of the SDGs in their local contexts. The British Council staff also invited participating teachers to share their utilization of the SDGs lesson plans with wider audiences at events they organized.

Despite the positive outcomes of the project, the challenges encountered cannot be overlooked, as discussed in the section below.

### Challenges Encountered

Despite the positive overall results and comments, participants from both cohorts identified the challenges encountered both when teaching English during the pandemic and also when engaging with ViVEXELT. The main areas of concern listed for question 9 in the survey (“what are the challenges for a teacher trying to encourage interaction in an online setting” and 22 (“the major challenge(s) when teaching English online or learning how to teach English online is/were”) were reported as the following ones:

1. The instability of the Internet network.
2. The lack of students’ willingness to communicate online.<sup>6</sup>

3. The distractions in the home environment affecting students' concentration/engagement.
4. The inability of the teacher to monitor all students and 'read' their reactions.
5. The promotion of interaction, both between teacher and students and students amongst themselves
6. The lack of teachers' e-CIC competences.
7. Digital poverty (both teachers and students) leading to inadequate equipment to engage effectively online.
8. The extra time needed to make an online session work (need to take more time for instructions and allow time for time lag).
9. The anxiety caused to both staff and students by the 'dehumanized' and unfamiliar online learning environment.
10. The difficulty with checking that learning is taking place, particularly when teaching large classes online.

It also came to light that some participants still needed a considerable level of support to operate effectively in a digital environment and many did not feel at ease within one. For example, enrolment on Moodle proved challenging for many, despite the fact that written and video tutorials were distributed and team members also offered to support participants with a shared screen to guide them through the registration steps. Also, a discrepancy emerged in the results. Despite the statements about the normalization of technology in the ELT online classroom, it transpired that there still was a certain level of anxiety about integrating technology into ELT practice, as illustrated in Figures 5, 6, 7 and 8, in response to the statement "I am a bit worried about using technology to teach English" before and after the ViVEXELT project. In fact, it appeared that ViVEXELT had not had any significant positive impact in relation to decreasing anxiety towards integrating technology into ELT for the participants in cohort 1 (see Figures 5 and 6).

The theme of anxiety towards technology has emerged before in literature relating to VE projects (Baroni et al., 2019; Rets et al., 2020; Gleason & Jaramillo Cherrez, 2021; Orsini-Jones & Finardi, in press). The unease with the remote environment expressed by some participants also needs to be addressed and might have been negatively affected by a previous experience of badly planned emergency remote learning and/or teaching (Can & Silman-Karanfil, 2022).

Also, for participants who are teaching English and/or are training to become English teachers, the anxiety about technology is heightened by their perceived lack of proficiency in English, a language that has a strong hegemonic status. ViVEXELT aimed at fostering a critique of the native-speaker canon, that is steeped in a colonial narrative that still prevails in ELT (Rubdy, 2015), even though the majority of English language teachers worldwide are L2 speakers of English. Due to the prevalence of the "native-speakerism" ideology (so defined by Holliday, 2006), L2 English speaking teachers are frequently discriminated against and most advertised positions in ELT are for "native speakers" only (Hildeblando Júnior, 2023). ViVEXELT

Figure 5. 'I am a bit worried about using technology to teach English' pre-project survey Cohort 1

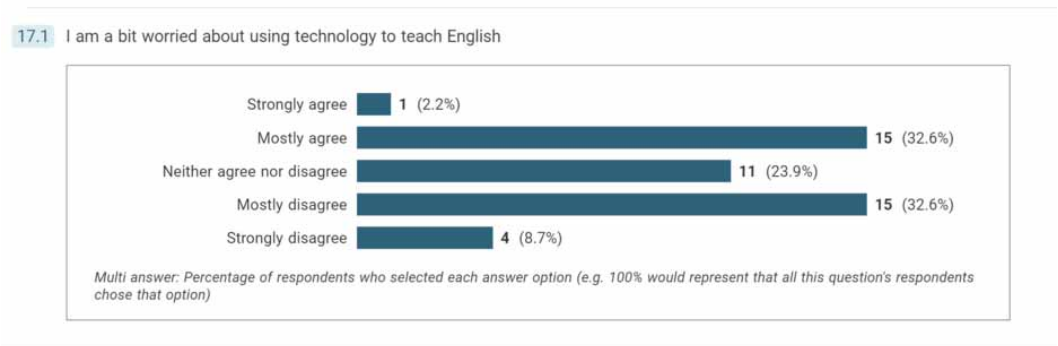


Figure 6. 'I am a bit worried about using technology to teach English' post-project survey Cohort 1

31.1 I am a bit worried about using technology to teach English

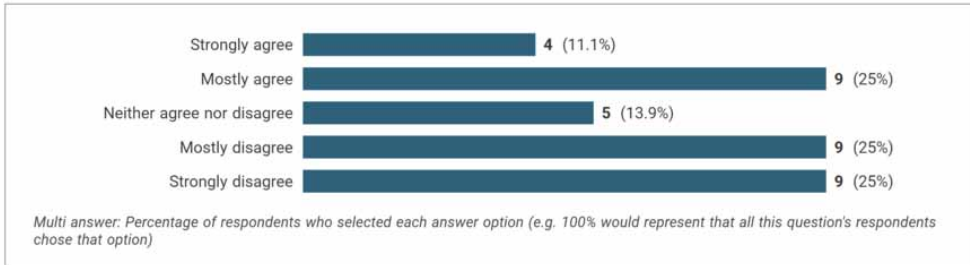


Figure 7. 'I am a bit worried about using technology to teach English' pre-project survey Cohort 2

19 Tick the box that best represents your beliefs about the statement below.

19.1 I am a bit worried about using technology to teach English

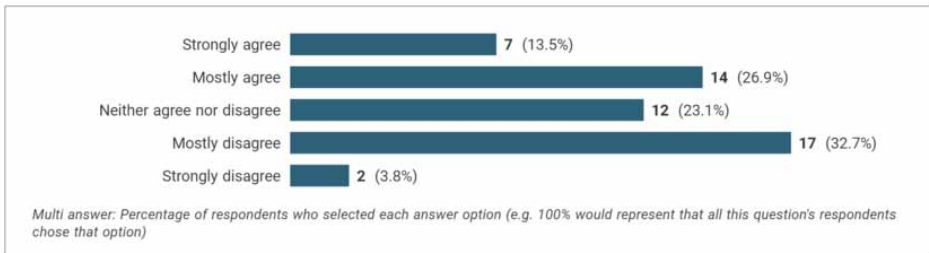
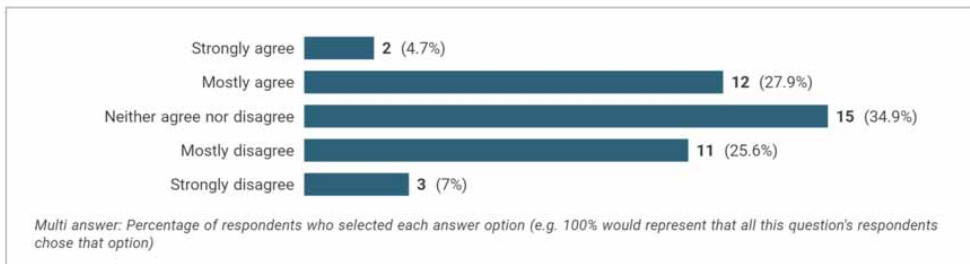


Figure 8. 'I am a bit worried about using technology to teach English' post-project survey Cohort 2

31.1 I am a bit worried about using technology to teach English



appeared to confirm that many participants felt that their English was not of a sufficient standard to actively engage in the online interaction, and it became apparent that the native-speaker ideology was affecting their willingness to interact. The fact that there were English L1 lecturers involved in the exchange contributed to their fear of exposing what they perceived to be English of not-native speaker standard. There were several critical incidents in the BoRs, where participants were not heard nor seen, despite the active efforts of

the e-mediators to scaffold interaction, because they found the presence of L1 speakers intimidating. This illustrates that the claim that the VE is an inclusive Third Space for ELT needs to be critically evaluated further, even if there is evidence that it is for some of its participants.

## **CONCLUSION**

The analysis of the data and feedback discussed here would appear to illustrate that ViVEXELT was successful in addressing its initial research questions. The ViVEXELT model of ELT CPD, ‘in’, ‘on’ and ‘for’ action, is a flexible, sustainable and transnational model for English language teacher education that maximizes opportunities for exchanging knowledge, experience and skills in an intercultural and international setting.

Participating teachers stated that they had acquired new competences, applied what they had learnt into their practice and disseminated the lessons learnt to their peers. On the whole, it appeared that most ViVEXELT participants enjoyed taking part in ViVEXELT and valued the knowledge sharing and interactional experience on it, in particular with reference to BoR use and management.

As previously discussed, the analysis of the journal entries appeared to support the ViVEXELT team’s argument that VE is a transformational Third Space. VE fits well both with Kumaravadivelu’s recommendations on teacher agency (Kumaravadivelu, 2012) and the need to upskill language teachers and students in language education to support them with becoming fluent in 21st Century competences and literacies, while also embedding real world tasks into their teaching practice.

It must however be pointed out that there are tensions and challenges around VE that cannot be ignored. The findings from ViVEXELT corroborate what Hauck argues (2023), that is to say that it cannot be assumed that “VE-based Internationalization at Home is inherently equitable and/or inclusive”, which is also reinforced by O’Dowd and Beelen (2021), who propose to further investigate processes of inclusion and exclusion in VE. It is important to cast a critical eye on the Global North VE theorization and practice as proposed by Klimanova and Hellmich (2021). There were for example critical incidents on ViVEXELT, where participants’ absence spoke louder than their presence.

The anxiety about both technology and English proficiency are emerging as recurrent themes for participants involved in VE for English language education based in the Global South, and not just on the ViVEXELT project (e.g., Orsini-Jones & Finardi, in press). More research needs to be carried out in this area to create VE opportunities that are equitable for all.

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## **COMPETING INTERESTS**

The author of this publication declares there are no competing interests.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The debate on terminology and definitions is ongoing, see for example Colpaert (2020) on this and O'Dowd's (2021) reply to it.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper the spelling 'competences' is preferred to that of 'competencies', but 'competencies' is used when quoting authors who use it.

<sup>3</sup> <https://padlet.com/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://forms.office.com/e/XTaaPRNsQT?origin=lprLink>

<sup>5</sup> See for example this Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/savingwaterproject.sdg6/posts/460392022370305/>

<sup>6</sup> This theme is amply discussed in the VE/telecollaboration literature (e.g. Rezaeyan & Gimeno-Sanz 2023).

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